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PLUTARCH'S ALEXANDER THE GREAT AS FOCUS FOR GREEK IDENTITY

THE CASE OF ALEXANDER'S CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH IN *VITA ALEXANDRI*¹

SUMMARY: The present paper concentrates on the character of Plutarch's Alexander and his idealized Greek traits as visible in one particular set of Plutarch's stories: the narratives on the childhood and youth of Alexander, presented in *Vita Alexandri*. By presenting him as a Greek hero, with a number of typically heroic and typically Hellenic features, Plutarch transforms the image of the Macedonian king, creating a model for his audience to identify as an embodiment of Greek greatness. While the portrait of Alexander in Plutarch's *Life of Alexander* is rather nuanced and not entirely positive (see, for example, his behaviour in the East), Plutarch seems, in the stories of Alexander's childhood, to be carefully presenting him as a perfect Greek model of a hero and a future leader.

KEYWORDS: biography, rhetoric, Alexander the Great, Plutarch, *Vita Alexandri*, *De fortuna aut virtute*, *Parallel lives*

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GREEK IDENTITY UNDER ROMAN RULE: A FEW PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

The case against identity, as Rachel Mairs states in her paper on the problems of identity in the methodology of Classical studies, is *that it is vague and that it is fashionable* (Mairs 2010: 55). It belongs to those problems that seem, at first sight, both painfully obvious and impossibly complicated, tangled as it is in so many concepts in modern philosophy and social sciences. It does not help when one is dealing with the past, a past as distant as that of the 1st and 2nd century Greece under Roman Empire, and with a question “What does it mean to be Greek under the Romans?” The modern terms from the fields of sociology or post-colonial studies come loaded with sense and meanings relevant to the modern societies, but not always easy to transfer into the studies of antiquity – can one, to use just one example, use the term “ethnicity” in the ancient context, not taking into account the complex web of its modern connotations and meanings attached to it?

To add to the already large set of problems, the evidence to use and assess is limited both in size and in character: we are lucky to have the possibility of comparing the Greek and the Roman approach to the problem, but we must be constantly aware of the fact that what we have is, in most cases, a voice of a rather specific part of the society: intellectual and political elite. In case of the Greeks this means the higher strata of society, willingly cooperating with the imperial Rome and participating in its political and social system in the provinces. Such a group is therefore bound to have at least partially positive feelings towards Roman imperial/political concepts, and to be open (again, at least partially) to accepting/emulating Roman cultural and social models. We know relatively little about the way in which the Romans were perceived by other inhabitants of the Greek lands, incorporated into the empire: the sources on the topic are rather limited.

Any answer – or answers, since there can be many possible explanations, combined together to form more complex pictures – to the question posed above must, therefore, be treated as partial and relevant only for a certain part of the society.

It will be impossible to solve such problems of terminology and the scope of material or to propose a universally valid answer to the

problem of being Greek under the Roman rule. Nevertheless, it seems interesting to try and look at the issue of the (professed and declared) Greek identity under Roman empire in the 2nd century CE, using a specific focus: the image, a model, used by one specially important author to present one specially important character, a Greek historical hero *par excellence*. The author in question is Plutarch of Chaeroneia, and the character – paradoxical as it may seem, if one takes into account Macedonian history and the struggle of Philip and his ancestors to be regarded as the real *Hellenes* – is Alexander the Great.

It is obvious, but worth stressing again, that the personality discussed in the present paper is not, in fact, the historical Alexander. The historicity of the events described and alluded to by Plutarch is often dubious and the questions such as the historical Alexander's attitude towards Greeks, Persians and Macedonians, the language he spoke, or the debate on whether Plutarch's assessment of his character and motives has any serious claim to be factually true, are discussed by historians often enough. It is a construct that is of much greater importance here: a fictional, fictionalized Alexander, created (or, partially, borrowed from earlier sources) by Plutarch for a specific ideological and literary reasons. This Alexander, it would seem, has become, for the writers of the period starting with Dio Chryostome, an epitome of Hellenic values: a Greek culture hero, a leader and a ruler of the Greeks (Asirvatham 2005: 109). As such, Plutarch's Alexander seems a perfect vehicle for the celebration and evaluation of the Hellenic identity and the great past of the Greeks; a celebration typical enough for the Greek writers of the empire, especially, but not exclusively, for the Second Sophistic.²

But shall we talk here about Plutarch's Alexander or, possibly, Plutarch's Alexanders? Plutarch tackles the life of Alexander in two works. The first of them is the set of two declamations, *De fortuna aut virtute Alexandri*, written most probably in the author's youth and discussing, within a rhetorical genre typical for the writings of the period, the reasons behind Alexander's success. The second is, obviously, *The life of*

² The literature concerning the problems of Hellenic identity and its relation to Romans and the Roman rule, as well as the assessment and idealization of the Greek past in the Second Sophistic is enormous. See especially Swain 1996; Whitmarsh 2001; Goldhill 2001 for the studies of the problem.

Alexander, a part of the *Paralles Lives*: a biography set against that of Julius Caesar and devoted to the description of the entire life of Alexander. That the two books differ in their presentation of Alexander (Whitmarsh 2002: 179) and in the level of the king's idealization has long been stated by scholars; there is also a consensus among specialists about the fact that *The fortune or virtue* presents a *post eventum idealization of figure of Alexander* (Whitmarsh 2002: 179), while the *Life* is more nuanced and also more critical in its outlook. What seems important for the argument presented here is the fact that the childhood stories in *Life of Alexander* – unlike many of the narratives concerning his later acts and deeds – seem to be similarly idealized and thoroughly Hellenized. In this respect, it would seem, the image of both Alexanders, the one from *Vita* and the earlier one, from *De fortuna aut virtute*, seems convergent.

PLUTARCH AND THE CONCEPT OF BIOGRAPHY

In a famous passage from the beginning of the *Life of Alexander*, Plutarch states clearly that he is very aware of the specific character of the task undertaken:

For I am writing biography, not history, and the truth is that the most brilliant exploits often tell us nothing of the virtues or vices of the men who performed them, while on the other hand a change remark or a joke may reveal far more of a man's character than the mere feat of winning battles in which thousands fall, or of marshalling great armies, or laying siege to cities. When a portrait painter sets out to create a likeness, he relies above all upon the face and the expression of the eyes and pays less attention to the other parts of the body: in the same way it is my task to dwell upon those actions which illuminate the workings of the soul, and by this means to create a portrait of each man's life (Scott-Kilvert 1973: 252).³

³ [...] οὐτε γὰρ ἱστορίας γράφομεν, ἀλλὰ βίους, οὔτε ταῖς ἐπιφανεστάταις πράξεσι πάντως ἔνεστι δῆλωσις ἀρετῆς ἢ κακίας, ἀλλὰ πρᾶγμα βραχὺ πολλάκις καὶ ῥῆμα καὶ παιδιὰ τις ἔμφασιν ἦθους ἐποίησε μᾶλλον ἢ μάχαι μυριόνεκροι καὶ παρατάξεις αἰ μέγιστα καὶ πολιorkία πόλεων, ὥσπερ οὖν οἱ ζωγράφοι τὰς ὁμοιότητας ἀπὸ τοῦ

The choice of stories and episodes from the life of a person characterized is therefore conscious, and so are the omissions. Plutarch – using the comparison with a painter – wants to achieve a *likeness*, a true image of the person portrayed (ὡςπερ οὖν οἱ ζωγράφοι τὰς ὁμοιότητας ἀπὸ τοῦ προσώπου καὶ τῶν περὶ τὴν ὄψιν εἰδῶν, *Vit. Alex.* 1,3); nevertheless, there seems to be, as always in his writings, a carefully planned strategy behind such an image presented. In case of Alexander, it is shaped by both the choice of sources and the choice of focus.

Much has been said in Plutarch criticism about his choice of sources for the life of Alexander (*Vit. Alex.* 46; Hamilton 1969; Hammond 1993: 5-24). To state just the most obvious background for further discussion: there had already been, it seems, a large tradition of both the *serious* historiography concerning the king and the more fantastic literature of a narrative character, the *Vulgate*, from which finally the *Romance of Alexander* would develop. Plutarch apparently uses both of them, often drawing stories and anecdotes from the more fantastical, narratively, moralistically oriented fiction on Alexander. Historians often criticize him for doing so, but those interested in the development of the mythologised, legendary Alexander should be grateful: in Plutarch, both in *Lives* and in youthful declamations on the fortune or virtue of Alexander, we may already observe the emergence of such concepts.

For the purpose of the present paper, I would like to concentrate on the issue of Alexander's childhood and youth and their presentation in Plutarch. The limited scope of the material should, nevertheless, allow us to see how Plutarch transforms a controversial and ambiguous historical character of the Macedonian king into an idealized (at least at that point) Greek hero. He thus becomes a focal point for assessing and strengthening Greek identity and for stressing the crucial points of what Plutarch understands as *Greekness*.

προσώπου καὶ τῶν περὶ τὴν ὄψιν εἰδῶν οἷς ἐμφαίνεται τὸ ἦθος, ἀναλαμβάνουσιν, ἐλάχιστα τῶν λοιπῶν μερῶν φροντίζοντες, οὕτως ἡμῖν δοτέον εἰς τὰ τῆς ψυχῆς σημεῖα μᾶλλον ἐνδύεσθαι καὶ διὰ τούτων εἰδοποιεῖν τὸν ἐκάστου βίον, ἐάσαντας ἐτέροις τὰ μεγέθη καὶ τοὺς ἀγῶνας. All subsequent Greek quotation from Plutarch's *Life of Alexander* from Perrin 1919; the quotation from *De fortuna aut virtute* according to Babbitt 1936.

ALEXANDER OF MACEDON OR ALEXANDER THE GREEK

Alexander was always a culturally contentious figure, states Tim Whitmarsh in his paper on Plutarch's Alexander (Whitmarsh 2002: 174) and one does not need to get into modern politicized debates on the topic to be aware of the possibility of many interpretations of Alexander's origins and ethnic/cultural background. The Greek authors of the imperial period were aware of the fact. When describing the origins and birth of his hero, Plutarch does not fail to mention his Macedonian (and Epirote) parentage; nevertheless, he also, from the very beginning, stresses Alexander's connections with mythical heroes of Greece, using well-known genealogical stories (cf. *Vit. Alex.* 2,1: Ἄλέξανδρος ὅτι τῷ γένει πρὸς πατρὸς μὲν ἦν Ἡρακλείδης ἀπὸ Καράνου, πρὸς δὲ μητρὸς Αἰακίδης ἀπὸ Νεοπτολέμου, τῶν πάνυ πεπιστευμένων ἐστί). Of the heroes mentioned here, Heracles is obviously the most universally Greek hero of all, while Achilles (not mentioned here by the name, but easily identified by the name of his son, Neoptolemus) is a figure associated, in a Greek mind, not only with a certain, specific character, but also, as a kind of specific *pars pro toto*, with Homer and the *Iliad*; the well-known association of Alexander with those is stressed more literally in *Fort. Alex.* 1,1,4, when Alexander's love for the poems of Homer is explicitly mentioned (though in an interesting context, which I would like to discuss a little later). The creation of Alexander as associated with various Homeric figures, not only his ancestors, is also evident in *Fort. Alex.* 1,10,1, where Alexander is almost explicitly compared with Agamemnon, a king *par excellence*.

The notion of Alexander's parentage being related to the Greek heroes of old is interesting. For his father's side this notion has been a part of Greek cultural consciousness at least since the Hellenodicae of Olympia have confirmed Alexander I to be able to compete in the Games, and therefore, to be regarded Hellenic. The Molossian family of Olympias, on the other hand, has been believed to be descendants of Neoptolemus (and thus, of his father Achilles) ever since Pindar (*Nem.* 4,51-53) and Euripides (*Andr.* 1246-1249; Carney 2006: 5-6). The Homeric parallels⁴

⁴ On the Homeric parallels and the presence and interpretation of the motifs taken from Homer in Plutarch's *Life of Alexander* see Mossman 1988.

present here suggest an additional point: they connect Alexander with the Greek education and the proper Hellenic *paideia*, which is, according to the common belief, a decisive factor in assessing whether one is Greek or not.

Coming back to the story of Alexander's birth in *Vita Alexandri*: interestingly, Plutarch does not mention Macedon in this passage, and while he must have assumed that his audience knew that Philip, Alexander's father, was a Macedonian king married to an Epirote princess, and that a serious case of non-Greekness, of being a barbarian, could be (and, historically, has been) made against both of them, he nevertheless associates Alexander, from the very beginning, with both a Panhellenic hero and a Panhellenic poem. The strategy of Plutarch seems as evident in his subtle omissions as in his mythological associations, and it is strengthened further by the construction of the sentence, suggesting that Alexander's mythological associations are a matter of common knowledge, a fact evident to almost anyone (*Vit. Alex.* 2,1: τῶν πάντων πεπιστευμένων ἐστί).

It would be an interesting task to look at Plutarch's strategies in creating the images of both Alexander's parents as far as the question of identity is concerned. Olympias seems to be presented as Other and distanced from the Hellenic world mostly by mentioning her non-Greek religious practices (use of foreign names, mentions of Macedonian or Oriental customs), while Philip is shown as more Greek in his religiosity (he sends to Delphi for consultation; a practice, while not necessarily regarded as exclusively Greek, nevertheless associated with the behaviour of Hellenic leaders and rulers). In case of Olympias, Whitmarsh pointed to the fact that her associations in Plutarch's text clearly point at the Dionysiac elements (Whitmarsh 2002: 186) – the terms Κλώδωνες and Μιμαλλόνες are linked with her, as are the snakes, Orphic rites and, finally, the supposed conception of her son by the god in a serpent form (*Vit. Alex.* 2,1-5). This may well be, as Whitmarsh and Judith Mossman (Mossman 1988) read it, a case of introducing, already at that early stage of the narrative, Dionysiac motifs in the biography of Alexander; the association with Dionysos will return later in Plutarch's narratives about Alexander's outbursts of anger and murderous fury under the influence of wine. But even if it is

so, it becomes visible only later in Alexander's life: once the influence of the East had settled in, the Dionysiac traits (madness, rage, association with wine) have become important.

Also, an important fact here is Alexander's association with gods, starting from the very moment when he was conceived: Olympias' snakes, Philip's Delphic consultations, and finally the burning of the Artemis temple in Ephesus. The last of these stories introduces another important feature of Plutarch's vision of Alexander: the universal character of his mission in the world. This was already suggested, earlier, by stressing Alexander's associations with Heracles, a hero of the Greeks, but also a wanderer known to all the world; here it is stressed again by both the association of Macedonian birth with a faraway city of Ephesus and – also – by the presence of the Persian Magi there and their prophecies concerning the newborn infant. The introduction of the Magi serves a double purpose here; while it can be argued that they are introduced to make Alexander's birth an even of universal, almost cosmic, proportions, they also, certainly, suggest already at that stage the main area of Alexander's military triumphs: the Persians and their empire.

The universal character of Alexander and his mission does not stand in contradiction to his Hellenic identity; quite the opposite, it strengthens it. And since I argue that, for Plutarch, Alexander is an ideal Greek par excellence, the importance of Alexander's world mission can be – in a symbolic, non-obvious way – understood as an importance of the Greeks and their cultural, but also political mission in the world.⁵

⁵ It is worth pointing here that the postulated Greekness of the Plutarchian Alexander should not be read as excluding the possible Roman perspective from his image. Such a reading would not be impossible in the Greek Imperial author; quite the opposite, the image of Rome is often in the background of the discussions of Alexander in the Greek literature of the imperial times. From the speculations on Alexander's possible confrontation with the Romans to the use of his figure as a model for monarchy and his state as the symbolically understood conquering empire, the perspective is omnipresent. Also in Plutarchian vision of Alexander, especially in *De fortuna aut virtute*, the Roman perspective can be detected (Asirvatham 2005: 108-109). In the present study, however, the scope of analysis is limited to include mostly the Hellenizing idealization.

THE EDUCATION OF THE PRINCE-PHILOSOPHER

The role of Alexander as the king-philosopher in Plutarch, and especially in *De fortuna aut virtute*, has been extensively discussed by scholars, as it forms a part of the larger debate on Plutarch's vision of philosophy and monarchical rule.⁶ Similarly, his philosophical education and the relationship with Aristotle – or rather this relationship's literary representations and re-imaginings – have been debated and analysed thoroughly in academic literature. The main aim of the following short remarks is not to recall these debates – rather, to point at the presentation of Alexander's teachers by Plutarch and the influence of this characterization on the image of Alexander as an ideal young Greek.

The training of Alexander, as Plutarch presents it, is the crucial part of proving him to be a perfect Greek hero. The first of his teachers, Leonidas, is characterized both by his family association with Olympias and, more importantly, by the virtues that he tries to teach his young charge. He is described as αὐστηρός (*Vit. Alex.* 5,4) which brings on the association with both austerity and strictness as well as severity. Plutarch, in this passage, stresses his importance and, at the same time, his humility: he is told not to shun the term παιδαγωγία applied to his position (normally it is associated with the actions of slaves leading children to and back from school). The positive assessment of Leonidas' humble behaviour is stressed by framing it with two sets of statements: in the preceding sentence he is mentioned as the relative of the boy's mother (*Vit. Alex.* 5,4: συγγενῆς Ὀλυμπιάδος), while in the following his position in relation to Alexander, the same that he calls παιδαγωγία, is described as the role of *foster father and mentor* (*Vit. Alex.* 5,4: τροφεύς Ἀλεξάνδρου καὶ καθηγητής). The latter description is also stressed with a statement first describing his actions as καλὸν ἔργον [...] καὶ λαμπρόν (*Vit. Alex.* 5,4) and then quoting unspecified *others* (ὕπὸ δὲ τῶν ἄλλων [...] καλούμενος) who called Leonidas the foster father and mentor of the young prince due to his dignity and family connection with his charge (*Vit. Alex.* 5,4: διὰ τὸ ἀξίωμα καὶ

⁶ Once again, we are dealing here with a problem extensively debated by scholars. On Plutarch and philosophy see e.g. Dillon 1996.

τὴν οἰκειότητα). The high praise of the austere and severe teacher is supposed to reflect on the pupil and on the rules and values that he was taught since early youth.

Lysimachus, the second of the teachers, is an interesting case. He is described as a person lacking education and wit (*Vit. Alex.* 5,5: οὐδὲν ἔχων ἀστεῖον), but popular with the court due to his associating various persons from the court with Homeric heroes: he himself took the role of the Phoenix to Philip's Peleus and Alexander's obvious Achilles. The interpretation of this passage seems twofold. On one hand, we may treat it as a foreshadowing of what later becomes a problem for Plutarch's Alexander: the susceptibility to flattery. On the other, the remark once more stresses the importance of the Homeric associations of Alexander.

Then, of course, Plutarch goes on to describe the crucial point in Alexander's education: the appointment of Aristotle as his principal teacher. Here, in Plutarch's account, Philip hires the most famous and best of philosophers, Aristotle (*Vit. Alex.* 7,2: τῶν φιλοσόφων τὸν ἐνδοξότατον καὶ λογιώτατων Ἀριστοτέλην) to teach his son, since the prince is susceptible not to force, but to training appealing to reason (*Vit. Alex.* 7,1); it is from Aristotle that Alexander will learn everything, from practical matter like medicine to the theoretical learning of metaphysics and philosophy.

The reputation of Aristotle as the greatest and most renowned of philosophers (historically not quite likely in the time when Philip was appointing him his son's teacher) is used by Plutarch to stress the role and importance of Alexander's *paideia*; even when the relationship between the master and student deteriorates, Alexander remains faithful to his love for philosophy and interested in the teachings of other philosophical figures (Diogenes).

An episode that may as well be connected with the philosophical education of Alexander is the taming of Boucephalas. The anecdote placed by Plutarch within the context of Alexander's philosophical education seems to have a lot in common with the concept of philosophical upbringing. Whitmarsh (2002: 180-181) points out at the Platonic elements in the story (the horse afraid of the shadow, the verbal echoes of Platonic terms) and interprets the anecdote as symbolically referring

to the preparation of Alexander for his future role of king-philosopher, for whom *sophrosyne* is the crucial character trait. The image of the young Alexander being able to tame the wild horse, associated often in Greek tradition, and indeed, also in Plato (*Phaedrus* 246a-257b), with the passions and wildness to be tamed and made civilized by education, suggest that he should be able to lead the rest of his life according to the proper rules of *sophrosyne*.

Another passage that is connected with the theme of the education of the prince is the visit of the Persian envoys. The anecdote as such, proving the wisdom, maturity and military talent of the future king, seems rather typical for the narratives about miraculously talented children who already at the very young age show the signs of their future greatness. Here, the theme is linked (like the Ephesian episode in the story of the birth of Alexander) not only with the general promise the child shows, but also with the particular areas of his future exploits: the child Alexander is interested in military matters concerning Persia, as if he was already planning his conquests. Together with the interspersed remarks about Alexander's zeal, youthful impatience in the pursuit of glory and the need to emulate and surpass his father's successes, this episode creates an image of a youth destined and already in his childhood prepared for greatness – greatness which, as Plutarch's readers would have known very well, he has, despite his failings, achieved.

CONCLUSIONS

The image of the childhood of Alexander in *Vita Alexandri* seems both perfectly Hellenic and perfectly idealized, unlike, one must say, the later part of Alexander's life. Plutarch presents him as a thoroughly Greek boy/youth, connected through his origins to the Panhellenic heroes and educated, according to his natural inclinations, in a typically Greek way, which prepares him for the role of the king-philosopher; the role which he will strive to fulfil, with varying degree of success, all his life. It seems reasonable to suggest that Plutarch's idealized image of Alexander the (almost) philosopher-king is a conscious response to

the representations of Alexander as a tyrant, prone to anger and lacking self-control, in Roman writings of the late Republican and early Imperial times, from Cicero to Seneca and Curtius Rufus.⁷ In general, in Plutarch's account, Alexander is a character viewed much more positively. In the stories of Alexander's childhood his Hellenic identity is both assessed and presented to the readers as a part of the great Greek past.

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⁷ On the image of Alexander in Roman philosophical and ethical writings see Spencer 2002.

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