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PLUTARCH ON THE END OF THE PERSIAN EMPIRE[1]

This paper focuses on two aspects of the moral, issues pertaining to the end of the Persian Empire as found in Plutarch's works. One is the character of the monarchs who brought about the decline of the political framework – in particular Artaxerxes II (in his biography) and Artaxerxes III (in *De Iside et Osiride*); the other is the character of the social environment in which they acted, the 'national' character of Persia, as it were, and how it is portrayed by Plutarch as producing its own demise when encountering Alexander (in the biography of the latter). It might also be said that Plutarch's depiction of Achaemenid Persia insinuates an attitude towards contemporary Rome.

Key Words: Plutarch; Persia; Artaxerxes II Mnemon; Alexander the Great; Artaxerxes III Ochus; Succesion of Empires; Achaemenid Empire.

A reader seeking the historical, political, institutional, social or military reasons for the fall of the Persian Achaemenid Empire in the pages of the works of the Greek author and biographer Plutarch, might be disappointed.[2] It is not just the often quoted passage at the beginning of the biography of Alexander (1.2), with the claim of the narrator to write a biography and not history, which discloses a method remote from what we would deem historical research.[3] It is also the frequent use of sophisticated symbolism,

1 Earlier versions of this paper were presented to audiences at Edinburgh and Brno, and I am thankful for all the comments that helped me improve it. I am grateful to Prof. C. Pelling for reading an earlier draft. All translations in the notes are from the LCL edition, unless stated otherwise.

2 Cf. Binder, C. 2008. *Plutarchs Vita des Artaxerxes.* Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 12–16; Stronk, J. P. 2010. *Ctesias' Persian History. Part I: Introduction, Text, and Translation*. Düsseldorf, 93.

3 *οὔτε γὰρ ἱστορίας γράφομεν, ἀλλὰ βίους*. See Duff, T. 1999. *Plutarch's Lives: Exploring Virtue and vice.* Oxford, 14–22; Pelling, C. 2002. *Plutarch and History.* Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 259–260. In fact, the genre in which

the employment of intricate narrative structures, the layers of significance lurking in the *Lives*, the allusions, the ironies and the allegories that appear to necessitate a literary treatment and a literary interpretation from the reader of the biographies.[4] Yet, Plutarch is certainly not a mere writer of fiction. The imagery he uses supports historical observations that cannot be divulged otherwise. Furthermore, even though he is at times not absolutely true to his sources (as can be judged by the extant ones), Plutarch does arrive at a greater truth than that conveyed by other texts.[5]

It would seem that the interest of Plutarch in the Achaemenid kingdom was first and foremost part of the nostalgic fascination of his age with the Greek heroic past.[6] Like other contemporary second century AD Greek authors and orators, Plutarch's attention was drawn to Persia and to the time when Hellenic identity was moulded in response to the eastern threat.[7] One should also bear in mind the possibility that the growing appeal of the East of old following the preparations to the Parthian campaign of Trajan (114–117 AD) may well have influenced the biographer.[8] Yet, regardless

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Plutarch writes is hard to pinpoint. In other places his work is presented as history; cf. *Cim*. 2.5; *Demost*. 2.1; *Aem. Paul.* 1.1; *Thes*. 1.2; *Tib.-Gai. Gracch.* 1.1.

4 See C. PELLING (2002: 171–195, 365–386).

5 See C. PELLING (2002: 143–170).

6 See BOWIE, E. L. 1970. "The Greeks and their Past in the Second Sophistic." *Past and Present* 46: 3–41 [7, 14, 27]; SWAIN, S. 1996. *Hellenism and Empire.* Oxford, 95–96; WHITMARSH, T. 2005. *The Second Sophistic*. Oxford, 68 n.43; cf. Philostratus, *VS* 519–520, 541, 595. For Plutarch's interest in Persia see HOOD, D. C. 1967. *Plutarch and the Persians*. Diss. University of Southern California; PELLING, C. 2007. „De malignitate Plutarchi: Plutarch, Herodotus, and the Persian Wars." In BRIDGES, E. – HALL, E. – RHODES, P. J. [EDS.] *Cultural Responses to the Persian Wars: Antiquity to the Third Millennium*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 145–164.

7 In addition, Plutarch's interest in the Zoroastrian religion, whose tenet of two opposite principles at work in the universe was very close to his own brand of dualism (see *De Iside et Osiride* 369a–371c, *De anim. proc.* 1026b, Cf. also *Proc. An.* 1026b) may also have played a part. DILLON, J. 1977. *The Middle Platonists.* London, 191, is convinced that such Persian influence and knowledge about Persian religion came to Plutarch primarily from his teacher. This fact may also have prompted him to turn his attention to Persian civilization. On Plutarch's understanding of Zoroastrian religion, see DE JONG A. 1997. *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature*. Leiden, 157–204.

8 On Roman appropriation of fifth century images of the Persian Wars see ROSIVACH, V.J. 1984. "The Romans' View of the Persians." *Classical World*, 78, 1–8; SPAWFORTH, A. 1994. "Symbol of Unity? The Persian-Wars Tradition in the Roman Empire." In HORNBLOWER, S. [ED.] *Greek Historiography*. Oxford University Press, 1994, 233–247, especially 237–243; HARDIE, P. 1997. "Fifth-Century Athenian and Augustan Images of the Barbarian Other." *Classics Ireland*, 4, 46–56. Cf. ISAAC,

of specific political circumstances, a role was surely played by the general interest of men of letters in the theme of the succession of empires, from the Ancient Near Eastern kingdoms to Rome.[9]

Furthermore, while it may appear inappropriate or even too narrow an attitude in the eyes of historians today, Plutarch seems to have been particularly interested in the demise of the Achaemenid kingdom as part of his treatment of virtue and vice and of his concern to trace the successes and failures of rulers and states to their moral excellence or failing, respectively.[10] What is of importance to Plutarch in his descriptions is to explore the ability or inability of his heroes to let the rational part of their soul guide

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B. 2004, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*. Princeton University Press, 375–380. Cf. Arrian's *Parthica* (*FGrH* 156, F 30–53). The inspiration of Trajan's expedition may be analogous to the influence of the campaigns of Verus (162–166 AD). See an anonymous treatise (*FGrH* 203), the attraction of anecdotes from the Great King's court (e.g., in Polyaenus, who also planned to write on Parthian wars: *Strat*. 8. praef.), and the reference to Xenophon's march (e.g., Lucian, *Quom. hist. conscrib.*, dealing with historians of the Parthian wars, cites *Anabasis* 1.1.1 at 24). There are echoes of Greek action against 'Asia' in the Roman *Lives* (Cf. Plut. *Comp. Arist.-Cat. Mai.* 2.3; *Comp. Crass-.Nic.* 4.4). There may be a sardonic variation of this identification in Mark Antony's comparison of his failed venture in the east with that of the Ten Thousand and in his admiration of Xenophon's army (*Ant*. 45.12). Note that ironically, Plutarch begins the Parthian sequence in the biography by having Mark Antony equate himself with the Persian king Artaxerxes I (*Ant*. 37.1). Cf. PELLING, C. 1988. *Plutarch: Life of Antony.* Cambridge, 221–222.

9 The idea of a series of world empires (which would later assume the form of *translatio imperii*; See LE GOFF, J. 1964. *La civilisation de l'Occident médiéval*. Paris, Chapter VI) can already be seen in Herodotus (1,95; 1,130) and Ctesias (*FGrH* 688, F 1 and 5) as a model with three items (Assyria-Media-Persia). A scheme of four empires appears in the OT book of Daniel (2:1–40; cf. 7:2–3), variously interpreted, and one of five successive kingdoms is found in authors from the Roman period (e.g., Polyb. 38.22.1–3; Vell. Pat. 1.6.6 [Aemilius Sura]; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.2.1–4; cf. Tac. *Hist*. 5.8; Appian, Praef. 9). See MENDELS, D. 1981. „The Five Empires. A Note on a Propagandistic Topos." *American Journal of Philology*, 102, 330—37; ALONSO NÚÑEZ, J.M. 1983. „Die Abfolge der Weltreiche bei Polybios und Dionysios von Halikarnassos." *Historia*, 32, 411–426; IDEM. „Appian and the World Empires." *Athenaeum*, 62, 640–644; KATHERINE CLARKE, 1999. *Between Geography and History: Hellenistic Constructions of the Roman World*. Oxford University Press, 15–16, 226–228. This idea had subversive connotations and was used by groups opposed to the Imperial rule: SWAIN, J. S. 1940. „The Theory of the Four Monarchies: Opposition History Under the Roman Empire." *Classical Philology*, 35, 1–21; MOMIGLIANO, A. 1987. *On Pagans, Jews and Christians*. Middletown> Wesleyan University Press, CT, 31–57. See WIESEHÖFER, J. 2003. „ The Medes and the idea of the succession of empires in antiquity." In LANFRANCHI, G. B. – ROAF, M. – ROLLINGER, R. [EDS.] *Continuity of Empire (?) Assyria, Media, Persia*. Padova, 2003, 391–396.

10 For this approach see T. DUFF (1999: 135–141, 162, 189, 205, 245, 263).

emotions and not let them get out of control. In his view, a bad character is formed by the habitual choice of the *psyche* to act in a certain manner which follows an excessive passion, or, in other words, in the incapability of the soul to find the right 'mean' between extremes.[11] The moral concern of Plutarch was to provide his readers with a model of a person's soul worth following and imitating.[12] When applied to the great deeds and events of the past, this view spells an ethical reading of history, in which the moral lessons are the only significant interpretation that really matters.[13]

Plutarch's reason for the fall of the Persian Empire is, thus, phrased in ethical terms. Plutarch shows little interest in the political and administrative units of the Persian Empire.[14] He does not display concern in the internal arrangements of different social classes and the relations of the Kings and the local aristocracy.[15] He hardly mentions the function of the army or manpower issues of the Empire.[16] Like other Greek authors depicting Persia, Plutarch's attention was focused on personal aspects, describing petty details and echoing a stereotypical presentation of the royal Achaemenid court.[17] Plutarch seems to find moral significance in these items.

I shall focus on two aspects of the moral issues pertaining to the end of the Persian Empire. One is the character of the monarchs who brought about the decline of the political framework; the other is the character of the social environment in which they acted, the 'national' character of Persia,

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11 Plutarch adheres to the Platonic tripartite division of the soul (expounded in Plat. *Rep*. 439e–440d; 442a–c) into the rational part and the passionate or irrational one, which, in turn, is split between the spirited and the appetitive. Unguided by the rational part, the emotions become harmful. Plut. *De virtute morali*, 441d–443d; Cf. J. DILLON (1977: 194), T. DUFF (1999: 72–76). Plutarch accepts Aristotle's doctrine of the mean (Arist. *NE*, 1106a23–24, 1106b35 ff.), i.e., that virtue (*arete*) consists in the attainment of the right "mean" between two extreme passions; see *De Virtute Morali*, 444c–445a, 451de.

12 See *Quom. quis suos in virt.* 85ab; *Per*. 2.4; cf. *Demet*. 1.1–3; T. DUFF (1999: 31).

13 The term 'moral' is used here not in a narrow simple sense denoting the protreptic-normative, but as including both the 'descriptive' function, which points to truths about human behaviour, in two variations, 'expository' and 'exploratory', as suggested by C. PELLING (2002: 239–251).

14 Cf. C. BINDER, (2008: 48–49).

15 Except in an anecdotal level: e.g., *Apophth. Reg. et Imp.* 172e, 174b.

16 He treats them only insofar as these aspects have moral significance: e.g., *Them*. 13.1.

17 COOK, J.M. 1983. *The Persian Empire*. London, 22; SANCISI-WEERDENBURG, H. 1987. „Decadence in the Empire or Decadence in the Sources? From Source to Synthesis: Ctesias." *Achaemenid History*, 1:33–46 [35]; cf. STEVENSON, R.B. 1997. *Persica*. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 45–46, 80, 141, 159.

as it were, and how it is portrayed by Plutarch to produce its own demise at the hands of Alexander.[18]

In Greek imagination, the fourth century reigns of the last Persian kings were seen as a period of decay and degeneration in comparison with those of former sovereigns, especially Cyrus the Great and Darius I. This picture, which can be seen in Xenophon's epilogue of the *Cyropaedia* (8.8), the third book of Plato's *Laws* (693c–698a) and Isocrates' *Panegyricus* (150–152), is historically speaking not accurate and is even self-contradictory at times, yet it proved to be a very powerful image in antiquity.[19] This period is detailed in several works of Plutarch, notable among which are the *Life* of Artaxerxes II Mnemon (405/4–359/8 BC), sections from the *Isis and Osiris* [*De Iside et Osiride*] on Artaxerxes III (359/8–338) and the *Life* of Alexander on Darius III Codomannus (336–330). Plutarch seems to be building his elaborate moral portrayals upon the widespread stereotypes of decadent Persia.

The significant source here is the solitary biography *Artaxerxes*,[20] one of Plutarch's neglected works.[21] Plutarch constructs the work to present a hero

18 On 'national' character, note that Plutarch apparently follows stereotypical traits. He characterises western and northern nations as possessing courage, audaciousness (*θρασύτης*) and boldness (*θυμὸς*); see *Mar*. 11.13, 16.5, 19.4,9, 23.3, 7; *Caes*. 18.1, 19.6–7, 24.5–7; *Cam*. 23.1, 36.3; *Crass*. 9.8, 25.8; *Sert*. 16.1–2, 9–11. On the other hand, he attributes softness (*μαλακία*) to eastern groups; *Luc*. 11.7–8, 25.5, 28.5–6, 31.7–8, 36.7; *Cim*. 12.7; *Them*. 16.6; *Arist*. 10.1, 16.4–5; *Alex*. 33.8, 63.4–5. Cf. SCHMIDT, T. S. 1999. *Plutarque et les Barbares: la rhétorique d'une image.* Louvain : Collection d'études classiques, 69–104, 240–244, 212–219.

19 BRIANT, P. 2001. "History and Ideology: The Greeks and 'Persian Decadence'." In HARRISON, T. [ED.] *Greeks and Barbarians*. Edinburgh, 2001, 193–210.

20 That is, not part of Plutarch's parallel biographies project, like *Aratus* on the one hand and *Otho* and *Galba* on the other. See PORTER, W. U. 1937. *Life of Aratus*. Dublin; MANFREDINI, M. & ORSI, D. P. 1987. *Plutarcho, Le Vite di* Arato *et di* Artaserse, Milano: Mondadori. *Otho* and *Galba* were part of a series of biographies devoted to the Caesars; see GEORGIADOU, A. 1988. „*The Lives of the Caesars* and Plutarch's other *Lives.*" *ICS*, 13.2, 348–356; ASH, R. 1997. „Severed Heads: Individual Portraits and Irrational Forces in Plutarch's Galba and Otho".' In MOSSMAN, J. [ED.] *Plutarch and his Intellectual World.* Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 1997, 189–214).

21 During the past two centuries little attention has been given to this Life. It was only treated by HAUG, M. 1854. *Die Quellen Plutarchs in den Lebensbeschreibungen der Griechen*, Tübingen, 87–98; SCHOTTIN. 1865 *Observationes de Plutarchi Vita Artaxerxeis*, Budissin; SMITH C. F. 1881. *A Study of Plutarch's Life of Artarxerxes*. Diss. University of Leipzig; MANTEY, O. A. 1888. *Welchen Quellen folgte Plutarch in seinem Leben des Artaxerxes*. Greifenberg in Pommern; KRUMBHOLZ, P. 1889. *De Ctesia Aliisque Auctoribus in Plutarchi Artaxerxis Vita Adhibitis*, Eisenach; HOOD (1967: 68–85); KÖNIG F.W.1972. *Die Persika des Ktesias von Knidos*. Graz, 106–109; MANFREDINI-ORSI (1987); MARASCO, G. 1994. *Vite di Plutarco*. Torino, vol. 5, 658–669;

whose *psyche* is composed of two conflicting parts, one which is seemingly restrained and mild, and another that is licentious and brutal. This contrast is artistically presented by positing the Persian King between two persons who typify the extremes within his soul: on the one hand, the generous and kind nature of his grandfather Artaxerxes I at the beginning (*Art*. 1.1), and the savage and callous character of his son, Ochus (later Artaxerxes III) at the very end of the work on the other (*Art*. 30.9).[22] The two opposite portrayals of Artaxerxes also symbolize the place of this king between the glorious achievements of his ancestors and the alleged breakdown of the empire at the time of his descendants. Indeed, at the beginning of his rule, Artaxerxes II gives the impression that he was emulating his grandfather (*Art*. 4.4)[23] and compared to his ruthless son he seems friendly to his subjects (30.9). Yet, this mild image is only conveyed by the narrator, and may have no real basis, exactly like its reverse, the savage portrayal of the king, which is used by Ochus at the very last chapter (30.2). The scheme of Ochus involves the presentation of Artaxerxes as plotting against his other son, Ariaspes, and planning to execute him. The image is said to have been communicated to Ariaspes repeatedly, thus causing him to take his own life.

It would appear that the *ethos*, or character, of Artaxerxes, is torn between rationality and passion. Yet the important words in these passages are *ἔδοξε* (4.4) and *δόξας* (30.9).[24] He only *seems* to be so. There is a sense in which this presentation is not entirely real. It is not that this monarch is completely lacking in self control; far from it. It is just that the restraints he displays have nothing to do with *paideia* or true *praotes* or *epieikeia*. These concepts, which may be interpreted, respectively, as education, mildness or

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R. B. Stevenson (1997: 24–29); T. SCHMIDT (1999: 318–324). Recent works are C. BINDER (2008); ALMAGOR, E. 2009. "A 'Barbarian' *symposium* and the Absence of *philanthropia (Artaxerxes* 15)." In *Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch*; FERREIRA, J. R. ET AL. [EDS.] Coimbra, 131–146; IDEM, "Characterization Through Animals: The Case of Plutarch's Artaxerxes." *Ploutarchos*, n. s., 7 (2009/2010), 3–22; and IDEM (Forthcoming). *Plutarch and the Persica*; MOSSMAN, J. 2010. „A Life Unparalleled: Plutarch's Artaxerxes." In HUMBLE, N. [ED.] *Plutarch's Lives: Parallelism and Purpose*, Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2010, 145–168. Its importance is borne by the fact that its hero is a barbarian, an outsider to the Greco-Roman world, whose figure disrupts the unity of Plutarch's biographical output.

22 1.1: *ὁ μὲν πρῶτος Ἀρτοξέρξης, τῶν ἐν Πέρσαις βασιλέων πραότητι καὶ μεγαλοψυχίᾳ πρωτεύσας…* 30.9: *δόξας δὲ πρᾶος εἶναι καὶ φιλυπήκοος οὐχ ἥκιστα διὰ τὸν υἱὸν Ὦχον ὠμότητι καὶ μιαιφονίᾳ πάντας ὑπερβαλόμενον.*

23 4.4: *ἐν ἀρχῇ δὲ καὶ πάνυ ζηλοῦν ἔδοξε τὴν Ἀρτοξέρξου τοῦ ὁμωνύμου πραότητα…*

24 See the initial description that Artaxerxes looked milder than his brother (*Art*. 2.1: *ἅτερος δὲ πραότερος ἐδόκει περὶ πάντα*).

reasonableness, would seem to be typically Hellenic in the eyes of Plutarch, and hence not wholly applicable to barbarians such as the Persian King.[25] In this non-Greek world, rationality is a phantom, and the reader has to infer that the limits for the king's propensity for excess are set within his soul not by reason but by emotions. Plutarch's presentation seems to suggest that the passions of the Persian King are curbed by other passions, leaving rationality no role to play.

In a similar vein, the monarch displays ostensible passive modes of behaviour, which are depicted in roughly comparable words both at the beginning and at the end of his public career (*Art*. 2.2 and 30.6, especially *κατακλαύσας* and *ἀπέκλαυσε*).[26] The gestures described, before the intended execution of his wife and after the murder of his beloved son Ariaspes – are really emotional outbursts, caused by anxiety or grief. Artaxerxes has no true moderation. When he is under the influence of other passions, like ambition or lust, and when barriers are lifted, he is capable of excessive cruelty, displayed in the killing of his rebellious son Darius with his own hands (*Art*. 29.11) and licentious sexuality, which is manifested in his marriage to his own daughter Atossa (*Art*. 23.5, 27.8).

In western eyes, the Persians were viewed as the perpetual enemy engaged in a continuous conflict with the Greeks. The Hellenic culture was portrayed as a sort of a limit to Persian ambition and savagery, and its existence beyond the Empire marked a border to barbarian passion. But Artaxerxes II was the first Persian monarch who actually enforced his will on Greece by the 'King's Peace' settlement of 387/6 BC.[27] Through this act he lifted, as it were, the external barriers on Persia as well as the internal restrains on his passions, leading to a grand display of depravity.[28] Greeks themselves began emulating the Persians. Examples for this decadence are collected by Plutarch in chapter 22 of the *Artaxerxes*, including the notorious *proskynesis* (act of prostration before the king) by Theban

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25 On the concept of *praotes* in Plutarch see MARTIN, H. M. 1960. „The Concept of *Praotes* in Plutarch's *Lives*." *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies,* 3, 65–73. See E. ALMAGOR (2009: 138) on the inapplicability of Hellenic qualities on barbarians.

26 2.2: *ὁ δὲ Ἀρσίκας τῆς μητρὸς ἱκέτης γενόμενος καὶ πολλὰ κατακλαύσας; 30.6: ἐκεῖνον μὲν ἀπέκλαυσε…*

27 See RYDER, T. T. B. 1965. *Koine Eirene.* Oxford; CAWKWELL, G.L. 1981. „The King's Peace." *Classical Quarterly*, n.s. 31; 69–83; URBAN, R. 1991. *Der Königsfrieden von 387/86 v. Chr. Vorgeschichte, Zustandekommen, Ergebnis und politische Umsetzung*. Stuttgart.

28 This could be considered a variation on the *metus hostilis* theme known in Rome; cf. Sallust, *Jug*. 41.2–5.

delegates,[29] and culminating in the sumptuous luxury lavished on Timagoras, the Athenian ambassador to the Persian court, with meals and presents such as ten thousand Darics, couches with bedding, and as many as eighty cows to follow in his train.[30] Indeed, in the next chapter, Greeks are no longer presented as setting a moral limit to the conduct of the Persians. When Parysatis, the Persian queen mother, urges the king, her son, to marry his own daughter, she claims that he is to ignore the Hellenic opinions and laws (23.5).[31] By the description of the decadent court, filled with luxurious living (*tryphe*) on the one hand, and murderous intrigues, whimsical royal decisions, incestuous relations and cruel and unusual punishments on the other, the biography tells us the story of the decline and fall of an Empire through the figure of a single person.

Typical to the portrayal of the demise of the monarchy and the role this king has in bringing it about is one gory depiction of a punishment meted out by Artaxerxes. It is administered to a soldier named Mithridates, for his offence against the monarch. During the battle of Cunaxa, this soldier was responsible for the slaying of the rebellious prince, Cyrus the Younger. But in a subsequent banquet, Mithridates' bold claim for the glory of the deed contradicts the official royal version, which has Artaxerxes as the sole killer of Cyrus.[32] The soldier is immediately punished, in order to restrain the passions he so recklessly exhibited. Yet, the retribution has no measure of self-control; instead, it unfetters a more powerful and dreadful passion. Mithridates is executed in a method that inflicts a horrendous death (*Art*. 16.3–7). Placed between two boats (*σκάφαι*), one on top of the other, he is force-fed with milk and honey. While his intestinal waste accumulates in the boats, worms and other insects breed in it and devour his flesh. Thus, like the words Mithridates emits, what is discharged from his body harms him and eventually leads to his end.

This gruesome picture (which probably comes from the work of Ctesias)[33] can be interpreted as having political overtones. Plutarch may use this im-

29 Albeit by a ruse, see 22.8. Abhorring the idea of an obeisance before a mortal (cf. ESTHER 3,2), Greeks were reluctant to pay this homage, as in the case of Alexander's attempt to introduce this ceremonial in 327 BC (Arr. *Anab*. 4.11.2–12; Plut. *Alex*. 54.3–6, 74.2).

30 Cf. Plut. *Pelop*. 30.9–12; Suda, s.v. 'Timagoras'.

31 *τέλος οὖν γῆμαι τὴν κόρην ἔπεισε καὶ γνησίαν ἀποδεῖξαι γυναῖκα, χαίρειν ἐάσαντα δόξας Ἑλλήνων καὶ νόμους.*

32 See E. ALMAGOR (2009) on this scene.

33 It is likely that Plutarch used Ctesias to describe the punishment of Mithridates as he did regarding the crime of the Persian soldier in the previous chapter. See C. F. SMITH (1881: 34); O. A. MANTEY (1888: 14–15); P. KRUMBHOLZ (1889: 16);

age of worms spawning as a metaphor. In one place (*De super.* 165b), he explicitly compares worms created in the body with passions formed by the presence of evil and intemperance (*ἀκολασία*).[34] In particular, the gory picture can be interpreted as a political allegory, signifying the eventual decomposition of the Persian Empire. In another work (*De Alex. fort.* 337a), Plutarch employs this very image as a political simile, describing the dissolution of Alexander's empire after his death and the emergence of many ignoble kings and rulers.[35] The punishment of the boats, designed to glorify the king, will eventually serve to blend truth and falsehood in a way that will prove fatal to Artaxerxes: his image as a violent monarch, capable of killing one of his closest men, will be deceitfully utilized by his son Ochus (as mentioned above) and will lead one of his other sons to take his own life, bringing Artaxerxes to the point of despair and eventual death. In this sense, the metaphor of worms coming out of what is discharged from the body and then devouring it, anticipates the elimination of the king by his own offspring. In this depraved Persian world, a carnal nightmarish image representing passions which are set loose in an effort to curb each other is more powerful than any detailed historical and scholarly explanation for the downfall of the Persian Empire.

Animals devouring other living creatures are used as a metaphor in another instance where decadent Persia is mentioned. The cruelty of Artaxerxes' son, Ochus, towards his subjects was notorious and is known from other sources.[36] Yet when Plutarch mentions him outside of the *Artaxerxes*, he recounts only one notable act which he did during the reconquest of Egypt, that is, the slaying of the holy bull Apis (cf. Aelian, *VH* 4.8).[37]

C. BINDER (2008: 238). Note, however, that Photius' epitome of Ctesias (*FGrH* 688, F 16.67) has a different account of the event: *ὡς Ἀρτοξέρξης παρέδωκεν αἰτησαμένηι Μιτραδάτην Παρυσάτιδι* ('Artaxerxes delivered Mithridates to Parysatis at her request').

34 This metaphorical association of living creatures with the realm of passions is common in Greek philosophy. See the allusion to the 'animals of the passions', *τὰ τῶν παθῶν θρέμματα*: Plut. *De virt. moral.* 451de, and Plat. *Tim.* 70e; *Rep.* 4.439b, 4.440d, 9.571c, 589ab; *Phaedr*. 230a, 246a ff., 253c ff. Cf. E. ALMAGOR (2009/10: 6 n. 15).

35 *τέλος δ' ἀπομαραινομένη καὶ φθίνουσα περὶ αὑτὴν οἷον εὐλάς τινας ἀνέζεσεν ἀγεννῶν βασιλέων καὶ ἡγεμόνων ψυχορραγούντων* ('but at length the host wasted away and perished, generating about itself maggots, as it were, of ignoble kings and rulers in their last death-struggle').

36 Diod. 16.43.1–45.6, 16.51.2, 17.5.3; Justin, 10.3.1; Aelian, *VH* 2.17 ;Val. Max. 9.2 *Ext*. 7; Curtius, 10.5.23; but cf. Athen. 4.150b–c [Licias].

37 Echoing the cruelty of Cambyses in Herodotus, 3.28–29.

Plutarch deals with this atrocity in the treatise *On Isis and Osiris*, a philosophical work which addresses an Egyptian myth on the good god Osiris, the evil deity Seth-Typhon and the goddess Isis, who is of a middle nature. The work is devoted to the discussion on the interpretation of the myth, and is essentially a treatment of the right way to attain the knowledge of the supreme good, through Greek philosophic understanding rather than a literary one, which provokes superstition (*δεισιδαιμονία*). The killing of the bull Apis by Ochus appears in this essay twice (355cd & 363cd). In the first instance, there is a reference to the appellation by which the Egyptians termed the Persian King, namely 'the knife'. The second occurrence mentions another name which was given to Ochus in Egypt, that is to say 'the Ass', with all the pejorative meanings this animal carried.[38] The two scenes have many facets, and are complicated by being situated at a juncture between Egyptian practices, Greek interpretation and Persian power. It is clear that Plutarch dislikes the superstitious comprehension of Apis as the physical embodiment of Osiris' soul (cf. 359b, 362c, 368c),[39] and in this sense the termination of his cult by Ochus would appear to be a good thing. It is, however, obviously not the case, and the slaying of the bull is presented as a culmination of Ochus' crimes. Once again, we are presented with an act of an apparent restraint of passion – in this case, of superstition and of the insolence of the Egyptians – which is committed with even greater passion, by a Persian King.

The passages abound with subtle ironies. Since both accounts are told from the Egyptian perspective (even though taken from the Greek author Deinon) they seem to betray a superstitious interpretation. The Egyptians not only appear to make the bull into a true incarnation of Osiris, but also turn the Great King into a real beast, representing Typhon, by using this metaphor. Ironically, while Ochus' deed effectively terminates the Egyptian superstition, it only helps to reinforce it, in what seems to be a symbolic presentation of the opposition of deities. Thus, in the second instance depicted by Plutarch, more than the first one, there seems to be a dichotomy in which the two terms (or the two beasts) can be both good and evil. The situation created corresponds to what Plutarch sees as typical to superstition, namely, the notion that good is evil (*De sup.* 167e). In this manner, Egyptian superstition tallies perfectly well with the characteristic inner

38 On the low status of donkey in Greek thought see GREGORY, J. 2007. "Donkeys and the Equine Hierarchy in Archaic Greek. Literature." *Classical Journal*, 102, 193–212.

39 See RICHTER, D.S. 2001. „Plutarch on Isis and Osiris: Text, Cult, and Cultural Appropriation." *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 131, 191–216.

conflict of the Persian monarch, in which the relatively good and bad items are interchangeable, given that they are passions.

The great clash of Persia and Macedonia is presented twice by Plutarch, once in the epideictic work *On the Virtue or Fortune of Alexander the Great* [*De Alexandri magni fortuna aut virtute*] (split in two essays), and once in the *Life* of Alexander. While the two essays contain an ostensible simple and positive presentation of Alexander as the bringer of culture to the barbarians, his image in the biography is much more complex, making his relation with the Persians of greater interest. Here, the eastern adversaries shed light on the character of Alexander, but not just as a foil, or a background against which his person should be judged. The Persians can be regarded as matching the internal non-Greek side of his *psyche*; moreover, corresponding to the stereotype of the barbarians, they can even be seen as the incarnation of the irrational, fitting the passionate part of Alexander's soul.[40] But this characterization can also work the other way around, in which case, one can learn about the Persian Empire by examining the *ethos* of Alexander. There is more than one point of resemblance between the last Persian King Darius III and Alexander the Macedonian in the description of Plutarch. I will try to show this in three images.

The first image to display the similarity between Alexander and Darius is artistically displayed in the dream of the latter, in which the Macedonian king is serving Darius dressed in the same robe which the Persian monarch himself used to wear when he was a royal courier (*Alex*. 18.7). The dream in effect highlights the very manner in which Alexander's character is close to the Persians. It depicts Alexander as a slave to the king, a position which by definition entails limits and restraints.[41] This position, however, is also a launch pad for any ambitious aspirant for the throne (as is made clear by the case of Darius). In that sense, it involves unbound desire. It is a restraint which in actuality is not really a restriction at all. This blending of passion and self-control, so typical in Plutarch's characterization of the Persian

40 Cf. WHITMARSH T. 2002. „Alexander's Hellenism and Plutarch's Textualism." *Classical Quarterly*, n. s. 52, 174–192 [191] on Alexander as aptly embodying east and west, since Macedonian identity is set between Hellenism and barbarism.

41 Cf. the description of Darius' position before his rise to power as that of a slave in Ael. *VH* 12.43. Plutarch uses the word ἀστάνδης in *Alex*. 18.7 and *De Alex. fort.* 340c. See BADIAN, E. „*Darius III*." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 100, 241–267 [249–250]; BRIANT, P. 2002. *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*. Winona Lake, IN. An English translation of *Histoire de l'empire perse: De Cyrus à Alexandre*. Paris, 1996, 370.

King (as we have seen), appears to be attributable to Alexander as well, in particular to his condition while present in the oriental kingdom.[42]

This mixture is made clear in the second image. When the harem of Darius falls into the hands of Alexander, after the battle of Issus, Alexander is depicted as refraining from harming or disgracing the captive Persian women, and uttering that these women are 'pains for the eyes' (*ὡς εἰσὶν ἀλγηδόνες ὀμμάτων αἱ Περσίδες*; *Alex*. 21.10). The phrase refers in fact to a reverse situation in an episode described by Herodotus (Hdt. 5.18.4), where it is Persian ambassadors in Macedonia who complain that the women are placed so far away from them during a banquet, and are thus 'sores for the eyes' (*ἀλγηδόνας σφίσι ὀφθαλμῶν*). When this assertion is voiced by Alexander it seems to be at the same time an expression of his restraint in abstaining from the women, but also of his passion, in echoing the sentiment of the delegates. The reader also recalls the rest of Herodotus' story, involving a treacherous murder of the Persian envoys in order to rectify the insult incurred by the women, in another example of passion restraining passion, which is lurking behind Plutarch's scene. Thus, what appears at first sight as an example of self-control which originates from good upbringing and *paideia* alludes in fact to a passionate curbing of emotions following the Macedonian model; it reflects an internal strife within Alexander's soul between two passions and not between reason and emotion.

The third image is the depiction of the dramatic end of the Achaemenid Empire, bringing the last words of Darius and a gesture of Alexander toward the deceased monarch (*Alex*. 43.2–5). Alexander is not able to capture Darius, who flees from the battle scenes at Issus and Gaugamela. When Alexander is finally able to reach him, it is immediately after he was killed by one of his few supporters. In the words of the dying Darius to the Macedonian soldier who brings him cold water to drink, he gracefully accepts his own ill-fortune and in a tone of resignation announces that the gods will reward Alexander for his kindness towards the royal family. What seems to be a restrained acceptance coming from a man who has lost everything is

42 Greek education and philosophy should have curbed Alexander, but they do not. Because of his character, and the absence of a clear demarcation of passions from restraining reason, *paideia* is incorrectly put into use in his *psyche* to put restrictions on the controls themselves. This understanding would also account for Alexander's quarrel with Aristotle (*Alex*. 7.7–8) and subsequent hanging of the Indian philosophers (*Alex*. 59). The picture is probably more complicated than that presented by BUSZARD B. 2008. "Caesar's Ambition: A Combined Reading of Plutarch's Alexander-Caesar and Pyrrhus-Marius, *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 138, 185–215 [190–192]. See the blending of passion and restraint in the account of *Alex*. 33.5 ff., where horses and horsemen play both roles.

not entirely so, for in his claim that the deities will pay Alexander, Darius seems to believe that the gods also provide services to the Persian King (cf. *Alex*. 30.12–13), an attitude which typifies an extremely arrogant ruler. Similarly, at the sight of the corpse of Darius, Alexander unfastens his robe and covers it. Alexander seems to show a humble respect for the dead king, and even to fulfill the dream of Darius in actually serving him by concealing his dead body. Yet, if the robe symbolizes the office of a servant, as the dream seems to imply, then the very act of taking it off signifies casting aside any self-control that went along with that position. This is evidenced by the cruelty immediately displayed by Alexander to Darius' killer, Bessus (*Alex*. 43.6).

It would seem that Plutarch's explanation for the fall of the Achaemenid Empire at the hands of Alexander takes into account the similarities between his character and that of Persia or the Persian kings. This is especially noted with regard to the fiery nature (πυρώδης) of Alexander (*Alex*. 4.5, 75.6), and of the East. Alexander's sweet odour is said to be the outcome of a mixture of his body, which was hot and fiery[43] and Alexander's death is noted as the result of the combination of wine and a fiery fever. Similarly, Plutarch relates that the properties of Naphtha arise from the fiery soil of Babylonia, and an anecdote is recounted on the efforts to grow Greek plants in Babylon (*Alex*. 35.14–15). All succeeded except the ivy, because the plant is cool and the earth is of a fiery nature.[44] In terms of fire, then, the Persians have certainly met their match in Alexander. It would seem that fire is a perfect image and simile for Plutarch in dealing with the blending of restraint and passion. Fire is used to fight fire,[45] but fire also increases fire (Plat. *Leg*. 666a; cf. *Art*. 28.1), and there seems to be a very thin line between the functions of flames as curbing or as inciting. One would interpret Plutarch's depiction of the fatal clash of the Macedonian king and Persia as a great conflagration, which inflames both sides and also causes their extinction, symbolized by the fire set to the palaces in Persepolis (*Alex*. 38).

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43 The thematic centrality of fiery hotness is noted by T. WHITMARSH, (2002: 188), but this should probably not be pressed too far. Rather than making a point about the humoral disposition of Alexander as a cause for his behaviour or eventual degeneration, it would seem that Plutarch employs this physiological convention to portray the place of passions within his psychological make-up, which is not necessarily consistent.

44 καὶ γάρ ἐστιν ἡ Βαβυλωνία σφόδρα πυρώδης. See SANSONE D. 1980. „Plutarch, Alexander and the discovery of naphtha." *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 100, 63–74 [73] for the relevance of the digression on Naphtha (35.12–13) to the fiery nature of Alexander himself.

45 Though a known practice through the ages, the English expression probably originates in Shakespeare's *King John* Act 5, scene 1 ("be fire with fire").

The psychological constitution of a single person like Alexander and of a group like the Persians seem to comprise latent traits which were 'triggered off' by external circumstances like the encounter between them, resulting in the eventual end of both parties.

One final note: It might be said that Plutarch's depiction of Achaemenid Persia insinuates an attitude towards his contemporary Roman Empire. In second century AD Greek literature, Roman Imperial institutions were sometimes referred to in the terms used by Classical authors to depict the Persian system (such as 'Satraps' or 'Great King').[46] One can assume that Plutarch too entertained this association.[47] His emphasis on Greek *paideia* when dealing with the Roman Empire may not only be meant to counter-balance the cruelty and ambition Romans might lapse into without the proper Hellenic education.[48] It might also indicate the fear of Plutarch that without proper restrictions put on by Greek set of values, an inevitable state of savagery will arise, and the restraints which will be used to curb it would come from the passionate realm itself[49] in a way reminiscent of the Persians but detrimental for both rulers and subjects alike. Thus, while ostensibly addressing the time of Artaxerxes II and his successors, Plutarch's moralism may, broadly speaking, be referring implicitly to the western Empire, and allegorically present the Roman emperor as the Persian king in order to point at a possible dire course of events.[50]

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46 See E. L. BOWIE (1970: 33 n. 95); S. SWAIN (1996: 176, 321). It is possible that the Roman authorities were also aware of that association in the minds of Greeks, for Plutarch advised local statesmen to beware of the power of Rome and refrain from inciting the masses by mentioning the deeds of their victorious ancestors against Persia (*Praec. Ger. Reip.* 814a ff.).

47 See T. DUFF (1999: 296).

48 See RUSSELL, D. A. 1966. „On Reading Plutarch's *Lives*." *Greece and Rome*, 13, 139–154 [145 n.1]; S. SWAIN (1996: 140–144).

49 E.g., the contrast of people and senate in Rome (on which see PELLING /2002: 208ff./) may seem like the clash of passionate forces.

50 Note that the dedication of the collection of sayings *Regum et Imperatorum Apophthegmata* attributed to Plutarch, has the Emperor Trajan explicitly compared to Artaxerxes II. This dedication is authentic according to BECK, M. 2002. "Plutarch to Trajan: The Dedicatory Letter and the *Apophthegmata* Collection." In P. A. STADTER and L. VAN DER STOCKT [EDS.]. *Sage and Emperor: Plutarch Greek Intellectuals and Roman Power in the Time of Trajan (98–117 A.D.)*. Leuven, 163–173. In the case of Artaxerxes, it might be said that from the Hellenic point of view, Greece's submission to the conditions of the King's Peace could be considered analogous to its position under the sway of Rome, with Persia standing in for the Roman Empire.