Suppose for a moment that you are visiting a pan-Hellenic shrine such as Delphi in the third century B.C., or taking a stroll through the agora of a major Greek city such as Athens, or through one of its cemeteries. What would you see? In this period, early in the Hellenistic Age, you would in all likelihood see great numbers of inscribed monuments wherever you looked, amongst many other sights. At the shrine you might—if you were literate—read inscriptions on many of the dedications to the gods, or peruse the honors bestowed on the sanctuary’s special benefactors; you might even glance at temple inventories. In the city’s agora you might note laws engraved on stelae, decrees, accounts, commemorations of important civic events and prominent individuals. In cemeteries you would see large numbers of inscriptions adorning the grave markers, often consisting of no more than the deceased’s name and parentage.

Amid this great mass of inscribed texts, there were certainly also epigrams. This term, in its most basic sense, signifies no more than “inscription,” a text engraved upon an object. But already from its earliest attestations (in Herodotus and Thucydides), the word was used preeminently of one epigraphic subset, the verse-inscription—short poems, most often engraved on tombstones, religious offerings, or honorific monuments. The earliest were in hexameters; occasionally there were iambs; but from the latter part of the sixth century, elegiac couplets grew ever more prominent until, by the fourth, they largely

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1 We gratefully acknowledge the advice of Professors Joseph W. Day, Catherine Keesling and Julia Lougovaya regarding epigraphic matters. As we sometimes went our own way nonetheless, they are not to blame for faults that remain.
2 In the early period, many of these were as likely to be in city sanctuaries.
3 On inscribed epigram, see Day, Petrovic, and Bettenworth in this volume.
4 See generally Puelma (1996). He points out the striking fact (125, n. 9) that prior to imperial times no poet ever refers to a poem as ἔπηραμα. For the related term, ἔλεγχον, which appears sometimes to be synonymous (Thuc. 1.132.2, Hdt. Vit. Hom. 36, lines 512–6), and is used by poets of inscribed epigram (CEG 700.3; 819.5, 13; 888.19; 889.8), see Gutzwiller (1998b: 47–9) and Petrovic in this volume.
supplanted the other forms. Verse was not the medium of laws, decrees, accounts, or other forms of civic or religious record-keeping. Nor was it even all that common in the three main categories in which epigrams appear—sepulchral, dedicatory, and honorific.

Indeed, verse inscriptions comprise only a small part of the larger epigraphic landscape—a fact easily forgotten by students and scholars who encounter them mainly in books that take these as their exclusive subject, the weighty tomes that form our standard academic editions of inscribed epigram. At a place where one might expect large quantities, for example a prestigious pan-Hellenic shrine like Delphi, they are remarkably scarce. As A. Jacquemin has noted with regard only to dedications, “the small number of metrical inscriptions of dedicatory type or commenting on offerings, just 21 out of an ensemble of 238 documents, is astonishing in a sanctuary as important as Delphi, which is moreover consecrated to Apollo, god of poetry.” Dedication, however, form only one group out of the roughly 2,000 inscriptions contained in the *Fouilles de Delphes*, and other epigrammatic types are virtually non-existent there (tombs are generally prohibited at shrines). Thus, the proportion of verse-inscriptions out of the epigraphic total at Delphi is just over 1%. Notable, too, is that the epigrams were not somehow segregated from the larger mass of prose inscriptions of whatever type (dedicatory, funerary, administrative, honorific, etc.); that is, they were not set apart and easy to find. At many sanctuaries the figures are just as low.

Note, however, that hexametric inscriptions still do occur. Their conventionality is suggested in the *Laws* (958e), where Plato’s Athenian stipulates that tombstones “shall be only as large as is needed to contain an encomium of no more than four heroic verses (μὴ πλείω τεττάρων ἥρωικῶν στίχων, i.e. hexameters) about the deceased’s life.”

As Day notes in this volume (n. 33), honorific epigrams are often subsumed in the category of dedications.

For modern editions of epigrams, see below in this chapter.

Jacquemin (1995: 155): “Le petit nombre d’inscriptions métriques relevant du type de la dédicace ou du commentaire d’offrandes, 21 sur un ensemble de 238 documents, peut étonner dans un sanctuaire aussi important que Delphes qui est de surcroît consacré à Apollon, dieu de la poésie.” Her figures cover the period from the sixth century B.C. through the third A.D. At some shrines (though by no means all) the proportion of verse-dedications is higher. Jacquemin compares the dedications on the Acropolis (where Raubitschek tabulates 141 metrical inscriptions out of 341 dedications total, i.e., 41%) and on Delos, where between the seventh and mid-second centuries we find 22 epigrams out of 109 dedicatory inscriptions (i.e., just over 20%). Jacquemin (1995: 155–7) suggests by way of explanation that Athens had far more wealthy individuals who wanted to commemorate their dedications in verse. At Delphi and Delos, by contrast, fewer individuals made dedications.

Prof. C. Keesling notes *per litteras* (16 August, 2006) that at many shrines inscribed