

Plutarch on Literature, Graeco-Roman Religion, Jews and Christians

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Plutarch on Literature, Graeco-Roman Religion, Jews and Christians

By

Frederick E. Brenk[†]

Edited by

Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta



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*For Françoise Frazier and Philip Stadter,
who did so much for Plutarchan studies,
in memoriam*



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Foreword

Literature and religion are equally expansive fields; few thinkers can summon the authority and wisdom to write compellingly and with equal conviction across both. Among the ancient Greeks, only Plato, Plutarch and Plotinus (along with his successor and editor Porphyry) could really lay that claim. The three “Pls,” indeed, mark the three stages of Platonism: the originator, the greatest “middle-Platonist,” and the most influential “neo-Platonist.” Plutarch, however, stands apart. He was the least doctrinal and the most experimental of all three: his huge oeuvre ranges across biography, political advice, witty forays into vegetarianism and animal rights, dialogues on sexuality, religious essays, a grief-laden letter to his mourning wife, sympotic questions—even (in the Greek and Roman Questions) an ancient form of cultural theory. There is no overarching Plutarchan theory of everything: most of his texts are relatively short (at least compared to Plato’s *Republic* and *Laws*, or Plotinus’ *Enneads*). In its kaleidoscopic variety, however, the Plutarchan corpus touches on almost every aspect of human (and even non-human) life.

Frederick Brenk, who sadly passed away in December 2022, devoted a scholarly lifetime to explicating the complexities of Plutarch’s thought in all its variety. Plutarch was his intellectual interlocutor for over fifty years: during that time Brenk produced a stream of brilliantly lucid, provocative and wise studies. What characterises his own scholarly oeuvre is a unique combination of qualities: a laser-like attention to detail, a humane grasp of the underlying moral issues, and a joy in the richness of language and ideas. What is more, he always saw Plutarch as part of an interconnected ecosystem of early Roman thought. Tempting though it is for those who enter the Plutarchan rabbit-warren to stay down there, Brenk drew our attention to those points of intersection with other major texts and writers of the time, whether Jewish and Christian or from the so-called “Second Sophistic.” The collection of essays you have in your hands exemplifies these approaches perfectly. There is no better periegetic guide to escort us through the labyrinthine landscape of Plutarch’s thought.

Tim Whitmarsh

Timothy John Guy Whitmarsh, FBA, is a British Classicist and the second A.G. Leventis Professor of Greek Culture at the University of Cambridge. He is best known for his work on the Greek literary culture of the Roman Empire, especially the Second Sophistic and the ancient Greek novel.

Frederick Brenk's *Plutarch on Literature, Graeco-Roman Religion, Jews and Christians*

The present book includes sixteen studies by Professor Frederick E. Brenk on Plutarch on Literature, Graeco-Roman Religion, Jews and Christians. Of them, fourteen were published earlier in different venues. Two of them, "A Name by Any Name? The Allegorizing Etymologies of Philo and Plutarch," "None Greater than in the Holy City' Lucian, Pausanias, and Plutarch on Religious Shrines" see the light for the first time in this book. Published between 2009 and 2022, these studies not only provide an excellent example of Professor Brenk's incisiveness and deep knowledge of Plutarch; they also provide an excellent overview of Plutarchan studies of the last years on a variety of themes. Indeed, one of the most salient characteristics of Brenk's scholarship is his constant interaction and conversation with the most recent scholarly literature on themes dealt with in his studies.

Of the three themes chosen to organize Brenk's articles, namely Plutarch on Literature, Graeco-Roman Religion, Jews and Christians, the former includes seven studies on several literary themes, such as characters, authorial voice, quotations and intertextuality, or conjectures. Chapter 1. "Plutarch's Flawed Characters: The *Personae* of the Dialogues" explores Plutarch's way of constructing his characters. Scholars have long ago realized that Plutarch's characters, even the main speakers of his dialogues, tend to be flawed. Contrary to what some might expect, this is not the result of Plutarch's literary inability, but rather a device he consciously employed in order to air more radical and problematic issues without taking responsibility for them.

Chapter 2, "'In Learned Conversation:' Plutarch's Symposiac Literature and the Elusive Authorial Voice," focuses on the question whether Plutarch's opinions come to the fore in his dialogues. In presenting the philosophical schools' opinions on a variety of themes, the role and importance of his interlocutors often offer a clue as to Plutarch's intentions. His own position, however, is in general difficult to discern. Many a time his *persona* does appear in the dialogues. In such cases (i.e., in some *Symposiacs*, in *The E at Delphi* and the *Erotikos*), he appears as fairly young, possibly a distancing technique. The *Symposiacs* in any case offered an opportunity to present his views in various shapes and sizes.

Chapter 3, "Space, Time, and Language in *On the Oracles of the Pythia*. 3,000 Years of History, Never Proved Wrong" in turn focuses on *Why the Pythia No*

Longer Speaks in Verse. It highlights the way Plutarch deals with these three notions. As for space, Plutarch treats twenty-five Greek city-states and reaches out to Macedonia, Rome, Carthage, Egypt, and Persia. As for time, Theon, the principal speaker, boasts that the Oracle has existed for three-thousand years (408D) and the essay is structured upon the contrast between a distant past and present reality. Language, finally, is the subject of the dialogue. In it, Plutarch attempted to cover a huge geographic and temporal span. In so doing, he managed to avoid both a monotonous and perhaps trivial guide to Delphi and a dialogue essentially detached from its setting at the shrine.

Chapter 4. “Voices from the Past. Quotations and Intertextuality: *The Oracles at Delphi*” explores Plutarch’s intertextuality playing especial attention to his quotations, which in Brenk’s view highlight the richness and greatness of the literary, intellectual, and cultural history of the selective view of the Greek past he is transmitting. The article offers a wide overview of Plutarch’s treatment of quotations; it surveys his preferences (f.e. for classical authors), the way he uses quotations, his re-use of quotations and many other interesting aspects. Brenk concludes that Plutarch’s quotations are of high quality and rarely repeated. Few of them reappear in another dialogue, not even in another Pythian dialogue. In fact, Plutarch’s citations demonstrate a skillful use of most of the forms studied in modern studies of intertextuality, especially in the sense of “layering” and “transformative intertextuality.”

Chapter 5. “Sliding Atoms or Supernatural Light: Plutarch’s *Erotikos* and the ‘On Eros’ Literature” approaches Plutarch’s *Erotikos*, a treatise that was influenced by the *On Love* genre and which in fact has a title that is as generic and ambiguous as in other texts of the *On Love* literature. In the *Erotikos* Plutarch many a time reacts to the genre directly and other times tries to surpass it. The dramatic dialogue, and the use of narrative illustrations are all well known from the ‘On Eros’ literature, but Plutarch pushes them to new limits and toward new heights. Comparison with the fragments from his *Peri erotos* shows interesting influences from Epikouros’ work of the same name. This is also detectable in his *Erotikos*, in which, despite Plutarch’s Middle-Platonic affiliation, he not only uses Plato’s arguments about ideal love against Plato but is also influenced by Epicurean and Stoic views on the issue. At the end of the *Erotikos*, for example, the transformation of *eros* into *philia* is one of his main arguments to maintain that heterosexual love is at least not inferior to homosexual.

After an introduction to Plutarch’s *Erotikos* numerous textual problems and *lacunae*, Chapter 6, “Looking at Conjectures (Guesses?) in Plutarch’s *Dialogue on Love*,” analyses more closely two examples of problematic sections in the text, namely 735F and 776DE. The problematic textual condition has led some

scholars to doubt about the authenticity of the treatise. According to Inge-kamp, the work comes from the pen of Plutarch but it largely consists of *hypomnemata* clumsily put together, and probably by an editor rather than by the author. Building on Ingekamp's opinion, Brenk thinks the inconsistencies noted by earlier scholars could be solved conjecturing that Aristoboulos, son of Plutarch, could have ended and edited a manuscript Plutarch had left unfinished.

Chapter 7 "Plutarch the Greek in the *Roman Questions*" revises Rebecca Preston's approach to Plutarch's *Roman Questions*, in which the Chaeronean allegedly shows that for him Roman culture was "something rather foreign and inscrutable." In Brenk's view, *Quaestiones Romanae* far from evidencing lack of knowledge of Roman culture and use of Greek authors as a source, show a good knowledge of Roman sources. In his dealing with the information provided by these sources, Plutarch builds bridges between Roman and Greek cultures. So much so that the *Roman Questions* in fact "reveal how international the Graeco-Roman world had become in the Early Imperial period, and how the opposition Greek versus Roman can be very misleading."

The second part on "Graeco-Roman Religion" includes four chapters. It opens with Chapter 8, "Plutarch: Philosophy, Religion, and Ethics." Brenk analyzes three aspects of Plutarch's interests, which were stimulated by his many travels and visits to his Greek and Roman friends and offers a sketchy overview of Plutarch's work on philosophy, religion and ethics. In what concerns philosophy, the chapter briefly refers to Plutarch's polemical treatises against Stoics and Epicureans. It first comments on *De facie* and *De genio*, and then includes a longer treatment of *Sympotic Questions*, the *Generation of the Soul in the Timaeus* and *Platonic Questions*. The section on religion reviews *Roman and Greek Questions*, *Sympotic Questions*, and the Delphic treatises, in order to proceed to *De genio*, *De facie*, and *De sera*, before providing a longer overview on *Isis and Osiris*. The third part on ethics mainly focuses on Plutarch's attack on Stoic and Epicurean ethics and then, with quick brush strokes, describes Plutarch's ethics.

Chapter 9 "Plutarch and Pagan Monotheism" discusses Plutarch's possible influence on Christians. Despite Christian claims regarding their embracing more cultures and their having the whole truth, they shared a philosophical *koine* with their Greek adversaries. In dealing with Plutarch's monotheism Brenk points out that Plutarch's innovation consisted in identifying the highest Platonic entity with God, and then attaching this doctrine to a god of a particular cult. In this sense he offered "Late Antiquity the concept of a monotheistic God, creator of the world in time, living in 'instantaneous' eternity, the perfect expression of Being, the Good and the Beautiful."

Chapter 10, “Searching for Truth?: Plutarch’s *On Isis and Osiris*” takes P. Van Nuffelen’s claim, in *Rethinking the Gods* (Oxford, 2011), that Plutarch much like the Stoics was searching for truth in other religions as a starting point. Brenk’s analysis of *On Isis and Osiris* is an attempt to problematize this affirmation by exploring Plutarch’s approach to Egyptian religion. In fact, Plutarch’s allegorical interpretation, by appropriating it to his own religious Platonism, makes Egyptian religion rather innocuous and familiar. At the same time, he tries to systematize and make sense of the complexity of the Egyptian material by injecting into it a higher spirituality. Most importantly, in his treatment Plutarch never explicitly says to be searching for new truths, especially something outside Platonism.

Chapter 11, “None Greater Than in the Holy City: Lucian, Pausanias, and Plutarch on Religious Shrines” intends to fill the gaps in some recent studies on Lucian’s *On the Syrian Goddess*. To begin with Brenk thinks that Lightfoot’s commentary on Lucian’s *On the Syrian Goddess* pays too much attention to the author’s dependence on Herodotus and tends to ignore the similarities with his rough contemporaries, Pausanias and Plutarch, who wrote on similar topics. As a matter of fact, *On the Syrian Goddess* has much in common with other works of the Second Sophistic, since its ideology and approach are shared by Pausanias, Plutarch, and Apuleius, and we would understand it better by paying more attention to their testimony. Commenting upon several insights by J. Elsner on Pausanias and Lucian, Brenk recognizes a deeper and more profound aspect not only in Pausanias and *On the Syrian Goddess*, but also in Plutarch and Apuleius. In his view, they “reveal a tendency toward a new sacralization of culture, finding its culmination in Christianity (and here we should include Islam), in the movement from the edge to the center, exoticism and syncretism, the type of visual representation, and large temples. And should we add ‘monotheism?’ If Elsner is reasonably correct, there is more to these works than meets the eye.”

The last part, “Plutarch on Jews and Christians” includes five chapters on Plutarch and Philo (two chapters), the New Testament, and Paul. Chapter 12 “Philo and Plutarch on the Nature of God” approaches Philo and Plutarch, two authors with similar backgrounds, who, however, reached different conclusions regarding the quality of the divine. Both authors intended to explain the nature of God to educated persons acquainted with their religious traditions. Plutarch’s real contribution consists not so much in his concept of Apollo as in his concept of the Middle-Platonic God masked by Apollo. This is a much higher God, like the Jewish one, the creator of the universe, exercising providence over His creation. He is also the fullness of being and, at least for “Ammonius” is unique, the only God, or the One, without parts, who deserves

worship from all. This notably brings Plutarch's theology closer to that of Philo, since, even if following different paths, they created theologies for their faiths. While Philo formed his theology upon an essentially monotheistic foundation, Plutarch created his upon one essentially polytheistic. In both cases, however, they drew their major inspiration from Plato.

Chapter 13, "A Name by Any Name? The Allegorizing Etymologies of Philo and Plutarch," provides an interesting analysis of the use of allegory in both Philo and Plutarch in their dealing with their respective traditions. As a devout Jew, Philo naturally believed in the Hebrew Bible as the foundation of his religion and, in this sense, he is in principle loyal to its literal meaning. However, whenever the literal meaning seemed offensive or unacceptable he could give it a symbolic or allegorical meaning. Differently, Plutarch's attitude is that of a scholar writing a detached learned treatise about a foreign religion. The *On Isis and Osiris* is a special case: Plutarch was not a devotee and did not believe in Egyptian myths and gods, except where they could be reconciled with his own religion and his Platonism. This is the goal of Plutarch's allegorical approach to Egyptian religion: he purifies it both for Klea and his readers, treating it as fundamentally in line with traditional religion and with his theological Middle-Platonism.

Chapter 14, "Plutarch's Monotheism and the New Testament," focuses on Plutarch's monotheism but pays particular attention to the monotheism developed in *On the E at Delphi* and *On Isis and Osiris*, which is then compared to that of the New Testament. *On the E at Delphi* presents a God that resembles the First God of Middle-Platonism, equated with Being and the One, absolutely without parts and without motion. This God is completely remote from mortals, and the proverb "Know yourself" (γνώθι σαυτόν) should make humans aware of the immense gulf between mortals and the divine. At the same time, however, this God also has attributes of the Second God in later Platonism since he is considered creator of the universe and as such responsible for holding it together with his providence. In this sense, he is not so distant from human beings. This later view is closer to *On Isis and Osiris*, where God appears to be much nearer, since Osiris is presented as the *logos* of the universe or the intelligence of the world soul. This immanentist view, however, is balanced with the transcendental one when he affirms that God is the father who transmits his *logos* to the world soul and to us. Clearly, Plutarch may not be that consistent in the presentation of his monotheistic ideas. Both treatises pursue different purposes and present monotheism in somewhat different ways. According to Brenk, however, a God very distant and very close seems to parallel Christian and New Testament views on the monotheistic God.

Chapter 15 “‘Most Beautiful and Divine:’ Graeco-Romans (Especially Plutarch) and Paul on Love and Marriage” approaches the Graeco-Roman background of Paul’s attitude toward love and marriage. In so doing Brenk presents the radically different views on love in fragments of Plutarch’s work *On Love*, his *Advice to a Bride and Groom*, and his *Dialogue on Love* as witnesses to the important changes occurring in the philosophical literature about love around Paul’s lifetime. These changes concern the role of women, but especially a new religious and eschatological dimension to love and marriage. The comparative analysis shows that despite some differences, Graeco-Roman authors and Paul show important similarities. All of them show a deeply felt religious sense of marriage and the attempt to integrate marriage into the ultimate goal of life. On the one hand, Plutarch moved away from the traditional goal that highlighted procreation as the main goal of marriage, but also from mere companionate marriage, by incorporating marriage into Middle-Platonism. “In Paul’s case marriage could no longer be based on the religious traditions of his upbringing. Nor could it easily be incorporated into the Graeco-Roman religious world. In this respect, both Graeco-Roman philosophers and Paul were stepping out on new paths.”

It is well known that Plutarch’s silences can be rather eloquent as regards his points of view or preferences and indifferences. One of the most notorious cases is his silence regarding Christianity, which is not mentioned one single time in Plutarch’s oeuvre. Chapter 16 “Plutarch on the Christians: Why So Silent? Ignorance, Indifference, or Indignity?” explores this striking silence with a view to finding a plausible hypothesis to explain it. Three questions evaluate three different scenarios to explain it: 1. Did Plutarch know nothing about Christians? 2. Did he have no occasion to write about them? 3. Did he know about the Christians but purposely rejected to write about them? In an attempt to give an answer to the first two questions, Brenk considers all the known passages on Christians from the end of the first and beginning of the second centuries. He then ponders Plutarch’s acquaintances in both Rome and elsewhere so as to evaluate the question as to whether or not he may have heard something about Christianity. Given that it is nearly impossible that he did not, the chapter concludes that it is not impossible that Plutarch “engaged in something like a conspiracy of silence against them, at least in his extant writings.”

The sixteen studies included in this book provide an interesting overview of the wide range of themes dealt with by Frederick E. Brenk in his analysis of the work of the prolific writer and polymath from Chaeronea. His comprehensive knowledge of both Plutarch and the cultural context in which he lived allowed Professor Brenk to see “Plutarch as part of the interconnected ecosystem of early Roman thought,” as Tim Whitmarsh puts it in the foreword to this book.

And this means that Professor Brenk naturally shed light not only on numerous aspects of Plutarch's religious outlook, but also on Philo, Pausanias, Apuleius, Lucian, and the New Testament, especially Paul, and many others.

The origin of this volume goes back to a conversation I had with Fred in Rome on 3 July 2019. Dominic Markl and I had organized a symposium to celebrate Fred's 90th birthday in the Eternal City, a place where Professor Brenk had spent so many years. A group of close colleagues and friends got together on this occasion: Zlatko Pleše, Rainer Hirsch Luipold, Aurelio Pérez Jiménez, Michael Kolarcik, Giovanni Casadio, Dominic Markl and I, Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta. After the symposium we walked together to the Santa Maria dell'Anima church, where we were invited to a concert. We closed the evening with a dinner at the Jesuit community of the Pontifical Biblical Institute. In the conversation that followed Fred and I began to advance a project that had to be delayed several times due Fred's numerous commitments: conferences, articles, book chapters; an admirable amount of activity for someone in his nineties!

During the preparation of this volume, I received the sad news of Fred's untimely passing away on 3 December 2022, at the age of 93 years. Up to two weeks earlier Fred and I had shared intense communication regarding his book. He was very enthusiastic about the imminent publication of the volume towards which we had been working together for the last three years or so. Last October I sent him the first proofs for correction. As he told me, his friend Pat Burns was going to undertake a first reading, after which he would correct the book himself and send it back to me around the middle of November. He never did. My warmest thanks are due to Pat Burns, Thomas Doyle, Benjamin Osborne, and John Moriconi, who kindly helped me to retrieve the manuscript from Fred's computer.

Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta

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1. “Plutarch’s Flawed Characters: The *Personae* of the Dialogues,” in J. Opsomer, G. Roskam, & F. Titchener (eds.), *A Versatile Gentleman: Consistency in Plutarch’s Writing. Studies offered to Luc van der Stockt on the Occasion of his Retirement* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2016) 89–100.
2. “‘In Learned Conversation’: Plutarch’s Symposiac Literature and the Elusive Authorial Voice,” in J. Ribeiro Ferreira, D. Leão, M. Tröster, & P. Barata Dias (eds.), *Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch* (Coimbra: Classica Digitalia / CECH, 2009) 51–61.
3. “Space, Time, and Language in *On the Oracles of the Pythia*: 3,000 Years of History, Never Proved Wrong,” in A. Georgiadou & K. Oikonomopoulou (eds.), *Space, Time and Language in Plutarch’s Visions of Greek Culture* (Berlin—Boston: De Gruyter, 2017) 79–86.
4. “Voices from the Past: Quotations and Intertextuality: *The Oracles at Delphi*,” in T. Schmidt, M. Vamvouri, & R. Hirsch-Luipold (eds.), *The Dynamics of Intertextuality in Plutarch* (Leiden—Boston: Brill, 2020) 61–85.
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Abbreviations

<i>AJPh</i>	American Journal of Philology
<i>AW</i>	Ancient World
<i>ASNP</i>	Annali della Scuola Normale di Pisa
<i>ANRW</i>	Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt
<i>Apeiron</i>	Apeiron: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science
<i>BCH</i>	Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique
<i>CJ</i>	Classical Journal
<i>CPh</i>	Classical Philology
<i>CQ</i>	Classical Quarterly
<i>CR</i>	Classical Review
<i>ETHL</i>	Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses
<i>FGrHist</i>	Felix Jacoby, <i>Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker</i> (Berlin: Weidmann, 1923)
<i>Gnomon</i>	Gnomon. Kritische Zeitschrift für die gesamte klassische Altertumswissenschaft
<i>GGA</i>	Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeigen
<i>GB</i>	Grazer Beiträge
<i>GRBS</i>	Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies
<i>Historia Religionum</i>	Historia religionum: an international journal
<i>Histos</i>	HISTOS. The On-line Journal of Ancient Historiography
<i>HSCP</i>	Harvard Studies in Classical Philology
<i>ICS</i>	Illinois Classical Studies
<i>InLIST</i>	Interaction and Linguistic Structures
<i>JbAC</i>	Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum
<i>JBL</i>	Journal of Biblical Literature
<i>JECS</i>	Journal of Early Christian Studies
<i>JHS</i>	Journal of Hellenic Studies
<i>JEA</i>	Journal of Egyptian Archaeology
<i>JSNT</i>	Journal for the Study of New Testament
<i>JRS</i>	Journal of Religious History
<i>JRS</i>	Journal of Roman Studies
<i>JSJ</i>	Journal for the Study of Judaism
<i>JSQ</i>	Jewish Studies Quarterly
<i>JTS</i>	Journal of Theological Studies
<i>Kernos</i>	Revue internationale et pluridisciplinaire de religion grecque antique
<i>LSJ</i>	Liddell and Scott, Jones, <i>Greek-English Lexicon</i> (Oxford, 1996)

<i>Mediterraneo Antico</i>	Mediterraneo Antico Magazine. Archeologia, egiptologia, storia
<i>MEFRA</i>	Mélanges de l'École française de Rome – Antiquité
<i>NETS</i>	A. Pietersma & B.G. Wright (eds.), <i>A New English Translation of the Septuagint</i> (Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 2007)
<i>NRSV</i>	New Revised Standard Version Bible (National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 1989)
<i>NTS</i>	New Testament Studies
<i>Numen</i>	International Review for the History of Religions
<i>Orientalia</i>	A four-monthly periodical devoted to the scientific study of the Ancient Near East
<i>Phronesis</i>	A Journal for Ancient Philosophy
<i>PMG</i>	D.L. Page, <i>Poetae Melici Graeci</i> (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1962)
<i>Ploutarchos</i>	International Scholarly Journal devoted to research on Plutarch's Works
<i>Revue de Philologie</i>	Revue de philologie, de littérature et d'histoire anciennes.
<i>RPhA</i>	Revue de Philosophie Ancienne
<i>REA</i>	Revue des Études Anciennes
<i>RE</i>	August Pauly, Georg Wissowa, Wilhelm Kroll, Kurt Witte, Karl Mittelhaus, Konrat Ziegler (eds.), <i>Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft</i> (neue Bearbeitung Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1894–1980)
<i>REL</i>	Revue des Études latines
<i>SCI</i>	Scripta Classica Israelica
<i>SPhA</i>	Studia Philonica Annual
<i>Studium Generale</i>	Zeitschrift für Interdisziplinäre Studien
<i>TAPhA</i>	Transactions of the American Philological Association
<i>Vetera Christianorum</i>	Journal of the Dipartimento di Ricerca e Innovazione Umanistica of the Università degli Studi di Bari
<i>VigChr</i>	Vigiliae Christianae. A Review of Early Christian Life and Languages
<i>WS</i>	Wiener Studien. Zeitschrift für Klassische Philologie, Patristik und Lateinische Tradition
<i>ZNT</i>	Zeitschrift für Neues Testament