

PLUTARCH AS APOLLO'S PRIEST AT DELPHI

It is well known that Plutarch was Apollo's priest at Delphi: this is seldom mentioned in his own works, but it has often been discussed by several scholars in his large bibliography. I have no new documents about this matter to add to what has been said, for instance, by Ziegler in his monograph¹ and by Burkert in his lecture at the 1995 Conference in Salerno devoted to Plutarch and religion². I only wish to refer briefly to the few passages in which Plutarch tells about his activity as Apollo's priest – and to the inscriptions which confirm his activity at Delphi – with the object to gain a better understanding of other passages in his works, particularly of one in the *The E at Delphi*.

It is not my intention to refer to the whole content of the three Delphic dialogues (*The E at Delphi*, *Oracles at Delphi no longer given in verse*, *The obsolescence of oracles*), nor will I add the fourth one, the *On the delays of divine vengeance* (and the other theological writings which have been lost, but whose titles are recorded in what is known as Lamprias' Catalogue). I only wish to consider the two passages in which Plutarch explicitly refers to his activity as Apollo's priest at Delphi, namely *An seni gerenda sit respublica* 17, 792F, and *Quaest. conv.* 7.2, 700E, in conjunction with the Delphic inscriptions *Syll.*³ 829A and 842-843, in order to shed new light on other Plutarcean passages, first of all *The E at Delphi* 1, 385A.

The text affording more information is undoubtedly the first one.

In chapter 17 of the work *Whether an old man should engage in public affairs* Plutarch is discussing whether political activity should be given up in old age, and he answers his interlocutor's argument with this analogy:

Καὶ μὴν οἴσθ' ἄν με τῷ Πυθίῳ λειτουργοῦντα πολλὰς Πυθιάδας· ἀλλ' οὐκ ἄν εἴποις ἴκανά σοι, ὦ Πλούταρχε, τέθυται καὶ πεπόμπευται καὶ κε-

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¹ Ziegler 1965.

² Burkert 1997, 11-28.

χόρευται, νῦν δ' ὥρα πρεσβύτερον ὄντα τὸν στέφανον ἀποθέσθαι καὶ τὸ χρηστήριον ἀπολιπεῖν διὰ τὸ γῆρας”.

Now, surely you know that I have been serving the Pythian Apollo for many Pythiads (or *quadriennia*), but you would not say: “Plutarch: you have done enough sacrificing, marching in processions, and dancing in choruses, and now that you are older it is time to put off the garland and to desert the oracle on account of your age”.³

This passage is useful for dating the work, which was probably written in Hadrian’s time, namely about 120 CE; it lets us know that Plutarch was one of the Delphic priests for a long time: according to Burkert⁴ the words “many Pythiads (i.e. *quadriennia*)” mean “about twenty years” and the passage is an important source for the Delphic ritual, of which Plutarch was officiant and eye-witness. For example, the sacrifice he is alluding to is certainly the one preliminary to the consultation of the Delphic oracle: the πρόθυσις, which was performed by one of Apollo’s two priests⁵. From this passage Burkert draws the conclusion that Plutarch was able to perform it “with a great financial expenditure” contributing “with his personal estate too”. Now, it is clear that it was a “liturgy” (as confirmed by the verb used by Plutarch), but I doubt that the priestly service at Delphi was performed at the priests’ own expense. It is true that in the classical age, at Athens and elsewhere, the public liturgies were performed at the expense of a rich citizen, that is it was a form of taxation: but the word “liturgy” underwent a long evolution in antiquity (and in the history of religions)⁶. In my opinion we should rather think that religious service at Delphi was probably paid for either by the pilgrims who came to consult the oracle or by the Delphic organization.

Apart from this, Plutarch himself confirms in another passage that the Pythian Apollo’s priests were two (in office at the same time). At *Quaest. conv.* 7.2 (700E) he relates that, in a “table-talk” in Delphi, during a banquet, some of his friends (τινες... τῶν ἐταίρων) asked him for the second time a question that was raised during the communal

³ Translation by H. N. Fowler 1969 (1936).

⁴ Burkert 1997, 12.

⁵ See Flacelière 1961, 59; Roux 1976, 82. I owe this reference to Cuvigny’s notes (1984, 105).

⁶ See the entry λειτουργέω (et sim.) in G. Kittel & G. Friedrich (eds.), *Grande Lessico del Nuovo Testamento*, Ital. ed., VI, Brescia 1970, 589-634 (H. Strathmann).

readings from Plato⁷. Plutarch says with a smile he had good advocates for refusing to oblige:

Εἶχον μὲν οὖν ἄρνούμενος οὐ φαύλους συνηγόρους, Εὐθύδημον τὸν συνιερέα καὶ Πατροκλέα τὸν γαμβρόν, οὐκ ὀλίγα τοιαῦτα τῶν ἀπὸ γεωργίας καὶ κυνηγίας προφέροντας.

I refused the request, and got no mean support from Euthydemus, my colleague in priesthood, and Patrocleas my son-in-law, who cited a good number of similar phenomena out of their experience in farming and hunting.⁸

It is not my intention, now, to investigate who these people were, because their identification is questionable⁹. Suffice it to point out that Plutarch is referring to his colleague in a free and easy way: Εὐθύδημον τὸν συνιερέα. He does not wish to flaunt his priestly office, nor does he want to hide it.

Everybody knows that archaeologists have found the inscription which was placed at the base of a statue of the emperor Hadrian, erected by the Amphictyonic council under Plutarch's direction. The text is in Dittenberger, *Syll.*³ 829A, and says:

Αὐτοκράτορα Καίσαρα, θεοῦ Τραϊανοῦ Παρθικοῦ υἱόν, θεοῦ Νέρβα υἱόν, Τραϊανὸν Ἀδριανὸν Σεβαστὸν τὸ κοινὸν τῶν Ἀμφικτυόνων, ἐπιμελητεύοντος ἀπὸ Δελφῶν Μεστρίου Πλουτάρχου τοῦ ἱερέως.

The emperor Caesar, son of the god Trajan Parthicos (*i.e.* conqueror of the Parthians), grandson of the god Nerva, Trajan Hadrian August: the Amphictyons' community (erected) through the Delphic cares of the priest Mestrios Plutarch.

All this is very interesting, but here I only wish to point out that the erection of the statue was deliberated by the community of the Amphictyons (τὸ κοινόν) under the control and direction of Plutarch, who is called Mestrios Plutarch, that is with his Roman name, and is qualified as Delphic priest. Clearly he is the curator, the Amphictyonic delegate (ἐπιμελητής), in charge of the execution of the Amphictyons' deliberation, in his capacity of Delphic priest.

⁷ Namely, what sort of person was called by Plato "horn-hard" (*kerasbolos*) or "obdurate" (*ateramon*).

⁸ Translation by E. L. Minar (1961).

⁹ See Frazier - Sirinelli 1996, 211.

Thanks to this inscription, we understand better *Syll.*³ 843, where two inscriptions are recorded: the first one (A) shows an elegiac couplet written on the base of a herm of Plutarch, carved in Pentelic marble, which was erected in the Amphictyonic synedrion (near the Thermopylae: see Hdt. 7.200), by Delphians and Chaeroneans together. The text says:

Δελφοὶ Χαίρωνεῦσιν ὁμοῦ Πλούταρχον ἔθηκαν
τοῖς Ἀμφικτυόνων δόγμασι πειθόμενοι.

Delphians and Chaeroneans together put up Plutarch's statue
in obedience to the Amphictyons' decrees.

Probably it is a statue erected in Plutarch's memory just after his death.

Similarly, another herm portraying Plutarch (B) – found headless – was erected in Chaeronea by Philinos (a friend of Plutarch's whom we meet in *Quaest. conv.* 1.6.1).

Other inscriptions, recorded in Dittenberg, *Syll.*³ 844, concern Plutarch's offspring: we find the name Autoboulos in A and B, but the first is probably Plutarch's grandson (or grand-nephew), not his son; the second one is Plutarch's sixth descendant.

These documents, in my opinion, make it easier to understand many passages in Plutarch's works. I am not referring to the three (or four) "Pythian Dialogues", but to passages of other works. For reasons of space, I can discuss only three here.

First of all I wish to make a short reference to *An seni* 785C, where Plutarch states that nobody is forced to leave the Amphictyons' chairmanship, when old, and devote himself to agriculture. Probably, Plutarch is referring to someone among his friends and colleagues, or maybe to himself.

Secondly, I wish to refer to *On Isis and Osiris* (378D), where Plutarch says:

διὸ τῶ μὲν εἰς τὸ χρηστήριον ἐνταῦθα κατιόντι παρεγγυῶμεν ὅσια φρονεῖν, εὐφημα λέγειν· οἱ δὲ πολλοὶ γελοῖα δρῶσιν ἐν ταῖς πομπαῖς καὶ ταῖς ἑορταῖς εὐφημίαν προκηρύττοντες, εἶτα περὶ τῶν θεῶν αὐτῶν τὰ δυσφημότατα καὶ λέγοντες καὶ διανοοῦμενοι.

We exhort anyone who comes down to the oracle, here, to think holy thoughts and to speak words of good omen. But the mass of mankind act ridiculously, because they proclaim the use of words of good omen

in their processions and festivals, but they both say and think the most unhallowed thoughts about the very gods.¹⁰

Clearly, we may recognize in these words the sermonizing tone of the Delphic priest and his dissatisfaction for the shabbiness of the daily reality of which he was eye-witness at Apollo's temple. Plutarch is speaking with great plainness, and takes it for granted that everybody knows he is Apollo's priest at Delphi, and for this very reason entitled to give advice and admonishment to people consulting the oracle. Please notice the painful distinction in the text. The Delphic priests recommend purity of speech and thought to all who descend, one at a time (hence the singular τῷ κατιόντι and the preverb κατά), into the underlying cave to consult the Pythia, whereas during the ceremonies and festivities the mass of the pilgrims behave foolishly (γελοῖα): while loudly reciting the formulas of the *euphemia*, they in fact disgracefully disregard it. The disappointment of Plutarch the priest is quite apparent.

Thirdly and lastly, I wish to tackle the problems posed by the text of *The E at Delphi* 385A, where Plutarch comes to the issue concerning the meaning of the great E situated up in front in Apollo's temple at Delphi¹¹ and lets us know that the question had already come up in his school. Here is the transmitted text, as given in the Loeb edition by F. C. Babbitt (1962):

πολλάκις οὖν ἄλλοτε τὸν λόγον ἐν τῇ σχολῇ προβαλλόμενον ἐκκλίνας ἀτρέμα καὶ παρελθὼν, ἔναγχος ὑπὸ τῶν υἰῶν ἐλήφθη ξένοις τισὶ συμφιλοτιμούμενος, οὓς εὐθὺς ἐκ Δελφῶν ἀπαίρειν μέλλοντας οὐκ ἦν εὐπρεπὲς παράγειν οὐδὲ παραιτεῖσθαι, πάντως ἀκούσαι τι προθυμωμένους.

This is his translation:

On many other occasions when the subject had been brought up in the school I had quietly turned aside from it and passed it over, but recently

¹⁰ Here the translation is mine. I do not like the translation by Babbitt 1962, 159: "For this reason we give instructions to anyone who comes down to the oracle here to think holy thoughts and to speak words of good omen. But the mass of mankind act ridiculously in their processions and festivals in that they proclaim at the outset the use of words of good omen, but later they both say and think the most unhallowed thoughts about the very gods".

¹¹ Not on the pediment of the temple, as some scholars write (see Ferrari 2010, at 71 and n. 2, p. 74), but inside the temple, in first position closest to the god, as Plutarch writes (ἐν προεδρίᾳ παρὰ τῷ θεῷ).

I was unexpectedly discovered by my sons in an animated discussion with some strangers, whom, since they purposed to leave Delphi immediately, it was not seemly to try to divert from the subject, nor was it seemly for me to ask to be excused from the discussion, for they were altogether eager to hear something about it.¹²

There is no problem in the manuscript tradition of the text, and the translation is excellent. Nevertheless, all subsequent editions have changed text and interpretation, unanimously accepting the correction *συμφιλοτιμουμένων*, suggested by Paton in 1893.

It has been accepted, of course, by Sieveking in the new Teubner edition, which is part of the complete edition by Paton-Pohlenz-Sieveking¹³, but it has also been accepted by Flacelière (in his *Belles Lettres* edition)¹⁴. It is supposed in Lozza's Italian translation¹⁵ and it appears again in Moreschini's edition with commentary in the *Corpus Plutarchi Moraliū*¹⁶.

The meaning they get from the text so corrected is this: "recentemente fui costretto dai miei figli, che insistevano insieme con alcuni stranieri etc." (Moreschini)¹⁷ or "ieri fui vinto dall'insistenza dei miei figli, che volevano compiacere ad alcuni stranieri in procinto di lasciare Delfi" (Lozza)¹⁸. Flacelière translated: "je ne pus échapper aux instances de mes fils jointes à celles de certains étrangers". The strangest instance is Vincenzo Cilento's¹⁹: he retained the manuscript text, *συμφιλοτιμούμενος*, and translated: "vi sono stato costretto dai miei figli, a gara con alcuni stranieri"²⁰.

Now, according to Moreschini's commentary (p. 24), Paton's correction "è necessaria per evitare la contorta spiegazione di Hirzel"²¹,

¹² Babbitt 1962 (*Plutarch's Moralia*, V), 201.

¹³ Paton - Pohlenz- Sieveking, Leipzig 1972.

¹⁴ Flacelière 1974, 4-5.

¹⁵ Vd. Del Corno - Lozza 1990.

¹⁶ Moreschini 1997.

¹⁷ English translation: "recently I was forced by my sons, who insisted, together with some strangers".

¹⁸ English translation: "yesterday I was prevailed upon by the insistence of my sons, who wanted to please some strangers who were about to leave Delphi".

¹⁹ V. Cilento 1962.

²⁰ English translation: "I was forced by my sons, in competition with some strangers".

²¹ Hirzel 1963 (1895), II, p. 202 and n. 1.

that is “it is needed to avoid the far-fetched explanation given by Hirzel”, namely that the news had been brought to Athens by Plutarch’s sons and therefore Sarapion could have been asking Plutarch to send him the “Pythian dialogues”.

I admit that Hirzel’s supposition is probably ill-founded and whimsical, but I do not think this should impel us to correct the text. Quite the opposite, I see strong reasons to reject the correction.

First of all, there is a strong linguistic reason. Actually the main verb ἐλήφθην means neither “fui costretto” (I was forced), nor “fui vinto, convinto” (I was prevailed upon, persuaded), but rather “I was caught, surprised, discovered, found” (ital.: fui colto, sorpreso, scoperto, trovato) – in the active form it means: to catch, take by surprise, find, come upon –, as anyone can gather from the common dictionaries, e.g. the classic LSJ or the *Greek-Italian dictionary* by F. Montanari, who refers to Hdt. 2.89.2, Antipho 1.3 etc., and then adds Soph., *Tr.* 808 (βουλευσασ’... καὶ δρῶσ’ ἐλήφθης, “you were surprised intriguing and committing such crimes”), and Lys. 13.66 (ἐλήφθη μοιχός, “he was caught in the very act of adultery”). Furthermore, I would like to point out that, in this meaning, the verb is usually accompanied by the predicative participle (in Acc. with the active form: to catch s.o. doing s.th.; in Nom. with the passive form: to be found doing s.th.). Clearly, Plutarch is simply surprised by his sons, who are arriving at Delphi unexpected.

In the second place, I would like to draw attention to the fact that, as made clear by what follows, Plutarch is not prevailed upon by his sons: actually he is persuaded by the insistences of the strangers, who – before leaving – want to hear some answer at any cost (πάντως ἀκοῦσαί τι προθυμουμένους).

As for the participle, I remind that the verb συμφιλοτιμέομαι means “to compete”, not “to please” (nor “to insist”). And I cannot imagine a competition ... in insistence between sons and strangers.

Rather, if we keep in mind that in Delphi Plutarch is carrying out his duties as Apollo’s priest, it is obvious that he feels himself obliged to give some kind of answer to a theologically important question posed by a group of pilgrims who are about to leave. I find it very likely that the priest Plutarch, when asked in great haste by “some strangers who were on the point of leaving”, should describe himself as quickly enumerating, with them, and almost in competition (συμφιλοτιμούμενος), the several explanations that had been proposed for the

“Delphic E”. In that moment he is taken by surprise by the arrival of his sons, whom he knows to be interested in the subject: so he does not like (is ashamed) to avoid the problem once more, and thus to disappoint the expectations of people who wish to hear him talk about it. Therefore, he has them seated all along the temple and starts a long discussion with all of them. So, when he reflects about the situation, both the subject and the place remind him of a similar discussion which was held by Ammonius and others, including himself, many years earlier, when he was young, “in the time when Nero came to Greece”.

Therefore I find Paton’s correction to be illogical and harmful: in my opinion it is obvious that Plutarch, as a professor, could avoid answering certain questions in his school; but – as Apollo’s priest at Delphi – he could not do so, both for good manners and because of his priestly duty. The mention of his sons’ sudden arrival needs not cause any astonishment on the grounds that “it is not supported by what is said later on” (as Hirzel thought). This detail explains why Plutarch, who has avoided this subject up to now, goes as far as writing about it at this time. His sons too have heard the recent Delphic discussion and perhaps have reported it to others. There is no more reason to avoid the subject: quite the opposite, it will be better to give friends, first of all Sarapion, an account of the “great” discussion about it held by Ammonius many years before. Actually it should not escape us that the discussion reported in this work is not the recent one, held by Plutarch with group of pilgrims and his sons, but the old discussion, held in 67 CE by Ammonius and others, including a Plutarch who was young and full of enthusiasm for mathematics. Surely the old Plutarch remembers it all with a little bit of nostalgia and, no doubt, with a smile on his face.

Naturally, the real meaning of the Delphic E has been a great problem at all times, and continues to be one up to now.