

TIMOXENA'S MESSENGER'S JOURNEY
(PLUT. CONS. UX. 608B)

The *Consolation to His Wife* is a short writing rapidly drafted by Plutarch in the space of a few days around the year 90 AD¹, in all likelihood at Tanagra, after learning about the death of his two-year-old daughter. A punctual analysis of the *incipit* allows to reconstruct the circumstances of the work's drafting and the movements of the two men playing the leading role, and also to gain some clarifications concerning the towns of Boeotia, communications in antiquity, and possibly Plutarch's activity, as well as his family.

The Greek text runs as follows (608B):

Πλούταρχος τῇ γυναικὶ εὖ πράττειν.

1. Ὅν ἔπεμψας ἀπαγγελοῦντα περὶ τῆς τοῦ παιδίου τελευτῆς, ἔοικε διημαρτηκέναι καθ' ὁδὸν εἰς Ἀθήνας πορευόμενος· ἐγὼ δὲ εἰς Τάναγρον ἔλθὼν ἐπυθόμην παρὰ τῆς θυγατριδῆς.

“Plutarch to his wife, best wishes. The messenger you sent to report the death of our little child seems to have missed me on the way as he travelled to Athens; but when I reached Tanagra I learned it from my granddaughter”.

This is De Lacy's and Einarson's 1959 translation (Loeb). It is an important one², in that it was widely followed and even prompted a few

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¹ As generally admitted: see Ziegler 1965, 94; Jones 1971, 136; Hani 1980, 177; Aguilar 1996, 309; Pomeroy 1999, 76. – The dating to the first decade of the second century AD “como poco” (*i.e.* “at the very least”), as proposed by Caballero 2005, 41, n. 2, is impossible in view of the fact that Timoxena was still young enough to have delivered a child two years before.

² Not least for having been a forerunner, so to speak: before, since the sixteenth century, many of the ‘historical’ translators omitted translating the last three words, which they deemed absurd. So J. Amyot (1572), M. Adriani (a sixteenth century translation, only published in 1819 by F. Ambrosoli), Ricard (1844); in more recent times B. Snell (1948) and M. Hadas (1957). The Latin translators, such as Xylander (1570) and Dübner (1841), rendered with “de nepte audivi”, playing on the double meaning of *neptis*, which (like the Italian “nipote”) conflates the meanings of “granddaughter”

fanciful hypotheses proposed in later years by some French and American scholars³: its *punctum dolens*, however, resides in the very last words: “my granddaughter”.

I have written on this passage in another paper⁴, and I think I have proved that θυγατριδῆ should be translated “granddaughter” (not “niece”, as still done by Russell 1993, taking up Volkman’s and Wilamowitz’s interpretation⁵, also followed by Ziegler⁶, as well as by Apelt, Pinnoy and others, nor “daughter-in-law”, as proposed by Babut 1981), but that it is wrong to add the possessive “my”, since Plutarch never had a daughter to make him a grandfather⁷. In my opinion the correct translation is “from *his* granddaughter”: what should be supplied is αὐτοῦ, not ἐμοῦ. But I shall come back to this; for the moment we shall leave this “granddaughter” aside to dwell shortly on Timoxena’s messenger and his journey.

The work begins with a brilliant prolepsis of the relative pronoun: Ὅν ἔπεμψας, “the man you have sent”. I shall now dwell on his journey (and then on Plutarch’s).

There’s no doubt that this man started from Chaeronea, where Timoxena was busy preparing the little girl’s funeral (her mother’s namesake: Timoxena too). The first piece of information we learn is contained in the verb: the man has been sent by the lady (ἔπεμψας) to convey the news (ἀπαγγελοῦντα) of the daughter’s death. “Ours” should naturally be supplied (more definitely, ἡμῶν, since the Greek – and Plutarch in particular – has little liking for the possessive adjective: it prefers the possessive genitive, usually postponed). It should also be

and “niece” (for the Italian translations see especially Impara - Manfredini 1991 and Pisani 2017; those by Vaghi 1993 and Chiossone 2010 are hardly of any use). In 1797 Wyttenbach, in a remark on Xylander’s Latin translation, suggested the noun should possibly be corrected to μητραδέλφῆς or the like.

³ It was followed by Warner 1971, 176; Hani 1980; R. Waterfield in Kidd 1992, 365; R. M. Aguilar 1996, 313 (“me enteré por mi nieta”); and S. Pomeroy 1999, 78. In particular, Hani 1980, Kidd 1992, 365, and Pomeroy 1999, 78, have drawn unwarranted conclusions (that Plutarch had had another, previously born – and nowhere mentioned – daughter; that Timoxena was his second wife; and so forth).

⁴ «Ploutarchos» n.s. 16, 2019, 33-44 (vd. *supra*, Scritto n° 19, p. 221 ss.).

⁵ Volkman 1869, 129; Wilamowitz 1889, 23 (= 1962, 648).

⁶ Ziegler 1965, 24 f. (= «RE» 1951, 651).

⁷ For the same reason I cannot approve the translation by Caballero 2005 “por nuestra nieta”.

noticed that $\mu\omicron\iota$ should be supplied with the future participle. The absence of the pronoun may be due to an intention of modesty on the part of Plutarch; but clearly the messenger has not been sent to convey the news indistinctly abroad. Timoxena sent him to convey the sad news to her husband, the little girl's father, who must of course be informed as soon as possible, not to say at once. Short of telephone, telegraph, or postal service of other kind, ancient communication could only be entrusted to a messenger, a trustworthy person especially chosen and appointed to fulfill the important and delicate task as rapidly as possible.

A first question springs to mind: where did Timoxena tell the messenger to catch up with her husband? We have no source other than these lines, which, however, suggest several meaningful details, if carefully analyzed. Clearly, the man went first to Tanagra, then moved on toward Athens; so, clearly, Timoxena bade him go to Tanagra first, then, in case Plutarch was not there, to Athens. Very probably, the lady is aware that Plutarch has an important engagement in Tanagra, but has no way to know whether he is already there. And she also knows that, before the Tanagra engagement, Plutarch has to be at Athens. So, the messenger was ordered to go to Tanagra first, since Plutarch might already be there.

I would like to add a detail that might appear pedantic, but is not devoid of some import, namely: at what address? Clearly, I am advancing further into the field of hypotheses, but I shall keep to the simplest and most natural ones. Plutarch is a teacher and a lecturer: if he has a lasting engagement at Tanagra – and it must be so, because, as we shall see, after receiving the sad news, he will not be able to leave immediately for Chaeronea, but will be forced to stay there for some days (during which he will write the *Consolatio*) –, then the most likely working hypothesis is that he is bound to give a series of lectures at Tanagra. (Possibly, he might also have some political engagement, but the former hypothesis appears more natural). I then think that the lady bade the messenger go to the 'school' or the place in Tanagra where Plutarch was to give his lectures, adding that, if he was not yet there, he was certainly still at Athens, no doubt at his father's⁸.

⁸ Autoboulos, Plutarch's father, owned a large house at Athens, where he once gave a dinner for, among others, young people who studied philosophy with P. (also leading

But let us leave Athens aside to talk about Tanagra. Tanagra is a small town north of Athens (about 70 kilometers away) and east of Thebes (about 25 kilometers away), on the road connecting the two cities⁹: it is in Boeotia, but close to the Attica borderline. It is then about 80 kilometers away from Chaeronea, more or less half way between Chaeronea and Athens, and the journey surely requires a few days¹⁰.

Clearly the messenger has been at Tanagra first, at the address indicated by Timoxena, and there he learned that Plutarch had not yet arrived: he is expected any day, but he is not there yet. Then, in my opinion, the man spent the night at his granddaughter's and naturally explained the situation to her: he told her about the child's death and her funeral, of Timoxena's subdued mourning, and other details, enabling Plutarch to write at ch. 4 (608F): "This also those who were present report – with amazement – that you have not even put on mourning... and that there was no sumptuous display... at the burial". The person who reported these news is of course the messenger: he relayed them to his granddaughter, and she in turn to Plutarch.

The following day the man did not remain at Tanagra to wait for Plutarch, but decided to move on to Athens to fulfill his task, in the conviction that, if Plutarch had left Athens for Tanagra that very day, they would certainly meet along the way (καθ' ὁδόν), since they would be proceeding on the same road in opposite directions. Unfortunately,

Conversations 7, 8, and 9 of book 3). Timon too, Plutarch's brother, once had there a great number of guests (*QC* 1.2).

⁹ See Martin (- Phillips) 1978, 394 n. 2. On the other hand Impara - Manfredini 1991, 79 and Pomeroy 1999, 78 (possibly taking up a remark by Babut, «RPh» 55, 1981, 323-324 on Hani's commentary) believe that Tanagra "was not on the road between Athens and Thebes at all". This, however, is a blatant geographical mistake, revealing a defective knowledge of Greece. The 'natural' road to Athens goes down from Thebes to the east, following the Asopus river valley to Tanagra, then turns to the south, passing the Boeotia-Attica borderline at the Parnes pass, reaching Athens by way of Acharnes (to this day Ὀδὸς Ἀχαρνῶν). Someone may object that it is also possible to go south from Thebes, passing through Plataea and reaching Athens via Eleusis: but it is a longer way and not recommended to this day by Google Maps and the road atlases.

¹⁰ See Martin (- Phillips) 1978, 394: "Tanagra is approximately fifty miles, a journey of one to two days, from Chaeronea" (and he adds in a note: "Tanagra is located on the road running from Chaeronea to Athens, roughly midway between the two cities").

though, something must have gone wrong, since – as the text states – the man along the way *ἔοικε διημαρτηκέναι* (“seems to have missed me” or “us”).

Let's pause for a while. The text does not mean “he went the wrong way”, as translated by some, since the verb usually governs a genitive, and *καθ' ὁδόν* is an idiom referring to place (and to time too in a way), which means “along the way” or “by the road”, as confirmed by Hdt. 1.111.¹¹ As a consequence, “me” (*i.e.* *ἐμοῦ*) must once more be supplied with the verb, as suggested by Maria Cannatà Fera in 1991, 318, n. 20 (or perhaps *ἡμῶν*, as I prefer to believe, also in consideration of the fact that probably Plutarch did not travel alone). Anyway, to sum up, the man missed me or us.

How could this happen? Let's try to imagine the scene. The man was traveling toward Athens, maybe on horseback, maybe on foot (since the text says *πορευόμενος*, a verb often used in the sense of “walking”). Plutarch, on the other hand, was traveling toward Tanagra (surely not on foot), and in my opinion he was not alone: he must have had at least some servants or perhaps some assistants with him. Along the way they stopped at a rest area (or even at a simple farmhouse) for a short repose (to go to the restroom, to water the horses, to have a bite, or for some other reason); at that moment Timoxena's messenger passed rapidly on his way and went on to Athens without noticing Plutarch and his companions. So he missed them (*ἔοικε διημαρτηκέναι*), and Plutarch went on his way with no inkling of this, finally arriving at Tanagra to the ‘school’ where he was to give a cycle of lectures. There, however, he learned the sad news. We should notice the particle *δέ*: the messenger missed him, *but* Plutarch learned the news all the same. He learned about it upon his arrival, but – as the text says – from the messenger's granddaughter, not by somebody else: so, when Plutarch reaches the ‘school’, someone warns him he should visit her, or, more probably, fetches her to the ‘school’; so the philosopher learns the news from her.

Some attention should be devoted to the verb, *ἐπυθόμην παρὰ τῆς θυγατρὶδῆς*. The verb means “to learn”, not merely “to hear”. It is a “learning” that implies “inquiring”; in particular, when accompanied by

¹¹ As rightly remarked by Pinnoy 1970, 80, who refers to the parallel at Hdt. 1.111. If I understand correctly, this is also the interpretation of Koster 1954, 87 and Aguilar 1996, 313.

παρά + genitive, it means “acquire information” from someone through questions and answers (compare, e.g., Plat. *Gorg.* 455e, Xen. *Cyr.* 1.6.23, etc.). I particularly lay stress on this since Sarah Pomeroy (1999, 78) remarks: “The granddaughter would have been very young indeed. Not waiting for her mother to give the news to Plutarch, she would have blurted it out”. Ms. Pomeroy maintains that this granddaughter might be Plutarch’s; since he is little over forty, his granddaughter has forcedly to be a child. This way, she is forced to invent a mother that is the source of information, altering the sense of the passage. At the same time, however, her ‘invention’ results in a confirmation that the informer is certainly an adult, as rightly remarked by Babut (1981, 59).

This conclusion brings us back to the heart of the main question raised by this passage. This θυγατριδῆ (and not *thygattris*, as Pomeroy writes¹²) is a grown-up woman, and therefore cannot be Plutarch’s granddaughter, if only for a question of age. Consequently, neither ἡμῶν nor ἐμοῦ can be supplied at the end, but only αὐτοῦ. Probably Plutarch takes it for granted that it’s clear whose granddaughter he’s talking about, because he is speaking about the messenger from the beginning, in the two preceding lines, and so it is hardly necessary to specify the reference. Both the writer and the addressee know full well they have no granddaughter (a daughter’s daughter), and no mistake is possible. Besides, the very geographical indication (Tanagra) is an indirect piece of information, as I believe no relative of Plutarch’s is a resident of that city.

At Tanagra our journey comes to an end: Plutarch, after learning the sad news, was not able to leave immediately for Chaeronea because of his engagement, but he wrote there, in a few days¹³, the eleven chapters of the *Consolatio*, which he may have sent to his wife (naturally through a trustworthy messenger) or directly handed to her when he finally was

¹² Possibly she derived this mistake from the German translation of Apelt 1926, II 114. Please, note that θυγατριδῆ is a *contracted* substantivized adjective: cp. the masculine θυγατριδοῦς (θυγατριδέος in Hdt. 5.67.4, 69.1, etc.). So it must be written with circumflex accent: on the contrary, Hani 1980, 176-177 writes it repeatedly with acute accent.

¹³ On the hastiness of the work’s composition (and the scant probabilities that it was subsequently revised) see Ziegler 1965, 191 f.; Cannatà Fera 1991, 318 f.; Aguilar 1996, 310; Roskam 2013, 385 f.

able to join her¹⁴. To Tanagra, I believe, went back Timoxena's messenger, as soon as he found out that Plutarch had moved from Athens to Tanagra – also in view of the fact that, as I believe, he may have been a resident of that town and may have been chosen by Timoxena for this very reason.

Abstract. The *Consolation to His Wife* is a short writing rapidly drafted by Plutarch in the space of a few days around the year 90 AD, in all likelihood at Tanagra, after learning about the death of his two-year-old daughter. From a punctual analysis of the *incipit* we gather that Timoxena's messenger, whom she had sent to convey the news to her husband, travelled first from Chaeronea to Tanagra, then from Tanagra to Athens, while Plutarch was going from Athens to Tanagra. But, for some hitch, the two men did not meet on the way: so the philosopher learned of the bad news only when he arrived at Tanagra, and was informed by another person, namely the messenger's granddaughter. Plutarch, however, was not able to leave immediately for Chaeronea, clearly because of an engagement that held him at Tanagra for a few days (possibly a series of lectures). There, during those days, he wrote the *Cons. ux.*, that he may have sent to his wife by a messenger (or maybe he delivered it in person to her as soon as he could get home). And there, during those days – I suppose again – did Timoxena's messenger finally catch up with him.

Keywords: Plutarch, *Consolatio uxoris*, Plutarch's family, granddaughter, Tanagra, Chaeronea, journeys.

¹⁴ The fact that the *Consolatio* seems to lack a final revision makes me lean toward this hypothesis: in chapters 10 and 11 (aside from the manuscripts' *lacunae*) the arguments seem to be summarily sketched rather than completely developed.

Sunto. La *Consolazione alla moglie* è un breve scritto che Plutarco stese nel giro di pochi giorni, intorno all'anno 90 d.C., molto probabilmente a Tanagra, quando seppe della morte della loro figlioletta di appena due anni. Una paziente analisi puntuale del suo inizio consente di capire che il messo inviato da Timossena per portargli la notizia andò prima da Cheronea a Tanagra e poi da Tanagra ad Atene, mentre Plutarco tornava da Atene a Tanagra. Per un qualche disguido però i due non si incontrarono per la strada: così Plutarco apprese la notizia solo quando arrivò a Tanagra, informato da altri, e precisamente dalla nipote del messaggero. Ma Plutarco non poté partire subito per Cheronea, evidentemente perché aveva un lungo impegno a Tanagra, che lo trattenne lì per diversi giorni. In quei giorni scrisse la *Consolazione*, che forse inviò alla moglie (o forse gliela portò di persona appena poté); e in quei giorni, a Tanagra, forse fu raggiunto finalmente dal messo di Timossena.

Parole-chiave: Plutarco, *Consolatio uxoris*, famiglia di Plutarco, nipote, Tanagra, Cheronea, viaggi.