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Greeks and the Roman past in the Second Sophistic: The case of Plutarch¹

Abstract: Since Ewen Bowie’s masterly study, Greeks and their past have been explored again and again, yet one feels that Greek attitudes to the Romans have more often than not received serious attention only as far as their relationship to their contemporary Romans was concerned, and their stance towards Roman history has been neglected. Plutarch has not entirely escaped this approach. Yet even after composing the Lives of the Caesars Plutarch all but ignored imperial history: compared to the multitude of examples from the history of the Republic he quotes hardly a handful from the Empire. Similarly, in his discussion of the various monuments of the city of Rome he ignores the transformation of the city by Augustus and the later monuments and discusses almost exclusively republican ones, and most notably he chooses for his Parallel Lives solely republican personages. Especially this last point is of cardinal importance for understanding Plutarch’s view of Roman history, but it has been all but neglected in scholarship. It appears that Plutarch studiously avoided contemporary references or historical allusions that may have been politically relevant. Consequently it is suggested that Plutarch’s cautious approach to contemporary politics may have influenced his avoidance of potentially dangerous subjects.

Ever since Ewen Bowie’s trailblazing study, the topic of Greeks and their past in the Second Sophistic has been explored again and again. Yet one feels that Greek attitudes to the Romans under the Empire have more often than not received serious attention only on the contemporary plane, exploring the Greek position towards contemporary Roman rule. Plutarch has not entirely escaped this approach. Of course his situation as an upper-class Greek and a Roman citizen of the Empire is of great interest, and indeed much effort has been devoted to determining his exact standpoint vis-à-vis Roman rule. Yet considering his long and serious engagement with Roman history and antiquities a more general appraisal of his attitude to the Roman past is in order, especially since the studies devoted to it dealt mostly with specific problems. In particular, his periodisation of Roman history and his choices, parallelising, as we shall see, to some extent those of the Second Sophistic towards Greek history, are ripe for reconsideration. It has been briefly argued that he was privileging, in the Parallel Lives, republican heroes over

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imperial personages\(^2\) and similarly he was favouring republican monuments in Rome over more recent ones. Let me repeat: while imperial Greek authors’, including Plutarch’s, dealing only with a specific, ‘classical’, period of Greek history has been the subject of study and controversy, his choice of only republican heroes for his Parallel Lives has been taken as self-evident. In the present study I intend to explore Plutarch’s attitude to the Roman past with a view to emphasising the parallels between it and Greek attitudes to the Greek past.

Certainly the assertion that Plutarch ‘In the Parallel Lives ... reconceived all Greek and Roman history and made it a continuous text on the possibilities and dangers of leadership\(^3\) ignores the limits Plutarch set himself. Nor can it be maintained that his ‘thoughts on political life [were] in as timeless a manner as possible’.

Of course the discourse on memory, and on collective memory, is nowadays much in vogue, and I do not deny the usefulness of this approach. However, to maintain that Plutarch’s personal and his town’s collective memory of Roman history also centred around the events of the late Republic—the Mithridatic wars and especially the battle of Chaeronea, the war with Antony and its culmination at Actium, as argued in a recent book,\(^5\) is of course begging the question—it is the battle of Chaeronea and the times of Antony and Actium that receive particular attention in Plutarch’s works, a fact that only instructs us about Plutarch’s choices in his writings, not about the collective memory of his townsmen. However, it is the question of how much imperial history Plutarch knew and whether for some reason there was much more of it than can be learned from his works that we must ask. Indeed, the following quotation from a prominent scholar will reveal the conflict between what we assume and what we know for certain: ‘... il De fortuna Romanorum rivela che Plutarco aveva una sorprendente conoscenza sia di Roma repubblicana che della storia imperiale. In questo lavoro Plutarco passa in rassegna le grandi figure del periodo regio e repubblicano, da Romolo ad Augusto’.\(^6\) It is of course the contrast between the first sentence on republican Rome and imperial history and the specification in the next of the regnal and republican period from Romulus to Augustus to which I wish to draw attention.

To return to my general considerations, it has been observed\(^7\) that the Second Sophistic privileged Greek history from the Persian wars up to the death of Alexander the Great with special emphasis on the history of Athens and Sparta. Plutarch acceded to that attitude, though at a late stage in the composition of the Parallel Lives, when expanding the series he added a number of Hellenistic biographies.\(^8\) It is instructive to

\(^2\) Geiger (2002) and (2005). Leeck (2010) 64, insists that Plutarch chose his heroes from all important periods of Roman history, but contradicts himself at 69.

\(^3\) Stadter (2002a) 7.

\(^4\) Ibid. 17, Stadter reviewing his own and Pelling’s contribution in the volume.


\(^7\) See, e.g., Hamilton (1969) xxii.

\(^8\) Geiger (1981).
compare with Plutarch his close contemporary Dio Chrysostom, who shared with him a
common background and education. Dio Chrysostom’s extant writings, amounting
approximately to one fifth or so to Plutarch’s, contain not one single reference to Plutarch’s
republican heroes. By the way, the Plutarchan heroes Numa and Romulus do get men-
tions and so do the emperors Augustus and Tiberius, as well as of course Nero (with Oc-
tavia and Poppaea Sabina), Vespasian, Domitian, Nerva, and Trajan, though, interesting-
ly, not Caligula and Claudius. Just for a wider view of the similarities between the two
authors, all of Plutarch’s classical Greek heroes, bar Dio of Syracuse, are referred to by
Dio Chrysostom, while of the later Hellenistic additions only Demetrius Poliorcetes ap-
pears in his writings. To quote an authority on Dio Chrysostom: ‘Admittedly, none of
the surviving orations commemorate specific events in the ancient history of Greece,
but they show a rich sprinkling of references to Pericles, Epaminondas, Plataea, Leuctra,
and Thermopylae—in short, the heritage of memories that Greeks cultivated with growing
interest under the Empire—and which marked them out distinctly from the Gauls
and Britons, subjects of the same monarch’.

The similarity between the attitudes of these two authors to the heroes of Greek
history enhances the resemblance of their views on Roman history. A number of
other important Greek imperial authors conform to the pattern: ‘... Aristides fails
to mention Roman history and Roman cultural attainments ... Aristides’ lack of inter-
est in Rome as a city ... his total lack of interest in Roman history, including even the
saintly Numa (who pops up in Dio of Prusa), is noteworthy’. And again: ‘Although
[Lucian] must have known Latin, he nowhere mentions Roman cultural activities
(and has very little interest in Roman history)’.

Yet it is Plutarch’s approach to the history of the Roman Empire, not necessarily
the contemporary one, that is my chosen theme in this contribution. As we all re-
call, he authored, prior to the Parallel Lives, a series of imperial biographies
from Augustus to Vitellius, of which the Lives of Galba and Otho are extant. Whatever
induced him to undertake that project is not known nor can the two surviving Lives
be even regarded as a great literary success, compared to the latter series. Neverthe-
less it is legitimate to compare the two series from certain points of view. The chief
one that interests me here are the spin-offs of these biographies in the non-biograph-
ical works of Plutarch, commonly labelled the Moralia.

In the argument concerning the fact that Plutarch ignored likely subjects from the
imperial period for his Parallel Lives, Agrippa, Germanicus and Virginius Rufus have
been put forward as possible examples for such biographies. Few would argue with

9 Mummius is mentioned for his desecration of Greek statues in Or. 37/42, in all probability by Favorinus.
10 Claudius is probably alluded to in Or. 41.6.
13 Swain (1996) 319, n. 75 cont. on 320: ‘History: note the confusion of Scipio the Elder, who defeated
Hannibal, with Scipio the Younger, who destroyed Carthage, at Dialogues of the Dead 25.7’.
the proposition that Marcus Agrippa, Augustus’ right-hand man, friend, admiral, son-in-law and father of his prospective heirs, or Germanicus, a youthful hero with a tragic end, and indeed Verginius Rufus, a victorious general who insisted on legitimacy in the accession to the imperial throne and later withdrew to private life, would have made most appropriate subjects for Plutarchan *Lives*. Nor would the biographer, with his wide reading in Greek history, despair of finding suitable parallels. Yet it is not only that their biographies were never written, these personages have been studiously avoided: Agrippa and Verginius Rufus are never mentioned in the entire corpus of the *Moralia*—the latter gets of course his due in the *Lives of Galba and Otho*—while Germanicus is mentioned twice with the anecdotal reference that he hated the sight and the sound of the cock (*On Envy and Hate* 537A; frg. 215k). This is all. Now obviously Agrippa could not have been absent from the biography of Augustus, though he is not mentioned in the relatively copious fragments of that *Life*, nor is Germanicus’ virtual absence from the *Moralia* proof of his non-appearance in the lost *Life of Tiberius*. From what Plutarch says of Verginius Rufus in the *Galba* and the *Otho* it appears that he should have regarded him as eminently suitable for the subject of a biography. Needless to say, these are typical examples that can easily be multiplied. We must get used to the idea that, despite the series of imperial biographies, Plutarch’s interest in Roman history, at least as expressed in his works, was restricted to the era of the kings and the Republic, with the Augustan age as a period of transition. By the way, it seems to me quite instructive that the only examples from Roman history in the two surviving imperial *Lives* are all republican.¹

A similar picture can be seen when observing Plutarch’s concern with Roman monuments. Obviously any sightseer would be astounded by the multitude and variety of the sights in the capital, including our small-town visitor, despite being familiar with Athens and having visited Alexandria. What a scholarly and investigative Plutarch could learn in Rome we may realise from the exceptional case of his studying the temple of Iuppiter Capitolinus and its history in the *Life of Publicola* (13–15): here we get a complete history of the temple from before its consecration, then its destruction by fire, rebuilding by Sulla, destruction again under Vitellius, rebuilding by Vespasian, burning down again and rebuilding by Domitian, with the remark of having seen the columns of this last temple in Athens, and then again in Rome, where they have been made too slender. This is as learned and as inquisitive a tourist as one may wish, even with a dash of architectural criticism—one imagines that learning the history of the shrine, probably making use of his Roman acquaintances or the local guides,¹⁶ followed on having seen the columns first at Athens, and then in Rome. However, in this instance we also learn that temples may have been, besides their obvious functions, also major touristic sites. Almost in the same breath we are told about Domitian’s palace, basilica, bath, and concubines’ quarters—a re-


¹⁶ For guides in general see Jones (2001).
ference all the more significant because of the absence of such details elsewhere. In the same Life the author also shows acquaintance with the shrines and colonnades of the Tiber isle and the Vica Pota.

This, however, is an exceptional case. For the rest, Plutarch restricts himself to republican and royal monuments, as in the two instances where he enumerates twice the various shrines to Fortuna dedicated by king Servius Tullius, in Roman Questions 74.281D–E and again in The Fortune of the Romans (322F–323A). Impressive as Plutarch’s learning is, these shrines of Servius Tullius certainly did not exhaust Plutarch’s acquaintance with temples of Fortuna. Thus, at Mar. 26.3 he mentions the Aedes Fortunae Huic Diei, dedicated after the battle of Vercelli by Q. Lutatius Catulus. Nowhere do we find descriptions of imperial monuments similar to those in the above mentioned passages: indeed, although such descriptions may have turned up in the lost Life of Augustus, where they may have been competing with the description of Pericles’ building projects, there is no trace in Plutarch’s extant writings of the city’s transformation from brick into marble by that emperor. Though it has been conjectured that Plutarch may have realised the possibility of totally separating republican heroes from later imperial ones in the Forum of Augustus, where the marble statues erected by Augustus were clearly distinguished from the later additions in bronze, this conjecture should be regarded with due caution since in our surviving evidence the Forum of Augustus with the Temple of Mars Ultor are ignored together with the rest of the Augustan monuments. Yet I do not believe that anybody will argue that it was possible for a visitor, even one less curious and well-informed than Plutarch, not to notice the Forum of Augustus, the Ara Pacis, the Mausoleum of Augustus, his Sundial or Agrippa’s Pantheon, and the prominence of these Augustan building projects in the cityscape of Rome. Of course, the interest in monuments was closely connected to the interest in history. Tourists being guided through Victor Hugo’s Paris or Joyce’s Dublin will hardly overlook the Eiffel Tower or the Spire of Dublin, though they may disregard them in their description of their tour.

Now it is not advisable to give free rein to historical or literary parallels. Regarding the Greeks’ preoccupation with their past in the Second Sophistic, and more precisely with their classical past, the controversy whether this was an outlet for the frustrations of the present or just a frame of literary reference or a channel of communication has by now acquired the status of a classic, including the reply: ‘why this literary reference?’, not denying the latter solution as a possible additional one. As for the Roman past, obviously there existed for the Greeks no canon of literature to

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17 See Scheid (2012a), especially 210 on Plutarch’s discussing only royal and republican monuments, and disregarding even such monuments as the imperial fora and the buildings in the Campus Martius; Scheid (2012b) is a somewhat simplified version.
18 Geiger (2008), see ‘bronze vs. marble’ in the Index.
follow, no ‘classics’ to adhere to. But one would be ill-advised totally to disregard the political realities and the possible parallels one might draw between political situations, even in an era *ubi sentire quae velis et quae sentias dicere licet* (Tac. *Hist.* 1.1). Conceivably the small-town Greek intellectual may have been less sure about the limits of the permissible than his contemporary, the senatorial historian. Just to stick to the previous examples, the *Lives* of a man, without whom the first *princeps* would have hardly achieved what he did, of a popular prince eliminated by poison, or even of a man happily refusing the imperial throne would have been perhaps too close to the bone. But republican history was ancient history. There is no need to repeat what has been above alluded to, that Plutarch was at liberty to choose republican heroes and to avoid figures from the Empire for subjects of the biographies, whether members of the imperial family or otherwise, but I shall underscore this thesis with the evidence from the *Moralia*. Not only do Plutarch’s republican heroes pop up in a variety of places, often in parallel accounts to the *Lives* but also a very wide variety of other republican persons, no doubt spin-offs of Plutarch’s wide reading in republican history, make their appearance. On the contrary, the Empire is very poorly served indeed. Even the emperors, whose *Lives* had been written, appear rarely, Augustus being just a partial exception: not only are Galba, Otho and Vitellius never referred to in the *Moralia*, there is also no reference ever to Claudius, and Caligula is mentioned only twice. All the other appearances of politically important personages of imperial times in these voluminous and variegated writings one may count on the fingers of one hand, and even these rare mentions are almost never in a politically significant context. Thus, the *Lives of the Caesars*, composed earlier than the *Parallel Lives*, left no traces to speak of in the assorted writings of the *Moralia*, a remarkable contrast with the numerous repetitions of stories and anecdotes from the *Parallel Lives* in these essays. I do not believe that we should put down this difference in its entirety to the inferior literary quality of the *Caesars*, and certainly not to a dearth of material in them. Indeed, I find myself in wide-ranging agreement with Rebecca Preston, who maintained that ‘Plutarch studiously avoids any contemporary relevance’ and that ‘... all references there to Roman politics concern republican practices and institutions’, and again, when she says that ‘There is no mention of contemporary political realities’.

In trying to discover the reasons for this peculiarity of Plutarch’s works we are somewhat handicapped by the largely insoluble problems of the chronology of these texts. Yet the consensus, according to which probably very few works were written before the *Caesars*, even on a relatively late dating of this work to the reign of Nerva, will eliminate the explanation that Plutarch disregarded imperial persons because he was not yet familiar with imperial history. At any rate, the chrono-

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21 It has been suggested to me that Greeks, including Plutarch, may not have been unaware of such canons existing, if virtually, in the minds of some of their Roman friends.


23 Jones (1966) is still the best guide for Plutarch’s chronology.
logy of Plutarch’s works dealing with Roman history may offer some insights. Whichever exact date we assign to the *Lives of the Caesars*, nobody has ever doubted that they are prior to the *Parallel Lives*; another work, the *Roman Questions*, has been dated after 105 CE, that is, it postdates some of the *Parallel Lives* or was composed *pari passu* with some others. One may also mention in this context the apparently late date of composition of the two most political essays, the *Political Precepts* and the *Old Men in Public Affairs*. I discount for the time being the partially extant *On the Fortune of the Romans*, for which in my view no dating is available, since I do not subscribe to the automatic relegation of the so-called rhetorical works to Plutarch’s youth. In parentheses I may add that this view dates to the times of the presumed superiority of age and is totally opposed to the present day worship of youth, to which unfortunately I cannot subscribe, even if for only personal reasons. The possibility that Plutarch ignores persons of imperial times in the *Moralia* out of lack of information should be rejected.

To resume, Plutarch not only ignored imperial personages for a feasible inclusion in the *Parallel Lives*, even when he was expanding the series, but he also almost totally, and, it seems, deliberately avoided mentioning such men in his *Moralia*. Now I have alluded to the fact that for the limits of the Greek attitude to the past a political versus a literary solution has been put forward—and I draw attention to the curiosity that the initial proponent of the political solution is a scholar best defined as an authority on the literary and intellectual life of the Empire, while the literary solution was first and most vigorously championed by an historian. As I have maintained, for the Greeks, including Plutarch, no literary canon relevant to Roman history was in existence. It is for the lack of a different solution that I am putting forward Plutarch’s political cautiousness—perhaps not unconnected with the possible reactions to his *Lives of the Caesars*, of which we regrettably know nothing—for his avoidance of persons of the time of the Empire both as subjects for his *Parallel Lives* and for mentioning in passing or as *exempla* in the *Moralia*. Admittedly, there is nothing in the surviving *Galba* and *Otho* that will support such a conclusion, yet I would not totally disregard the possibility that it may have been the reactions to the *Lives of the Caesars* that caused Plutarch to be so sparing with later references to that work. Of course he may have been overcautious—one bitten twice shy. Add to this the above-mentioned almost total avoidance of references to imperial persons in general or of their treatment as *exempla*. The question remains open to future investigation.