

# Plutarch the Multiculturalist: Is West always Best?

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## Abstract

Is Plutarch a multiculturalist, recognising the value of non-Greek cultures along with Greek? Does he even go as far as Antiphon in the fifth century and deny any firm dividing line between barbarian and Greek? There are some traces of this, particularly an awareness that all may recognise the same gods; the Romans in particular may share some underlying traits with the Greeks while also showing differences. But Alexander the Great, even if the *On the Virtue or Fortune of Alexander* essays present him as unifying East and West, does so by imposing Greek values; the *Life* shows little interest in his learning anything from eastern values and philosophy. The alien culture to inspire most respect is that of Egypt, and the *Isis and Osiris* in particular accepts that there is much wisdom that Greeks share with Egyptians.

**Key-Words:** Multiculturalism, Polarities, Racism, Alexander, Gymnosophists, Egypt, Syncretism.

lutarch, we feel, is one of us. He would be thoroughly at home in a convivial conference setting<sup>1</sup>, this ‘understanding and intellectually curious person, someone who is serious but not stuffy, aware

of life in all its manifestations, yet deliberately avoiding the unseemly and trying to present the best side of his subjects’<sup>2</sup>: one can just see him in the bar late at night, surrounded by acolytes of a much younger generation, gently pleased by our interest and admiration, occasionally putting us right on so-

<sup>1</sup> As so many of us felt ourselves at home amid the breathtaking scenery and warm hospitality of Banff. I have tried to preserve the feel of this genial occasion by keeping some of the informality of my original delivery. My second paragraph in particular prompted some lively audience participation.

<sup>2</sup> STADTER, 1988, p. 292.

nothing, but always doing so with gentle tact and making sure that no-one really misbehaved and the party went with a civilised swing. This is surely the second most attractive personality of classical antiquity. And a lot of his moral views, even if sometimes on the pompous side, are pretty attractive too. That is even true on gender issues: we may get impatient with debating whether heterosexual or homosexual love is the better in *Amatorius*, but equally I dare say most of us would be on the side he clearly favours when Ismenodora wants to marry young Bacchon: well, why not? Yes, this is the character I would second-most like to be like.

Second-most? Who then could beat him? Not Socrates, surely: no, I have enough people edging away from me in bars already. Thucydides? Oh, lighten up. Pindar? Nobody could understand a word I said. Cicero? Nobody else would ever get a word in. Caesar? Can't understand why I seem to be making people so nervous. Aristotle? There are *five* types of reason why one wouldn't want to be Aristotle..., one of them that we would have to deal with the young Alexander, who was surely a tough pupil. No, the one I would put ahead is Herodotus, for very much the same reasons – that unflagging curiosity, that strong projection of an amiable personality who is always eager for a

new experience and a new conversation, that readiness to accept that wonder is so important and may always be there around the next corner.... Yes, he would fit in pretty well as well.

Herodotus, indeed, will be a lurking presence in a lot of what follows: for it is so tempting to want both Plutarch and Herodotus to be attractive on racial issues as well, people who are prepared to find virtue and admirability wherever they may be. After all, Antiphon in the fifth century could say that

we are equally adapted by nature to be both Greek and barbarian... in all this, there is no firm dividing line between barbarian and Greek: we all breathe the same air through our mouths and noses, we all laugh when we are happy and cry when we are sad, we take in sounds through our hearing, we see with the same rays of light, we work with our hands, we walk with our feet (fr. 44B D–K)<sup>3</sup>.

It was not impossible to think in that way, though we should also notice exactly what Antiphon says—not we are all the same, but we are all equally adapted to be the same, which is not quite the same thing. It still seems that Antiphon is insisting that the distinction between Greek and barbarian is a matter of νόμος rather than φύσις, very much what Aristotle famously denied.

<sup>3</sup> As supplemented by POxy 3647: see PENDRICK, 2002, ad loc.

It is not difficult to find Herodotus making his audience think critically about such distinctions. The familiar *locus classicus* is Darius' seminar on cultural relativism in Book 3: the king asked some Greek visitors whether they would eat their dead fathers, and met with shock and horror; then he asked some Indians whether they would be prepared to cremate them, and met with a similar response. If he had wished, Herodotus could have made this an example to show how primitive those Indians were in comparison with the morally sophisticated Greeks, and how Darius was not much better if he failed to realise that; but in fact the conclusion drawn is very different.

So these practices have become enshrined as customs just as they are, and I think Pindar was right to have said in his poem that custom is king of all. (Herodotus 3.38.4, tr. Waterfield)

Herodotus is clearly on Darius' side, for that was surely Darius' point too in staging his demonstration. The story shows how all peoples think their own customs best, and (as Herodotus has just made explicit) 'only a madman' would scoff at what others do (3.38.2).

Just as important is the narrative subtlety of the context. Herodotus could have put this in many different places, but in fact puts it at the end of a sequence

where Darius' predecessor Cambyses had indeed been showing himself a 'madman'—that 'madman' who would scoff. He had mocked Egyptian religious practices so spectacularly that he even killed the Apis bull, an animal that the Egyptians held particularly sacred (3.29). This is a point in the narrative when Greek listeners and readers might feel particularly superior at the expense of those brutal domineering Persians; yet it is here that we see this other Persian king, Darius, showing himself much more sensitive to cultural differences than the Greeks in the story, and presumably than many of the audience, who would largely have shared that horror at the Indian practices. It is the Persian who emerges as the man with cultural insight, not the Greek, and nothing could make it plainer that these foreigners—even these tyrannical Persian foreigners—are *not* all the same. That sets any complacent Greek readers or listeners back on their heels.

Can we find anything of the same in Plutarch? Yes, sometimes we can. The end of *Isis and Osiris* is very respectful to Egyptian ideas about religion (and we might remember that Plutarch's most revered teacher was the Egyptian Ammonius)<sup>4</sup>: the gods are the common possession of all humanity, and they do not differ among Greeks and barbarians

<sup>4</sup> JONES, 1967; SWAIN, 1997, pp. 182-4; OPSOMER, 2009; KLOTZ, 2014, pp. 214-7; STADTER, 2015, pp. 193-5.

(377C-E, cf. below); everyone has the same initial knowledge of them and honour for them, even if different peoples use different names (377D); and the greatest and most beneficial of humans have become gods, as ‘we have come to think, not regarding different ones as belonging to different peoples, not some Greek and some barbarian and some northern and some southern, but common to all just as sun and moon are common to all’ (377F)—not far, then, from the sort of argument that Antiphon was using. But then we can look also at all those passages collected so well by Thomas Schmidt, and discussed before him by Tasos Nikolaidis<sup>5</sup>. Schmidt’s distribution of material is particularly interesting: five lengthy chapters on basically negative characteristics—savagery, over-confidence (θρασύτης), wealth and luxury, numerousness—not perhaps negative in itself, but almost always bringing out the superiority of the smaller numbers that defeated them—and simple worthlessness (φωλύτης); then a relatively short chapter on ‘positive traits’, including a few ‘noble savages’ (as Bessie Walker called them when talking about Tacitus)<sup>6</sup> and, interestingly, a disproportionate number of impressive women. Those proportions are very

similar to the balance in Edith Hall’s trail-blazing *Inventing the Barbarian* of 1989, not about Plutarch at all but concentrating on Greek tragedy, with lots of glances across to Herodotus (and Hartog, though Hall’s and Hartog’s emphases are rather different)<sup>7</sup>: four chapters, about fifty pages each, on polarities which are almost universally denigratory about barbarians; then an epilogue, half the length of the other chapters, on ‘The polarity deconstructed’. Since then there has been something of an industry in deconstructing the polarity a good deal more, in both tragedy and Herodotus. Some of that scholarly action has been in the direction of regarding Herodotus and particularly Aeschylus’ *Persians* as foundational texts not just of ‘Orientalism’, as Edward Saïd represented them, but also of the *critique* of Orientalism, at least occasionally making readers and listeners uneasy about any West-is-best complacency and providing them with some material that could challenge those prejudices as well as some that could feed them. I have had my own say there on both tragedy and Herodotus, though oddly enough my contributions have not reduced everyone else to a silence of stunned agreement<sup>8</sup>. Can’t think why.

<sup>5</sup> SCHMIDT, 1999; NIKOLAIDIS, 1986.

<sup>6</sup> WALKER, 1952.

<sup>7</sup> HALL, 1989; HARTOG, 1988. On those differences of emphasis see PELLING, 1997a.

<sup>8</sup> Tragedy: PELLING, 1997c and 1997d; GARVIE, 2009, pp. x-xxii agrees; HARRISON, 2000 does not. Herodotus: PELLING, 1997a.

It would be welcome if we could say something similar of Plutarch—but there, immediately, lies the first warning: we know the temptation of finding what we want to find, and overemphasising or over-interpreting the bits that fit the picture that we like. None of us needs any warning that modern liberal approaches to racial differences are, indeed, very modern, as specific and maybe more specific to our own time and culture than any other. If we wanted any such reminder, it is salutary to recall that when the First World War was over, in all the idealism of the Peacemaking of 1919 and amid all the concerns to accommodate ethnic self-determination in the new map of Europe and the far East, one proposal that got nowhere was a mild suggestion from Japan that Woodrow Wilson's fourteen principles might be expanded to include a statement of racial equality. That was just a non-starter, and not just because Wilson was facing an election where the votes of the American south would be crucial. Japan attracted little support from anyone<sup>9</sup>.

One thing is clear. By Plutarch's time there is not a simple Greek-barbarian divide, for one reason in particular: Rome and the Romans, 'those most

powerful men above' as he calls them in a haunting phrase in *Advice on Public Life* (814C). As soon as the Romans start impinging on the Greek world, people can tell the difference. Pyrrhus looks across at the Roman army he faces and comments that 'that barbarian *taxis* is not barbarian: we shall see how it goes' (*Pyrrh.* 16.7). They did indeed see how it went, and for the next few hundred years Greeks learned not to be too dismissive. The world of the *Table Talk* is eloquent there, where sophisticated dinner guests may be local Greeks or may be visiting Roman grandes, and by then Roman grandes can come from anywhere: one of them, Lucius Sulla, is a Carthaginian. We have to be careful not to think of a total fusion into just one Greco-Roman cultural amalgam: it is better to think of 'code-switching', so that people can talk Greek and talk Roman, and indeed think Greek and think Roman in ways which go beyond the simple language that they happen to be speaking at the time. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill is very good on this in *Rome's Cultural Revolution*<sup>10</sup>. It is most interesting to see the ways that Romans behave at the Greek dinner table, as they code-switch too. They are in relaxed mode, so they do not play

<sup>9</sup> MACMILLAN, 2001, esp. pp. 325-30. Particularly telling was the attitude of the British Foreign Secretary Balfour, not one of the major players on this specific issue: 'the notion that all men were created equal was an interesting one, he found, but he did not believe it. You could scarcely say that a man in Central Africa was equal to a European' (MACMILLAN, p. 326).

<sup>10</sup> WALLACE-HADRILL, 2008. See also now MADSEN-REES, 2014.

the ‘powerful one above’ too much; Greeks also know not to overstep the limit, and they too behave with proper tact; and Romans are careful to talk about topics appropriate to the Greek dinner table, matters of philology and culture rather than the best way to manage an army or an empire<sup>11</sup>. If I can be allowed an Oxford moment, it reminds me so much of what happens when a politician visits his or her old college: they are so careful at the dinner table to try to behave like dons rather than powerbrokers, and talk about all the good and intellectually demanding books they have read, not realising that when left on our own we are more likely to be talking about last night’s football. It is all quite demanding.

So there are two worlds, but they know one another and they mesh: that is going to be true even if we accept that *Table Talk* has an element of the aspirational and idealising too, and that not every visiting Roman was so unboorish. At least those idealised Romans treat Greeks with respect. Contrast the Roman matron in Lucian, who has a tame Greek philosopher but uses him to take care of her pet bitch on a journey, and the animal nestles in his lap, licking his beard, pissing down his front, and finally giving birth to her litter under his cloak (*Philosophers for Hire* 34-5). And Plutarch, quite evidently, treats Romans and Roman culture with

respect too. Otherwise he would hardly have written the *Parallel Lives*, after all, and the *Roman Questions* shows an utter fascination with Roman customs for their own sake. Still, there is not usually the radiant admiration of an Aelius Aristides, or even of Dionysius of Halicarnassus in the poem to his history:

My readers will learn from my history that Rome have birth to a multitude of virtues from the very moment of its foundation—examples of men whose match has never been seen in any city, Greek or barbarian, for their piety or their justice or their self-control in all their lives or their formidable prowess in warfare. (*Roman Antiquities* 1.5.3).

—though it is true enough that Dionysius too goes on to have some sharp things to say once the history is underway, especially when he glances forward to the late Republic. Plutarch certainly feels he can tell Romans some home truths. Coriolanus and Marius would have been so much more satisfactory if they had only had a proper Greek education: the Muses would have tempered all that bad temper and inability to acclimatise to political life. And what of all those great Roman successes on the battlefield? Doesn’t that show how marvellous they are?

That is a question requiring a lengthy answer for men who de-

<sup>11</sup> Cf. PELLING, 2011, pp. 209-10.



fine 'advance' in terms of wealth, luxury, and empire rather than safety, restraint, and an honest independence. (*Comparison of Lycurgus and Numa* 4.12-13)

The reserve there is clear, and really rather bold.

The end of *Pompey* is particularly interesting here, that passage when the two armies are shaping up on the battlefield of Pharsalus and 'a few of the best of the Romans, and some Greeks who were there but not participating', reflected on the madness of it all<sup>12</sup>. Perhaps they are 'Greeks' simply because we are deep in Greece at the time, but the viewpoint is still marked as at least partly that of an outsider, even if there are a few of the best of the Romans there to think along similar lines. The thinking does not project the same reserve about Roman militarism as in the *Lycurgus and Numa* passage; here it is more a point about the way that militarism is directed, that 'plight to which greed and rivalry had brought the empire'.

By now, had they wished to rule in peace and enjoy their past achievements, the greatest and the best parts of land and sea were already theirs, and open for them to do so; had they still wanted to gratify a thirst for trophies and triumphs, they could have drunk their fill of Parthian

or German wars. Scythia too was a great task that remained, and India as well; and they had an excuse that was not inglorious for such greed, for they could claim that they were civilising the barbarians. For what Scythian cavalry or Parthian arrows or Indian wealth would have resisted 70,000 Romans attacking them in arms, with Pompey and Caesar in command, men whose name they had heard even before they heard of Rome? For such were the unapproachable and varied and savage tribes they had traversed in arms. (*Pomp.* 70).

That, then, is what they ought to have been doing, fighting the barbarian in the east; and there is not much doubt that it would be fighting for fighting's sake, or rather for the sake of greed. They might 'claim' that they were civilising the barbarians, but that is all it would be, a claim. We shall see later whether the similar civilising claims that were made about Alexander had more substance in them; and Alexander is very much a subtext in the background of this passage, that Alexander whom Caesar and Pompey could have played over again if only they had chosen.

So far this *Pompey* passage may look like the view of not just an outsider but a rather condescending one: if only these benighted Romans had been able

<sup>12</sup> The following paragraphs expand some comments in a chapter in TITCHENER-ZADORJNYI, forthcoming.

to get their act together... But the pair of *Pompey* is *Agesilaus*; and Alexander had been in the air in *Agesilaus* too, most notably when Agesilaus is about to set off on an eastern conquest. This time it had been a matter of playing Alexander *ahead of* his time, and Agesilaus had even gone through the preliminary essentials at Aulis (ch. 6), though rather less messily than Agamemnon before him.

But at this moment Epicydidas the Spartiate arrived, announcing that a great Greek war was besetting Sparta, and so the ephors were summoning him and commanding him to help the people at home. 'You Greeks! You are the inventors of barbarian evils.' [Euripides, *Trojan Women* 764].

There may be particular bite in that Euripidean quotation, as in the original it is aimed by the captive Andromache against the brutal conquering Greeks—one of the ways, then, that Greek tragedy 'deconstructs the polarity', to go back to that chapter-heading of Edith Hall (above). Here, though, it is not a criticism aimed by an 'Oriental' against Greeks: it is one equally well-aimed but delivered by a Greek against other Greeks, just as it is Greek against Greek in the conflicts themselves.

For what else could one call that jealousy and that combination and array of Greek forces against themselves? Fortune was

on an upward surge, yet they laid hold upon her; they turned upon one another the arms that were levelled against barbarians and the war that they had driven out of Greece. I do not myself agree with Demaratus of Corinth when he said that those Greeks had been robbed of a great pleasure who had not seen Alexander sitting on Darius' throne; no, I think they would have done better to shed tears at the thought that this had been left for Alexander by those who had at that time expended the lives of Greek generals at Leuctra, Coroneia, Corinth, and in Arcadia. (*Agesilaus* 15.2-4)

So this capacity to shed the blood of those who should be your own people is not just a Roman thing. It is Greek as well, and this is not the only occasion on which Plutarch tells that home truth to the Greeks, pointing that perpetual tendency to conflict, *philoneikia*, and fragmentation<sup>13</sup>. On the Greek side it is more of an inter-city combat, on the Roman it is more the powerful individuals—even closer kin, in Caesar's and Pompey's case—who clash so destructively; but one can still see these as different versions of the same disease. We are not so far from the world of Thucydides, where different peoples again show differences. His Athens and Sparta contrast just as much as Plutarch's Greece and Rome, and for

<sup>13</sup> Especially at *Flam.* 11: PELLING, 2002, pp. 182, 243-4. Cf. *Pyth. or.* 15.401C-D, which I discuss at PELLING, forthcoming.



that matter as Herodotus' Greece and Persia. But national or civic differences also have their limits, and there may, in Plutarch as in Thucydides, be an underlying human nature that comes out in different but comparable ways.

So 'Plutarch the multiculturalist'? Yes, or at least 'biculturalist', in the sense of acknowledging and respecting the differences between Greek and Roman ways, here in their bad aspects as so often in their good and intriguing ones; but they still have an underlying basis of unity. When Plutarch looks at Rome at least, the Other is not as Other as all that. And that is very much what some of us have been saying about tragedy and Herodotus.

What we make of the *eastern* foreigners—not the Romans, but the Romans' potential victims in those might-have-beens of Pompey and Caesar—is another question. They do not seem to be getting much sympathy so far.

They may—or may not—get more sympathy if we turn to the man who did get his eastern act together, Alexander himself. The twinned essays *On the Virtue or Fortune of Alexander* essays used to be thought of as earlier than the *Life*, usually because their highly 'rhetorical' slant was dismissed as a sign of juvenility; the same has been

thought of *On the Fortune of the Romans*, and in that case I think this is probably right anyway but for different reasons<sup>14</sup>. With the Alexander essays it is less clear-cut, and it is quite possible that his knowledge there of Alexander detail is precisely because he has just been researching it for the *Life*. We just cannot be sure.

Let us start with 'civilising the East', that notion that we noticed would just have been a pure sham on the Roman side. That is certainly in the air for Alexander. We know that that idea of Alexander as a 'philosopher in arms' was used in the Alexander account written by his steersman Onesicritus, who also—we can trace—was considerably interested in the customs that Alexander came across in the far East; that phrase 'philosopher in arms' in fact comes in a quotation in Strabo, describing the admiration for Alexander felt in those terms by an Indian sage<sup>15</sup>. Onesicritus is normally thought to be an important influence on Plutarch's Alexander essays, and indeed he is quoted both there and in the *Life*<sup>16</sup>. Certainly that idea of the philosopher in arms, the bringer of culture and benefit as well as conquest, is prominent in those essays, and if it is rhetoric it is sometimes wonderful rhetoric. He is arguing what he admits to be 'the most

<sup>14</sup> PELLING, 2011, p. 211; and 2014, p. 154.

<sup>15</sup> Onesicritus *FGrH* 134 F 17a = Strabo 15.1.63–5; cf. F 5.

<sup>16</sup> HAMILTON, 1969, pp. xxxi–xxxiii; and below.

paradoxical thing of all', that Alexander was not just a philosopher but a better philosopher than Plato and Socrates:

Plato wrote one *Republic*, and persuaded noone to live like that because it was so forbidding; Alexander founded more than seventy cities among barbarian races and spread Greek culture through Asia, overcoming their uncivilised and savage habits of before. Hardly anyone reads Plato's *Laws*, but tens of thousands adopted Alexander's and still live by them today. (*On the Fortune of Alexander* 1.328D-E).

And more, much more. Rather a spot of the Macedonian white man's burden, in fact. A little later we get a view of him as leading the world to one government.

He conducted himself like a man who was making the whole world subject to one rationality and one system of governments, wanting to bring all humans together as a single people. If the Heaven that had brought Alexander here had not snatched his soul back so quickly, a single law would have governed all humankind and they would have all been looking towards a single justice as they look on a single sun. (330D).

'Look on a single sun' rather along the lines of that trope we have already seen

in Antiphon and in *Isis and Osiris*, 'just as we all breathe the same air ...' and 'we see the same sun and moon'. There is a lovely essay of Arnold Toynbee on the theme 'What if Alexander had died old', purporting to be written by a court historian in Alexandria under the reign of Alexander LXXVI<sup>17</sup>: Plutarch got there first, and a bit less wordily. It is a picture that is developed (ch. 6, 329A-D) with another comparison with those cerebral philosophers, again to Alexander's advantage: Zeno argued that we should 'think of all humankind as our fellow-demesmen and fellow-citizens', ruled by a single law, but that was just a fantasy and a dream: Alexander turned it into reality. And he did not do what Aristotle commended, ruling the Greeks as a leader but the barbarians as a despot, treating one lot as friends and relatives and the other as animals or plants, but 'came as a shared *harmostes* and reconciler to everyone', 'mixing lives and characters and marriages and ways of life as if in a single *krater*, telling everyone to regard the world as their native country, the camp as their acropolis and garrison, the good as their kinsmen, the bad as their aliens'. Great stuff: no wonder that this was a key text for that rosy-eyed picture of 'Alexander the Great and the unity of mankind' famously argued once by W.W. Tarn, and just as famously demolished by Ernst Badian<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> TOYNBEE, 1969.

<sup>18</sup> TARN, 1933; BADIAN, 1958.

So: Plutarch the multiculturalist? No, not really. There is certainly that ‘world as one village’ aspect—though one can still ask if Plutarch, if he were not pushing this particular rhetorical line, would really commit to the downgrading of all those favourite philosophers, especially Plato. There is doubtless some drawing here too on later, post-Zeno ideas of cosmopolitanism, just as there is in *On The Fortune of the Romans*, there with the *Roman* empire as the boon of Providence to grant the world stability and bring the warring empires to harmony (316E–317C)<sup>19</sup>. But it is not just one village, it is one culture too, and it is *Greek* culture that Alexander is ‘spreading through Asia’ (328D–E, quoted above). That ‘one village’ passage culminates in an exhortation to judge Greek and barbarian not by dress but ‘to define Greek in terms of *arete* and barbarian in terms of *kakia*’ (329C), and that is what the fusion of blood and customs should

lead to. But it is clear who is to be the boss: the subjects will be brought ‘to accept the Macedonians as rulers rather than hating them as enemies’ (330A, cf. 342A in the second essay), even if it is clear too at times that violence is going to be necessary for people’s own good<sup>20</sup>. He is ‘taming and softening them like wild animals’ (330B). Thomas Schmidt is good on this: the glorification of Alexander is in fact an exaltation of Greek values<sup>21</sup>.

That was the essays; what about the *Life*? The first thing to note is that there is virtually nothing of that ‘philosopher in arms’ notion, nor of the one-village idealism: Onesicritus is quoted (*Alexander* 8.2, 15.2, 46.1, 61.1, 65.2), but not for that. The marriages at Susa, so central to the fusion idea, are barely mentioned at all, and when they are the emphasis falls on the sumptuousness of the wedding feast (70.2)<sup>22</sup>. It is a

<sup>19</sup> SWAIN, 1989, pp. 507–8; PELLING, 2007, p. 257.

<sup>20</sup> I have here benefited greatly from discussion with ÁLIA ROSA RODRIGUES, whose Coimbra dissertation (‘The figure of the lawgiver in Greek political tradition until Plutarch’) stresses how often violence is necessary if a dispensation is to last.

<sup>21</sup> SCHMIDT, 1999, pp. 283–6, concluding ‘Toutefois, le système de référence reste fondamentalement grec. La glorification d’Alexandre est en fait une exaltation des valeurs grecques.’ Cf. NIKOLAIDIS, 1986, p. 239: in the *Alexander* essays ‘Plutarch makes a very general distinction between Greeks and barbarians to the effect that the former are good, whereas the latter are bad’.

<sup>22</sup> TARN, 1933 cited five passages for his ‘unity of mankind’ thesis: one of these does come from *Alexander* (as opposed to two from the essays), but it does not seem to support very much. This is the *legomenon* at 27.10, the idea that Alexander may have thought that God was the shared father of everyone but made the best of humans particularly his own, given as one of several possible explanations why Alexander may have seen Ammon as his ‘father’. But does this go beyond Homer’s presentation of Zeus as the ‘father of gods and humans’ but also having favourites?

particularly clear illustration of how Plutarch regards different ideas and themes, and arguably different standards of verisimilitude, as appropriate for that sort of essay and for works requiring the sober and analytic historical eye. It is magnificent, but it is not history, and therefore it is not biography either.

Philosophy is relevant, though, and that is where Aristotle comes in. He is recruited to take care of young Alexander's education, and this is allowed two chapters near the beginning (chs. 7–8). We are also given the impression there of an Alexander who is all set up to be that ambassador for Greek culture, with Aristotle's corrected version of the *Iliad* under his pillow every night, other Greek texts sent for when he is en route, and his remark that he loves Aristotle as much as his father (admittedly a mixed compliment in the circumstances), as he owes his life to his father but his good life to Aristotle. Those initial chapters also make clear that the relationship between the two later cooled, and one can trace that tepidity as the *Life* continues<sup>23</sup>; still,

that enthusiasm and yearning (*pothos*) for philosophy, inborn in him and nurtured from those early years, was never lost from his soul: that is shown by the honour he paid Anaxarchus and the

fifty talents he sent Xenocrates and the seriousness with which he took Dandamis and Calanus. (*Alexander* 8.5).

There is much that one could say about the way that the *Life* tracks through this later relationship to Hellenic culture, and much of it has been said in two recent treatments by Mossman and Whitmarsh<sup>24</sup>. But let us go straight to the end, and those final encounters with the Indian sages Dandamis and Calanus. They come immediately after Alexander's meeting with the strange Gymnosophists (chs. 64–5). Those chapters also have been much discussed, as there is something about naked Indian philosophers that does capture the imagination: people have been most interested in whether this might all be true, and whether there is any authentic Indian wisdom embedded in the stories<sup>25</sup>. But, for the moment, let us just ask what they are doing in the *Life*, and particularly whether they really show that unimpaired 'enthusiasm and yearning for philosophy' that that early passage promised.

First, the Gymnosophists, these Indian philosophers who 'were thought to be particularly skilful and economical with their words in question and answer' (64.1). We should note that Alexander is going to put them to death, starting with the first

<sup>23</sup> *Alex.* 17.9, 54.1–2, 55.8–9, 74.5, 77.3.

<sup>24</sup> MOSSMAN, 2006; WHITMARSH, 2002.

<sup>25</sup> See esp. STONEMAN, 1995.

one to answer wrongly, then all the all the others—a sort of Cyclops cave in reverse. True, these were the people who had been particularly active in stimulating a revolt, and so it is no wonder that he is a trifle cross: still, if this is knowledge meeting power, it is not a particularly sympathetic sort of power. One recent commentator describes Alexander as ‘sardonic, savage, like a cat amusing himself with his prey...’<sup>26</sup>. He does let them off in the end, but that seems pretty whimsical too.

And *knowledge* meeting power? There does not seem a lot of knowledge in the Gymnosophists’ answers, nor anything particularly eastern; if Alexander does not seem particularly interested in their answers’ content, that is because there is not much content anyway. It all basically seems clever-clever, and not much more: ‘which is the most intelligent animal ever born?’ ‘The one that humans have not yet found’, presumably because they’re so damned clever at concealing themselves. ‘Which is the older, day or night?’ ‘The day, by one day?’ Alexander is understandably bemused, but is simply told ‘if the questions are difficult, so should the answers be’. It is pretty poor stuff: some have tried to find Cynic philosophy there, but it is hard enough to find any philosophy at all. We are a long way from the world of Aristotle.

Then there is the meeting with Dandamis and Calanus—or rather *not* the meeting in Dandamis’ case: in Plutarch, as in Strabo but not in Arrian, Alexander has just sent someone to get him<sup>27</sup>. That envoy was in fact Onesicritus, and this is one of those passages that presumably go back to him. Here there is a little more interest in what they say, though there is rather more interest in the nakedness: Calanus insists that Onesicritus strip off before he talks to him. But what is difficult is to find anything distinctly *eastern* in what they say. Dandamis hears about Socrates and Pythagoras and Diogenes, and says that they seem good chaps, but far too conventional, far too respectful of *nomoi*. There may be a distant echo of the *Crito* here; but Diogenes conventional? That certainly conveys the way that we are in a different thoughtworld, but it also has the air of the moment in Herodotus when Anacharsis reports his impressions of Greece—all rather intellectually disappointing except for the Spartans, the only people who can give and receive *logos* (4.77). In each case the point is to set Greeks back on their heels, not to point out anything distinctive about the foreigner’s own cultures. Dandamis also asks why Alexander should have come so long a way: that is not very different

<sup>26</sup> BOSMAN, 2010, p. 192.

<sup>27</sup> *Alex.* 65; Strabo 15.1.63-5; Arr. *An.* 7.1.5-6. On the divergences cf. HAMILTON, 1969, pp. 179-80 and the *BNJ* commentary on Onesicritus *FGrH* 134 F 17a (M. WHITBY)

from the exchange of Cineas and Pyrrhus (*Pyrrh.* 14)—what on earth is the point? Why not just sit back now, and enjoy a drink right away?

And so one could go on. When Richard Stoneman tried to find genuine Indian thought in all this he did get somewhere, but with the versions in other sources, not this one<sup>28</sup>. Plutarch just does not seem very interested in alien wisdom here, or really very much in anything that Indian thought has to offer beyond a spot of nakedness and bizarrerie: it is hardly radiating multicultural open-mindedness to what this fascinating world has to offer. Yes, odd things happen over there, none odder than when Calanus builds his own funeral pyre and self-immolates. But there does not seem much to *learn* from that. Whitmarsh argues that Plutarch is here ‘test[ing] his own conceptions of Hellenism in the crucible of narrative’ and offering ‘a voyage of self-discovery (and in a sense self-destruction) for his readers as well as his subject’<sup>29</sup>; yet, as tests go, it is not that harrowing. This is not an episode to make any complacent Greeks lose their sleep.

The emphasis rests more on what has been lost, not on anything that is been gained. Mossman talks about the ‘melancholy’ aspects of those final

chapters<sup>30</sup>: perhaps they are more than that, ‘macabre’, as Alexander’s self-destruction reaches its climax—all that heavy drinking, all that excess of grief for Hephaestion and so on. Anything but a ‘philosopher in arms’ here, clearly. Part of that macabre tinge comes from Calanus, as he sets fire to himself: I shall meet Alexander soon, he says, in Babylon (69.6–7). *Caesar* too will end, memorably, with his own ghost telling Brutus that ‘I will see you at Philippi’: ‘yes,’ replies Brutus, ‘I will see you there’ (*Caes.* 69.11). Death is in the air, there as here: macabre indeed, and once again so very different from the clear philosophical air of Alexander’s youth and of Aristotle. But eventually the impression is one of philosophy—Greek philosophy—gone wrong. There is nothing wrong or difficult with Hellenicity here, it is Alexander that has gone to pieces. It is all very different from the essays, and not at all multicultural. This work is just not very interested in the fascination of the East. But then this peculiarly rich *Life* has so many other things to be interested in, and they are points about Alexander the individual, not about the world he conquered.

One other thing that this suggests is the wisdom of Thomas Schmidt’s sub-title—‘la rhétorique d’une ima-

<sup>28</sup> STONEMAN, 1995; cf. again the *BNJ* commentary on *FGrH* 134 F 17a.

<sup>29</sup> WHITMARSH, 2002, pp. 191–2.

<sup>30</sup> MOSSMAN, 2006, p. 292. I say more about this in PELLING, forthcoming.



ge'. Thankfully, we no longer use words such as 'mere rhetoric' to be dismissive, even in the case of works that seem intellectually underwhelming such as those Alexander essays: they are what they are, and the ideas are interesting ones. Perhaps the notion that Alexander is a greater philosopher than Plato and Aristotle can even set a complacent Greek back on his heels, rather like Dandamis' remark about those over-conventional figures Socrates and Diogenes. They make one think, perhaps think more deeply than the final chapters of the *Life*; or at least think about different things. But Plutarch's rhetoric can go in different directions, and his mindset is flexible enough not always to think the same things about racial differences or about anything else.

Let us end by going back to *Isis and Osiris*. The passages quoted earlier strike a different note from anything we have seen in any of the Alexander works. That essay as a whole is anything but dismissive: Egyptian ideas and Egyptian religious ceremonies are taken very seriously, in all sorts of ways: they may be obscure and strange, they may need a lot of decoding (and the decoding is often pretty obscure too), but they are certainly worth the effort.

For there was nothing irrational or legendary or based on superstition, as some claim, among the foundations of their cults; instead some were based on mo-

ral and necessary causes, while others were not lacking in historical or physical intelligence. (*Isis and Osiris* 353E).

In *Herodotus' Malice* he waxes indignant at the way that Herodotus represented Greece as drawing so many of their religious ideas and customs from Egypt, "using the effronteries and legends of the Egyptians to subvert the most holy and sacred truths of Greek religion" (857C-E); but here he stresses instead that "the wisest of the Greeks", Solon, Thales, Plato, Eudoxus, Pythagoras and maybe Lycurgus too, themselves came to Egypt to learn what they could from the priests (*Isis and Osiris* 354D-E). Plutarch can even use Egyptian ideas to correct the notions of Democritus, Epicurus, and the Stoics about the destructive powers of nature (369A). In this mindset he is even generous in treating Persian ideas too, though not so generous as about Egyptian: he brings in some ideas about Zoroastrianism, for instance (369D-70E). Wisdom, it seems, is to be found anywhere and everywhere: whatever the cultural differences, those culturally formulated insights may each carry an element to illuminate a wisdom that everyone shares. 'There is nothing wrong with regarding the gods as common to all and not seeing them as peculiar to the Egyptians' (377C)—or, we might add, to the Greeks either: 'Isis and her associated gods belong to all humanity, and all humanity knows them' (377D).

That helps to explain the great effort that he expends in that work on investigating equivalences: Osiris *is* Dionysus, Sarapis is Pluto, and so on (often with a ‘they say that’, but Plutarch is quite ready to play the game himself too, e.g. 362B, 364D-E). That sort of syncretistic approach seems to us frankly odd. Why *should* different cultures have gods that they define in the same way? Why can’t we say that one culture defines its gods and marks off their typical activities in one way and another in another? But that is basically because we are on the whole a godless lot, at least as far as polytheistic gods are concerned. We therefore assume that that attribution of characteristics is no more than *nomos*, and there is no reason at all why each culture should choose to picture their gods or demarcate their spheres in related ways. But if you really believe that those gods exist, are out there somewhere, then it makes better sense to say that different cultures might have inklings of the same gods even if they put them in different ways<sup>31</sup>. For all we know, George W. Bush’s notorious claim that Christians and Muslims worship the same god may have been based on some similar thinking. Egyptians ‘know about’ a god and call him Osiris, the same god as the Greeks know about and call Dionysus.

It is still true that this sort of approach, indeed like Bush’s, implies a certain generosity, accepting that the Egyptians have not simply got it all wrong, and in this work in particular that generosity is clear. The Egyptian insight is just as good as the Greek, and may even be better.

So here we have a qualification of Thomas Schmidt’s general conclusion, that Plutarch does not distinguish all that much between different types of barbarian; though I would rather emphasise again the wisdom of that subtitle, *La rhétorique d’une image*, and stress that Plutarch can think and argue in different ways at different times and in different mindsets. One recalls again how in *Isis and Osiris* he is more generous towards and interested in Persian wisdom than in the Alexander works, and much more ready to accept the Greek debt to Egyptian thinking than in *Herodotus’ Malice*. Foreigners and foreign culture offer him a repertoire of possibilities and thought-prompts, and the issue should not be reduced to a single, monolithic ‘what Plutarch thinks’.

Finally, why Egypt? What is so special about the country to inspire that generous, open-minded mindset (and not in *Isis and Osiris* alone, we might add<sup>32</sup>)? Probably we should not be surprised. Egypt had always been

<sup>31</sup> Cf. CHIAI, 2013, pp. 56–7, who puts this point particularly well.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. e.g. Numa 4.1, 14.9, *On the Decline of Oracles* 429F, *God’s Slowness to Punish* 552D, *Amat.* 764A-B.

like that, with all its suggestion of intriguing, ancient wisdom: this, after all, is the theme of Phiroze Vasunia's *Gift of the Nile*. It was that already for Plato and Aristotle; it is something special already in Homer, with that hint of the riddling and the enigmatic in the story of Proteus: it is enigmatic still for Plutarch, and it is interesting that it is when Cleopatra is at her most beguiling and seductive and dangerous that Plutarch calls her 'the Egyptian woman', τὴν Αἰγυπτίαν (*Antony* 25.3, 29.6, 31.4, *How to tell a Flatterer from a Friend* 61A). Virgil did something similar—*sequiturque (nefas!) Aegyptia coniunx* (*Aeneid* 8.688)—but the associations for Plutarch may be even more many-sided than they are for Virgil.

And of course Herodotus did all that too. Were there time enough to discuss how Herodotus uses Egypt, one could argue that he does do a lot more of the sort of thing that Whitmarsh finds in Plutarch's *Alexander* and I do not: using Egyptian customs and traditions not just to put Greek and Persian history in their chronological place, as Egyptian history goes back so much further, but also to ask searching questions about Greece, 'testing [his audience's] conceptions of Hellenism in the crucible

of narrative' and ethnography. When Herodotus tells the Helen story (2.112–20), it is the Egyptian Proteus who has the moral high ground, not those wife-stealing and child-sacrificing Greeks: so much for any vaunted Greek moral superiority<sup>33</sup>. Even in *Isis and Osiris* we have not found anything quite like that, just a readiness to look for common denominators in Greek and Egyptian wisdom and use both as a path to insight. Perhaps Ammonius had taught Plutarch more than we think<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> Plutarch himself was (or affected to be) outraged by this: *Herodotus' Malice* 857B.

<sup>34</sup> Including, perhaps, some of the dangers that attend such genial conferences along with the pleasures: at least, Ammonius found a tactful (though extreme) way of remonstrating with those who had lunched too well before an afternoon discussion (*How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend* 70E). The food at Banff was excellent too, and so was the behaviour.

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