

One of the focal points of scholarship on Ancient Greek epigram is the question of early collections. Excellent studies have been dedicated to early epigrammatic books (Argentieri, Gutzwiller, Parsons) and to the earliest traceable attempts to gather and publish inscribed epigrams (Petrovic, Sider), but not enough attention has been paid to the material context of inscribed epigram as the first instance of epigrammatic collection. In my paper, I posit that even the earliest epigrams were not meant to be read alone, but rather were conceived as a reply or addition to inscriptions on other objects in the vicinity. Spatial setting such as a sanctuary or the side of the road constituted the earliest form of an epigrammatic collection and served as a primary model for the later collections of literary epigrams. Extant epigrammatic collections as well as the Posidippus papyrus, which contains poems assembled in categories such as ‘epitaphs’ and ‘dedicatory epigrams’, demonstrate that material context served as an important organizing principle.

I start by offering new insights regarding the deixis of an inscribed epigram. By referring to its environment or medium or by addressing its recipients, the inscribed epigram is firmly anchored in the material world. Very often, by means of deictic references, an epigram instructs its reader to pay special attention to the environment. For instance, dedicatory epigrams continually refer to their objects by using the formulaic *με ἀνέθηκε*. Sepulchral epigrams also almost always employ some sort of deixis. However, we, as modern readers of epigrams, usually fail to notice that this deixis does not only refer to the object on which the epigram is inscribed. It also points towards other objects with inscriptions that were placed in its vicinity. In a dedicatory epigram, *με ἀνέθηκε* points towards an object, perhaps a bronze statue of a youth, but also to other dedications which were placed all around it. We must imagine - the Greeks would have seen them with their own eyes - countless other dedications in the sanctuary, vying for god's attention. The meaning of *με ἀνέθηκε* in this context was something along the lines of: “*And I* was set up by...”

I proceed by analysing some early epigrams which indisputably point towards other objects in the vicinity, such as CEG 302. This sixth-century BC dedicatory epigram features *μέν* in the first line, which I interpret as a response to other dedicatory inscriptions: Φοί]βο μέν εἰμ' ἄγαλ[μα Λ]ατ[οί]δα καλ[ό]ν. *And I* am a beautiful dedication to Apollo. This epigram is an illustration of the way archaic and classical composers of epigrams intended their texts to be read. By placing the word *μέν* in the first line of an epigram, the author is implicitly evoking a whole plethora of texts in which his poem is not a lone voice, but a member of a chorus. The material context – in this case, a sanctuary of Apollo – is, I submit, the first and earliest collection of epigrams.