“STABBED WITH LARGE PENS”:
TRAJECTORIES OF LITERACY IN
PLUTARCH’S LIVES

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It is well-known that Plutarch’s political views are centred on the idea of concord and abhorrence of violent conflict (stasis) within a community. The double Life of Tiberius and Gaius Gracchi is constructed as a negative paradigm of stasis. Plutarch shows Rome plunging for the first time (Tiberius-Gaius Gracchi 20.1) into a period of bloody civil strife for which the brothers are responsible—despite their noble intentions (9.4: καλὴν ὑπόθεσιν καὶ δικαίαν), they are ambitious demagogues pandering to the masses (Agis-Cleomenes 2.3–8). The stasis is presented as a reversal of the norms and expectations of civic life. Legislation and persuasion collapse (Tiberius-Gaius Gracchi 20.1–2; 37 [16].1–4). Neither gods, nor laws can be trusted any more, as Cornelia will point out (36 [15].4). The temple of Concord built by the consul Opimius in the aftermath is really a monument to madness (38 [17].8–9). Likewise, artefacts are used in a violent, abnormal way during stasis: tribunes of the people start to carry bandit-style stilettos (10.9, cf. 36 [15].2), Tiberius is clubbed to death with pieces of senatorial furniture (19.8–10).

The immediate prelude to Gaius’ death can be read as adding a further dimension to the portrayal of crisis:

On the day when Opimius prepared to repeal Gaius’ laws, the Capitol was occupied early in the morning by both parties. After the consul had performed the sacrifice, his lictor (τῶν ὑπηρετῶν), one Quintus Antyllius, was carrying the entrails away and said to Fulvius’ supporters, “Make

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1 Successive drafts of this paper were presented to classicists at Exeter, Liverpool, Nijmegen, and Canterbury. I am grateful to all participants of these meetings as well as to this volume’s referees for their feedback and suggestions. The remaining errors are entirely my own.

2 *Praecepta gerendae reipublicae* 823F–825D; *Comparison Agis-Cleomenes-Gracchi* 4.3; Duff (1999) 89–91, 93, 196, 296–297; Gómez Espelosín (1990); Ash (1997) is a brilliant case study of *stasis* in *Galba* and *Otho*.

3 See Ingenkamp (1992), especially 4336–4344.

4 On Plurarchan stereotyping the Gracchi as champions of the *demos*, see Pelling (2002a) 214–216.

5 A narrative move that dates back to Thucydides, 3.81.5–83.4.
way for the good people, you wicked citizens (κακοὶ πολίται)!" Some say that he also made a rude gesture with his bare forearm (τὸν βραχίονα γεμνὸν οίνον ἐφ᾽ ἐβρεῖ σηματίζοντα παρενεχεῖν). Anyway, Antyllius died right there, stabbed with long styluses—which were allegedly new ones, made specially for this purpose (μεγάλοις γραφείοις κεντούμενος ἐπ᾽ αὐτὸ τοῦτο πεποίηθα λεγομένους). The crowd was confounded by the murder, but the two leaders reacted in opposite ways. Gaius was angered and reproached his men for having given the enemies the much-awaited cause to attack. Opimius, on the other hand, got elated, as if he had received the signal, and urged the people onto vengeance. (34 [13].3–5).

The passage reflects some of the main anxieties of the Life. Sacrifice fails to reunite the divided community, ending in bloodshed instead, communication degenerates into insults and rude, then stabbing gestures. But there is also a poignant detail about Antyllius’ end: his murderers are armed with pens. Roman citizens (the offensive address κακοὶ πολίται momentarily reminds us of the civic nature of the conflict) use their “specially prepared” styluses in the forum not to write, but to kill another citizen. Writing tools, such as tablets and stylus, would be ubiquitous on Roman streets as an essential part of “civilized” communal functioning—trade, oratory, government, schools. Plutarch’s message seems to be that when the pen becomes an instrument of phonos, not of logos, the community must be in crisis indeed.

A question might be raised as to whether a crowd of Gracchan supporters, who were mostly working-class and so assumed semi-illiterate, would be an unusual and provocative sight when equipped with styluses in the forum. Firstly, it is not certain that the lictor was in fact attacked by the mob rather than by a small group of Gracchus’ closest associates. There are serious discrepancies in the ancient sources. While in Plutarch Antyllius is pen-stabbed spontaneously and to Gaius’ great displeasure (Tiberius-Gaius Gracchi 34 [13].5; Comparison Agis-Cleomenes--)

6 For the Roman political conscience to be carrying a weapon in the public space is a major transgression. So arming oneself with styluses and pieces of furniture rather than with swords and daggers is an attempt to stay somehow on the right side of the law: cf. e.g., Cicero, In Catilinam 2.1, Philippica 2.112–113, especially Philippica 5.17–18; Pliny, Naturalis Historia 34.139; Digesta 48.6.3; Nippel (1995) 54–55; 58; Richardson (1976) 95; generally, Lintott (1968) 107–124. The trick did not work. Ancient historians typically describe the Gracchan crisis as the point when violence and weapons were introduced into Rome’s life: Velleius Paterculus 2.3.3: hoc initium in urbe Roma ciuitis sanguinis gladiatorumque inpunitatis fuit; Appian, Bellum Civile 1.2.4: ήσειος.

7 Fascinating picture in Morgan (1998) 1–2. In the riddling list of Trimalchio’s gifts (Petronius, Satyricon 56.9) the epithet “of the forum” (forensia) refers to writing tablets (tabulae). For ancient writing tools, see Blanck (1992) 64–71; Small (1997) 145–150.