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Greek Anthology

JEAN-LUC FOURNET

The *Greek Anthology* (AG) is the conventional name given to the most important collection of Greek epigrams. It is composed of the fifteen books of the *Palatine Anthology* (whose name is due to the manuscript of the Palatine Library in Heidelberg, which transmitted it to us) plus a sixteenth one (also called *Appendix Planudea*) containing 388 epigrams the modern editors excerpted from another anthology compiled in 1301 by Maximus Planudes (*Planudean Anthology*).

This literary monument of nearly 4,100 epigrams (around twenty-five thousand verses) is interesting first for the history of its creation, inseparably linked to that of the epigrammatic genre: the *Anthology* (literally “collection of flowers”) is the result of a slow stratification over a millennium of which the most important stages are (1) Meleager’s *Wreath*, edited around 100 BCE, and giving much room, beside some remote precursors (Archilochus, Sappho, Simonides) and contemporaries, to the Alexandrian poets who marked the flowering of the epigrammatic genre in the third century BCE; (2) the *Wreath* of Philippus of Thessalonike, under Nero, collecting pieces composed in the meantime; (3) Agathias’ *Cycle* (567 CE) gathering epigrams by recent or contemporary poets. It is the merit of Constantine Cephalas to have combined thematically, in Constantinople around 900, those three collections along with others: this new anthology served as a basis for the compilers of the *Palatine Anthology* around 950 and later on to Maximus Planudes for his own *Anthology*.

Because of its volume and its huge timespan (seventh century BCE–tenth century CE), the AG is above all an invaluable document on the epigrammatic genre. It evidences the evolution of the epigram which, while being initially an inscription on a monument or an object (epitaph, *ex-voto*, dedication), quickly

freed itself from them to some extent and from the traditional circumstances of its production to become a fully-fledged literary genre that, particularly from the Hellenistic period onwards, invaded the private sphere (especially with the development of the amatory epigrams). The constituent books of the AG give a good idea of the various fields it covered: ephrastic poetry, that is, describing works of art (II and III), amatory (V), votive (VI), sepulchral (VII and the majority of VIII), epideictic or illustrative (IX), hortatory (X), bacchic and satirical (XI), pederastic (XII) epigrams, arithmetical problems, riddles, and oracles (XIV). The variety of themes and functions accounts for the variety of tones (solemn or intimate, serious or humorous/ironical, sober or mannered, etc.) and of the meters (elegiac distichs, hexameters, iambic trimeters, but also a great number of rarer meters, especially in Book XIII, owing to which the AG is the most complete catalogue of the meters used by Greek-speaking authors).

Since the epigram is the genre par excellence of intimacy, unlike other literary forms, the AG is also and above all an extraordinary document on the private life of the Ancients, their psychology, their manners, and their customs. Nothing portrays better than it does, in all their variety, the most intimate, picturesque, and unknown sides of ancient societies even at their humblest levels, either pagan or Christian, from Archaic and Classical Greece to Middle Byzantine Constantinople via the Hellenistic and Roman East.

SEE ALSO: Epigram; Hellenism, Byzantine.

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