

Side by Side by Plutarch

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Abstract

Like many authors of his time, Plutarch associated specific characteristics and vocabulary with barbarians, notably superstition, great numbers, tremendous wealth, and the like. When he uses this language to describe non-barbarians, he is able to import a subtle negativity to his undertaking without distracting from his main narrative. The Life of Nicias furnishes a useful case study.

Key-Words: Barbarians, Comparison, Superstition, Wealth, Nicias.

Think Plutarch, think parallel¹. Scholars of his biographies cannot get away from the idea of comparison: Greek to Roman, past to present, victor and conquered. Plutarch notably liked to use groups of people—Greeks, Romans, Spartans, kings and emperors, women—to compare against other groups of people or individuals. We should add barbarians to that list

of groups since it is clear from his many uses of the related term that much like Americans and Canadians², Plutarch and barbarians in their many different forms were old friends³. That barbarians were another group whose thoughts, ideas, or sayings Plutarch wished periodically to represent as a whole, rather than one at a time, is clear from his lost *Quaestiones Barbaricae*⁴. We have a pretty good idea of what that work was like, extrapolating from the

¹ HUMBLE, 2010, *passim*.

² I'd like to acknowledge the hard work and vision of my colleagues, particularly Noreen Humble, in bringing about this conference. A meeting of the North American sections has been long overdue.

³ SCHMIDT, 2002, counts over 950.

⁴ #139 Lamprias catalog.

Greek and Roman questions a series of questions with answers, touching on barbarian religious practices, institutions, and ways of living⁵. Building on the work of scholars who have identified a series of attributes or traits considered “barbaric” by Plutarch, I will agree with them here that Plutarch defines certain adjectives or attributes as “barbaric” and hence implicitly negative. I argue further that he at least sometimes uses them to add a negative flavor to his depiction of non-barbarian individuals, using *Nicias* and the *Nicias-Crassus* pair as case studies.

Barbarian behavior has been well-documented by Plutarch scholars for many years and Plutarch uses the terms barbarian, barbaric, barbarous, etc., to describe not only different nationalities, but also the behavior of individuals. Real barbarians were people like Persians and Gauls, but evidently not Macedonians or at least not always, nor, indeed Romans. T. Schmidt, for example, suggests that Romans did not count as barbarians, but rather as Greeks, for contrast purposes: “Plutarch’s presentation of barbarians seems to agree rather with the idea of a conciliatory attitude of Plutarch towards the Romans (as defended e.g. by Jones 1971, Boulogne 1994, Sirinelli 2000) and not with the view that Plutarch’s

writings were a form of resistance against the Roman domination (see e.g. Swain 1996, Duff 1999)”⁶.

Nikolaidis examined Plutarch’s treatment of Greeks and barbarians, noting specific traits and attitudes. For instance, barbarians tend to be superstitious, show inappropriate and intense emotion, especially when mourning, crave excess wealth and luxury, and treat their captives savagely. He assembled a useful list of characteristics for Greece/Greek/in a Greek way, and barbarian/barbarian-like/in a barbarian way, emphasizing that “in making these distinctions Plutarch does not see Greeks and barbarians in black and white terms”⁷. Under “Greek” we are not surprised to see words like *arête*, *pronoia*, *praotes*, and *philanthropia*, while under “barbarian” we are equally unsurprised to see *kakia*, *thrasos*, *deisidaimones*, and *baruthumoi*.

In addition to the earlier mentioned traits including savagery, boldness, immense wealth, and overwhelming numbers, Schmidt adds a general group of traits he calls *phaulotes*, “vileness” which includes faithlessness, cowardice, wickedness, and superstition. But he, like Nikolaidis, also emphasizes that some barbarian characteristics have positive sides to them, in that barbarians can exhibit courage, intelligence, and

⁵ SCHMIDT, 2009, p. 171.

⁶ SCHMIDT, 2002, p. 70, n. 7.

⁷ NIKOLAIDIS, 1986, p. 244.

wisdom, making them a little more complicated⁸. Indeed, F. Brenk compellingly describes the mixture of attraction and revulsion we feel at the physical depiction of Gauls, with their Celtic faces, mustaches and wild hair, and their extreme solutions to problems (i.e. assassination): “The single Dying Galatian has a distinctive Keltic face, and hair treated and arranged in a disgusting fashion, at least to Greek and Roman taste. Also disruptive are the non-classical mustache and the distinctive torque around his neck”. Who would not be in favor of Kamma, the heroine of the Celtic version of the Lucretia myth? Kamma was married to an important man among the Galatians, too important for the evil Sinorix to simply assault. After Sinorix murdered her husband and proposed marriage, Kamma prepared a poisoned wedding cup, drained half herself, and then watched her new husband drink the fatal draft. Having succeeded in murdering her aggressor, she spent the day and a half it took her to die dancing in victory after his demise, “a mixture of heroism and homicide, civilization, and barbarity”⁹.

Despite this appreciation of the potential positive side of barbarian

characteristics, Schmidt further argues that Plutarch is not actually interested in barbarians’ political thought, but is simply trolling for good examples¹⁰:

With the barbarians, and especially the barbarian monarchy, Plutarch has set up a negative standard by which the Greek and Roman leaders are or may be judged. It works through exempla and may thus be deduced by the reader himself even without explicit statements by Plutarch. The barbarian monarchy is a powerful example of what a king should NOT be.

This predilection for exempla fits in well with the accepted notion of Plutarch’s use of foils as a device, particularly in the *Parallel Lives*, as pointed out by many scholars, many times, including myself, most notably in connection with the life of Nicias¹¹. Schmidt astutely notices in connection with *De fort Alex.* (328A-329A), that “... Plutarch uses the barbarians—the savage and lawless populations of Asia—as a foil to bring out the great achievements of Alexander and the superiority of the Greek political system”¹². But since we are on the subject of Nicias, let us look at foils, or comparison, or parallelism in that biography and in the *Nicias-Crassus* pair.

⁸ SCHMIDT, 2002, p. 58, and 1999, pp. 239-70.

⁹ BRENK, 2005; the two quotations are from pp. 94 and 98.

¹⁰ SCHMIDT, 2004, p. 235.

¹¹ See MOSSMAN, 1988; TITCHENER, 1996; TITCHENER, 2013; ZADOROZHNYI, 1997.

¹² SCHMIDT, 2004, p. 230.

The Life of Nicias.

Throughout his biography, Nicias is actively contrasted with another individual. In the earliest part of the biography, it is Pericles (3.1). After Pericles' death, Nicias is "put up against" Cleon (*antitagma*, 2.2) until the latter's death (9.2), at which time Alcibiades becomes Nicias' foil. Plutarch first contrasts Cleon and Alcibiades (9.1). It is clear that Alcibiades will take up where Cleon left off being a thorn in Nicias' side: "Once freed from Cleon, Nicias had no opportunity at all to lull and pacify the city, but having safely set matters on the right track, stumbled badly, and was immediately shoved into war by the power and impetuosity of Alcibiades' ambition" (9.2). Later (11.1) Plutarch refers to the feud between Nicias and Alcibiades becoming so intense that ostracism was invoked. After Alcibiades' recall, Nicias faces off against Lamachus (15.1). However, after an explanation of why the two generals were not equals (15.3-4), Nicias becomes the sole actor on the stage until Lamachus' death (18.3). Nicias' solo, as it were, coincides with the dramatic climax of the life, and the peak of his success.

When Gylippus enters the scene (18.5), however, almost halfway through the narrative, Nicias' fortunes decline rapidly. In the latter portion of the biography, Nicias is contrasted both with his fellow general Demosthenes, and with Gylippus also. These sub-

pairs occur elsewhere in the life: at the beginning, Pericles is contrasted with Thucydides, as well as Nicias, and Cleon is contrasted first with Brasidas, and then with Alcibiades. In an interesting parallel, toward the end (26.1-2), Gylippus himself is contrasted with his Syracusan counterparts, and then Gylippus and Hermocrates together are contrasted with Eurycles and the popular front.

Contrast continues to be an overt device at the end of chapter twenty-seven, where Nicias laments the contrast between the Athenians' glorious intentions and ignominious end, and his men lament the unfair irony of Nicias dying in command of an expedition from which he more than anyone else had tried to dissuade the Athenians, and the discouraging failure of his many expensive religious services. But contrast is also a more subtle framing device, as can be seen through Plutarch's discussion of Nicias' piety. Most of chapter three is concerned with Nicias' outlay of wealth on dedications and choruses, whereas the beginning of chapter four discussed his obsession with divination. Yet the end of chapter twenty-three and the beginning of chapter twenty-four present Nicias' piety as ignorant, useless, and ultimately dangerous superstition. We admire Nicias' piety at the beginning; by the end we sneer at his superstition.

I suggest that Plutarch uses these and traits like them not only to compare

his subjects to one another (Nicias and Crassus) and to various foils (Crassus and Parthians; Nicias and Hiero), barbarian and otherwise, but also to add dimension to a biographical subject who may or may not be a barbarian himself (i.e. Nicias). Schmidt, indeed, has noted how “With remarkable consistency, the negative characteristics of barbarians are used as a foil to bring out the good qualities of the Greek and Roman heroes”¹³. The more of these traits a biographical subject possesses, or the more Plutarch chooses to focus on those traits, the more uncomfortable we feel, and the more uncertain about what we are meant to emulate.

The Nicias-Crassus pair.

To what extent does this barbarian-style language or signifiers make the biography of Nicias the way it is, i.e. unpleasant? Nicias is unpleasant enough that I wondered in the past why Plutarch even wrote about him. I concluded at the time¹⁴ that a pair was needed for Crassus, already underway as part of the simultaneous preparation for the Roman Lives so brilliantly illuminated by Chris Pelling (1980). Nicias is a very hard guy to like, even if one sympathizes with him, but it’s

hard to pin down why that is. This pair has been seen by some as negative, like *Alcibiades-Coriolanus*, or *Antony-Demetrius*. This is a little confusing in that Nicias, conspicuous for religious piety, should be a tragic figure whose fate was ἥκιστα ἄξιος (“least worthy”) because of his devotion to religion. Surely Crassus, whose money came from proscriptions, fire sales and slave trading was worse than Nicias. But that is not really clear.

To look closely at how Plutarch compared his two subjects, I suggest we look at *Nicias* side-by-side as part of a Duff-style book¹⁵, separate the proem, compare it closely with its parallel life, *Crassus*, and then conclude with the *Synkrisis*. We will then see a pervasive structure dependent on both the biographies, which throws the true themes into deeper relief. This structure has been seen before. R. Seager noted it particularly in *Crassus*, although he attributes it to Plutarch’s failure to appreciate complicated narrative¹⁶: “So in general the life leaps from one landmark to the next: Spartacus, the consulship, the coalition, the second consulship and finally Carrhae”. Further, concerning Plutarch’s source material for the *Nicias*, Duff notes that while *Alcibiades*

¹³ SCHMIDT, 2002, p. 58, and p. 70 where he notes that “Dio makes the same rhetorical use the barbarians as a foil, although with less insistence than Plutarch”.

¹⁴ TITCHENER, 1991.

¹⁵ See DUFF, 2011.

¹⁶ SEAGER, 2005, p. 110.

uses Thucydides sparingly, *Nicias* relies heavily on Thucydides despite the promise to be useful and not redundant¹⁷.

Both of these observations can be explained by the organization of the *Nicias-Crassus* book. Plutarch is controlling his material so that his sequences are parallel. The major themes of personality type are established, cowardly (*Nicias*) and

greedy (*Crassus*). There is a significant military action that acts as an exemplar of the military career (Pylos for *Nicias*, the Servile War for *Crassus*), and then the catastrophic final campaigns (Sicily for *Nicias*, Parthia for *Crassus*), followed by a kind of coda. There are framing pairs of bad omens in the same places of each biography.

Introduction to the Book: <i>Nicias</i> 1: "Since we agree that it is not out of line to compare Crassus to <i>Nicias</i> , and the Parthian disaster to the Sicilian", then on to source criticism on Thucydides, Philistus, and Timaeus.	
<i>Nicias</i>	<i>Crassus</i>
2: personality = timid	2: personality = greedy
3: <i>Nicias</i> used money in lieu of rhetorical powers like those of Pericles	3: <i>Crassus</i> used hard work and preparation to overcome those more naturally gifted (Caesar, Pompey, Cicero)
7: Cleon as foil. Pylos episode: theme of cowardice and dangers of catering to the base	7: Spartacus as foil, but: "This was the beginning of his rivalry with Pompey."
7-9: Pylos episode; enter new foil, Alcibiades	8-12: Servile war; enter additional foil, Caesar
12: <i>Nicias</i> does not want to go to Sicily	16: <i>Crassus</i> is elated to go to Mesopotamia
13: BAD OMENS: Meton, Altar of the gods; Adonia; Herms; Socrates	16-17: BAD OMENS: Ateius, cursing lunatic (w. incense); trips over Publius who has fallen outside Ishtar's temple
14: Athenians arrive in Sicily	18: Parthian campaign begins
23: BAD OMENS: eclipse	23: BAD OMENS: wrong cloak; heavy standards
28: <i>Nicias</i> ' death	31: <i>Crassus</i> ' death
29-30: prisoners' fate; news reaches Athens	32-33: Parthian production of Bacchae

In the *Synkrisis* Plutarch recapitulates the themes of both *Lives*, in the same order as in the biographies, establishing these points of comparison:

- Money: How they got it and what they did with it.
- Political career: *Nicias* was subversive to the base and obsessed with

¹⁷ DUFF, 1999, p. 24.

safety; Crassus was violent but contended against worthy opponents; however, he can't compete with the Peace.

- Base Motives: Nicias let Cleon in and abandoned Athens to the inferior. That's how he got stuck with Sicily. He didn't want war, but got it. Athens sent Nicias out unwilling, and his city hurt him. Crassus did well against Spartacus because there were good men running things. He wanted war, but didn't get it. He hurt his city.

- Public Stance: Nicias was right to warn about Sicily; Crassus was wrong to push for Parthia.

- Military conduct: Nicias came close; disease and envy overcame him; Crassus didn't give fortune a chance to help him.

- Divination: not a factor because although Nicias was devout and Crassus an unbeliever, they both died the same way.

- Manner of death: Nicias was led by false hope to surrender, and Crassus was led by false hope to destruction.

Final Judgement

Nicias' personality, timid and cowardly, in the end made his death more shameful than Crassus' personality, greedy and grasping.

That's a pretty half-hearted denunciation of Nicias, who seemed to be winning (or losing) the race up to that point. What's the coffin's final nail? One clue may lie in *Quomodo Adolescens*. About half-way through that essay, Plutarch cautions young people to pay

close attention to their teachers so that they not miss the hidden fruit on the vine. He advises study of the differences between the language the poets use for good and bad characters, providing many examples from Homer. He ends this chapter curiously, saying:

30C: ταῦτα μὲν οὖν ἱκανὰ περὶ διαφορᾶς, ἂν μὴ κάκεινο βουλόμεθα προσλαβεῖν, ὅτι τῶν Τρώων ἐαλώκασι καὶ πολλοὶ ζῶντες, οὐδεὶς δὲ τῶν Ἀχαιῶν, καὶ τῶν μὲν ὑποπεπτῶκασιν ἔνιοι τοῖς πολεμίοις, ὥσπερ ὁ Ἄδραστος, οἱ Ἀντιμάχου παῖδες, ὁ Λυκάων, αὐτὸς ὁ Ἑκτώρ δεόμενος περὶ ταφῆς τοῦ Ἀχιλλέως, ἐκείνων δ' οὐδεὶς, ὥς βαρβαρικοῦ τοῦ ἱκετεύειν καὶ ὑποπίπτειν ἐν τοῖς ἀγῶσιν ὄντος, Ἑλληνικοῦ δὲ τοῦ νικᾶν μαχόμενον ἢ ἀποθνήσκειν.

This is enough on the subject of differences, unless perhaps we desire to add, that of the Trojans many were taken alive, but none of the Achaeans; and that of the Trojans some fell down at the feet of the enemy, as did Adrastus, the sons of Antimachus, Lycaon, and Hector himself begging Achilles for burial, but of the Achaeans none, because of their conviction that it is a trait of barbarian peoples to make supplication and to fall at the enemy's feet in combat, but of Greeks to conquer or to die fighting.

Plutarch is done with examining the differences between "good" and "bad" Homeric figures, and the coda he chooses to add has to do with surrendering. Plutarch carefully puts this sentiment

into the mouths of the ancient Greek warriors, but he has gone to some trouble to do so. The “fall at the feet” verb, *ὑποπίπτειν*, is based on the same verb used in Nicias (*προσπεσὼν*, 27.4).

But is it possible to use a *Moralia* quote to illuminate something in the *Lives*? Is there only one Plutarch, or not? Is there a parallel Plutarch, an anti-Plutarch? I have heard both sides of this question argued with great eloquence by the most learned of scholars. Unitarians say that one way or another, Plutarch is Plutarch, and distinctions between *Lives* and *Moralia* cannot be categorically assigned¹⁸. Separatists say that *Lives* and *Moralia* are written for different purposes entirely, and that the rhetorical nature of the *Moralia* makes it difficult to transfer inferences thus derived. Yet some essays seem to have plenty of connection to the *Lives* or their subjects, such as *An Seni* or *Praecepta*. The *Quaestiones* may be notebooks or kinds of outlines (*hypomnemata*) for use in *Lives*. The disagreement is the same when it comes to examining Plutarch’s use of sources. So, for example, it has been argued that Plutarch’s use of Thucydides is very different in the *Moralia* than in the *Lives*, and that this difference stems from the genres themselves¹⁹:

In light of the differences in Plutarch’s aim and method, discussions of his use of Thucydides should differentiate between the two genres, since “The threads used as the warp in the composition of the *Moralia* become the woof in the *Lives*, and those yarns which form the warp in the *Lives* are found again in the woof of the *Moralia*.”

and

In the *Parallel Lives*, Thucydides is a source of information. In the *Moralia*, he is, additionally, a source of ornamental quotations. Therefore, it is my contention that it is frequently Thucydides the stylist whom Plutarch cites in the *Moralia*, but almost always Thucydides the historian that Plutarch cites in the *Parallel Lives*. There can be no question of Plutarch’s appreciation of Thucydides as an artist, and there can be no question of Plutarch’s fondness for the liberal use of *γνωμολογίαι*. Perhaps Plutarch felt that the simultaneous use of Thucydides as historian and ornament was somehow distasteful—that one or the other was appropriate but not both. Perhaps he felt that Thucydides’ eloquent writing style would interfere with the point

¹⁸ For discussion on this subject, see NIKOLAIDIS, 2008, especially the Introduction, Section 2.a (*How Plutarch deals with other genres*), and Section 3 (*Moralia in vitis*).

¹⁹ The first quotation is from BABBITT, 1927, p. xii, the second from TITCHENER, 1995, pp. 194-5.

of the biographies, whereas it would enhance the flow of the essays. The best explanation is that in the *Parallel Lives*, Plutarch used Thucydides as a primary source, while in the *Moralia* he is one of many secondary sources, frequently consulted in one of Plutarch's notebooks, where his admiration of Thucydides' writing style made the historian an important ingredient in Plutarch's own version of *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*.

Here I suppose that I have shifted the argument to whether or not there is only one Thucydides, but I am comfortable with the idea of one Plutarch who has different facets, and so I will press the point that I want to apply Plutarch's comment in *Quomodo Adollescens* to the final sentence of the *Synkrisis* between Nicias and Crassus. I think part of the "negativity" in Nicias, certainly in the oddly flat final judgment of the *Synkrisis*, comes from Plutarch's deliberate use of characteristics and language typically associated with barbarians. Great wealth, superstition, and cowardice signified barbarians, not Greeks. The end of the *Synkrisis*, with its specific reference to surrender making his death more shameful, reinforces the idea that Nicias was an individual who did not fit in with aristocrats like Pericles and Alcibiades, or street-fighters like Cleon and Hyperbolus. Wealthy, superstitious, and cowardly, the general's surrender in Sicily was

the deciding factor in who was the more shameful, the bigger barbarian, Crassus or Nicias. Crassus, as a Roman, had a definite barbarian flavor to him which Plutarch and his contemporaries would have considered natural. But for Plutarch, barbarian attributes in a Greek were harder to overlook or forgive, and his characterization of Nicias using those attributes condemns the general in an oblique and disconcerting way.

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