Divisions in Greek culture: Cultural topoi in Plutarch’s biographical practice

Abstract: Greek culture plays an important role in the evaluation of passions in Plutarch’s Lives, but at a number of places Plutarch puts more weight not on Greek character generally but on local character: in interaction or diversity (space) and between past and present (time). Such conceptions can be best explained as cultural topoi, which Plutarch uses like rhetorical topoi, established in Plutarch’s era of the so-called Second Sophistic. Local cultural topoi, such as Spartan simplicity and honesty or Athenian philanthropy and changeability, are integrated into the themes and the lesson of the Lives and receive much attention in biographical practice as means of revealing the character of the heroes. Their introduction allows Plutarch to include an evaluation, which illustrates his biographical techniques, while simultaneously holding up an image of a collective identity, which is familiar to his contemporaries. The more the reader can identify the collective features, the more he will be inclined to understand the similarities or differences of the individuals’ characters, such as those of Cimon, Lysander, Callicratidas, Alcibiades or Agis and Cleomenes.

In Plutarch’s Political Precepts 799C the character of the Athenians, Carthaginians, Thebans and Spartans becomes canonically opposed to each other.¹ The Athenians are easily moved to anger, but they are least inclined to be angry with those who make fun of them. The Carthaginians are bitter and most savage when enraged. The Thebans would not have refrained from reading the letters of the enemies as did the Athenians, and the Spartans would not have endured the insolence of the Athenian orator Stratocles, who cheated the Athenians in making sacrifices on the grounds that they had won a victory.

Such stereotypical conceptions can be best explained as cultural topoi, repeated points which Plutarch uses like rhetorical topoi, established in Plutarch’s era of the so-called Second Sophistic. I wish in this chapter to focus on Plutarch’s attitudes to local characteristics and investigate how such topoi figure in Plutarch’s biographical methods: as collective attitudes (which have an application beyond individual attitudes and are familiar to Plutarch’s audience) and as personal attributes which are in harmony or in contradiction to these communal attitudes, and thus serve as moral indicators.


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Cimon was not always in control of his passions. In his earlier years he had the reputation of being dissolute and bibulous (Cim. 4.4: ἀτακτός καὶ πολυπότης). The reader might expect here an explanation for Cimon’s inability or reluctance to control these passions, based on his character. However, Plutarch’s treatment integrates into the structure of the biography a fragment by Stesimbrotus:

Στησιμβρότος δ’ ὁ Θάσιος περὶ τὸν αὐτὸν ὁμοῦ τι χρόνον τῷ Κίμωνι γεγονός, φησιν αὐτὸν σφετερικὴν οὖτ’ ἄλλο τι μάθημα τῶν ἐλευθερίων καὶ τοὺς Ἑλλήναν ἐπιχωριαζόντων ἐκδιδασχηθῆναι, δεινότητος τε καὶ στωμαλίας Ἀττικῆς ὄλως ἀπηλλάχθαι, καὶ τῷ τρόπῳ πολὺ τὸ γενναῖον καὶ ἄληθὲς ἐνυπάρχειν, καὶ μᾶλλον εἶναι Πελοποννήσιον τῷ σχῆμα τῆς ψυχῆς τοῦ ἀνδρός, φαινον, ἀκομψον, τὰ μέγίστ’ ἀγαθόν, κατὰ τὸν Εὐρυπίδειον Ἡρακλέας ταῦτα γὰρ ἔστι τοῖς ύπὸ τοῦ Στησιμβρότου γεγραμμένοις ἐπειπεῖν.

And Stesimbrotus the Thasian, who was of about Cimon’s time, says that he acquired no literary education, nor any other liberal and distinctively Hellenic accomplishment; that he lacked entirely the Attic cleverness and fluency of speech; that in his outward bearing there was much nobility and truthfulness; that the fashion of the man’s spirit was rather Peloponnesian, ‘plain, unadorned, in a great crisis brave and true’, as Euripides says of Heracles, a citation which we may add to what Stesimbrotus wrote (Cim. 4.5 = FGrH 107 F4, transl. B. Perrin, Loeb).

The opening sentences from the Stesimbrotus citation seem to suggest that the lack of Greek education was responsible for the deficits of Cimon. But it is curious that the quotation attributes Cimon’s flaws of character to local culture and distinguishes Attic and Peloponnesian behaviour: Cimon was an Athenian, but he had a Peloponnesian spirit (Πελοποννήσιον τὸ σχῆμα τῆς ψυχῆς). More surprising is that Plutarch adds his own words to the quotation of Stesimbrotus, so we don’t know exactly where the end of Stesimbrotus’ words and the beginning of Plutarch’s own words lie. Cimon entirely lacked Attic deinotēs, which is the technical term used for cleverness, especially in speech, can be explained with stōmylia, an ambiguous term: fluency of speech, but also wordiness. So if the lack of Attic education entails a lack of Attic fluency of speech, this lack also testifies to Cimon’s nobility and truthfulness. Plutarch justifies this attitude by suggesting that Cimon’s spirit was rather Peloponnesian, as is shown by his reference to the Dorian hero Heracles. Jacoby sees here carelessness and awkwardness on the part of Plutarch, but the text after stōmylia and the prolonged stress on the Peloponnesian spirit, which are very likely Plutarch’s own invention, offer a brief summary of Cimon’s qualities, culminating in a diffe-
rence between Athenian and Peloponnesian attitudes. This local *cultural topos* helps to bring out Cimon’s ethical stance.

Not only does Plutarch make a subjective comment on Cimon, he also notes a basic link between the gentleness (πραότης) and the artlessness (ἀφέλεια) of his nature (5.5). This is especially striking considering his recurrent emphasis on two basic elements of Greek culture in the *Lives*, praoṭês and education,⁴ but on this occasion Plutarch has nothing to say about education: the simple Peloponnesian nature of Cimon is entirely in accord with his political virtues (5.1). That is why in this *Life* Plutarch does not exploit the opportunity to build a contrast between Cimon as an aristocratic individual and the Athenian polis. His larger theme is that the pre-eminently virtuous disposition of his hero can be explained in ethical, not in political terms. Plutarch remarks that the generosity of Cimon surpassed even the hospitality and philanthropy of the Athenians of old (τὴν παλαιὰν τῶν Ἀθηναίων φιλοξενίαν καὶ φιλανθρωπίαν, 10.6). This supplement ‘of old’ indicates either that the Athenians in the time of Plutarch do not excel in generosity any more or, as is more likely, that this is an idealised *cultural topos* of the past, which continues to prevail among contemporaries of Plutarch.⁵ This image of the Athenians, based on a famous statement of Pericles in *Thucydides* (2.40.4), became a topos in the orators of the 4th century BCE.⁶ Plutarch similarly mentions it in the *Pelopidas* (6.5; cf. *Demetr.* 22.1). Plutarch’s explanation of Cimon’s generosity is not pragmatic and political, but ethical:⁷

{oǐ de ταῦτα κολακείαν ὅχλου καὶ δημαγωγιάν εἶναι διαβάλλοντες ύπὸ τῆς ἄλλης ἐξηλέγχοντο τοῦ ἄνδρος προαρέσεως, ἀριστοκρατικῆς καὶ Λακωνικῆς οὐσίας, ... λημμάτων δὲ δημοσίων τοὺς ἄλλους πλὴν Ἀριστείδου καὶ Ἐφιάλτου πάντας ἄνασσαμέλειν όρον, αὐτὸν ἀδέκαστον καὶ ἄθικτον ἐν τῇ πολιτείᾳ δωροδοκίας καὶ πάντα προίκα καὶ καθαρῶς πράττοντα καὶ λέγοντα διὰ τέλους παρέσχε.

Those who slanderously said that this was flattery of the rabble and demagogic art in him, were refuted by the man’s political policy, which was aristocratic and Laconian ... and though he saw all the rest except Aristides and Ephialtes filling their purses with gains from their public services, he remained unbought and unapproached by bribes, devoting all his powers to the state, without recompense and in all purity, through to the end (*Cim.* 10.8, transl. B. Perrin, Loeb).

The interweaving of the topics of generosity and Laconian spirit is coherent, and must be read in the context of the consistent disinterestedness of Cimon. And this Laconian spirit is at work in *Cim.* 14.4, too: according to Plutarch, when Cimon was accused of having been bribed, he said before his judges that he was no prox-

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⁴ See *Cor.* 1.5; 15.4; *Brut.* 1.3; *Num.* 3.7; *Them.* 2.7.
⁵ Cf. *De soll. an.* 970A; *Arist.* 277; Becchi (2009) 268f.
⁷ For a political interpretation of Cimon’s generosity see *Arist. Athen. Pol.* 27.3; *Theop. FGrH* 115 F89; Stein-Hölkeskamp (1999) 145–164, esp. 152–155.
enus of rich Ionians and Thessalians, but rather of Lacedaemonians, whose temperate simplicity he lovingly imitated (Δακεδαμονίων ... εὐτέλειαν καὶ σωφροσύνην). No argument is needed to interpret the cultural topos of these passages, which make an obvious point. Whatever actually happened, Plutarch was impressed by the honesty of Cimon and, by contrasting his Laconian features to those of other people, he amplifies this impression.

II

The cultural topoi of Cimon re-appear in the Life of Lysander, but Plutarch is now concerned to analyse not a coherent, unchanging hero, but, as Stadter rightly points out, a paradoxical paradigm. Let us first consider Plutarch’s evaluation of Lysander’s statue at Delphi at the beginning of the Life (1.1–3). In classical literature the terms κομᾶν (‘to let the hair grow long’) and κομῆτης (‘long-haired’) are recognisably Spartan features and have political connotations: they were favourite habits of aristocrats, and Athenian laconizers were satirized in Aristophanes’ comedies. When Plutarch says ‘after the ancient custom’ (ἔθει τῷ παλαιῷ), he underscores a difference in time and a recognition of a traditional topos, which his contemporary readers were expected to spot. Lycurgus is reported to have said that long hair makes the handsome more comely to look upon, and the ugly more terrible (1.3). In other words, the ambiguity surrounding Lysander’s handsomeness or ugliness (καλός or αἰσχρός), is not based on the approval or disapproval of the ancient Spartan appearance, namely long hair and beard, but on the way these Spartan characteristics were in accordace or not with his individual features.

The same tension comes to the fore even more in the field of Spartan education (Lys. 2.2–5). Lysander conformed to the customs of his people, was of a manly spirit, and superior to every pleasure. Athenaeus (12.543b–c; cf. Nep. Lys. 4.2) offers us a tradition about Lysander (in accordance with the image he has from most historians), which put the stress on his luxurious lifestyle. Its negative criticism is reinforced through Lysander’s depiction as a parallel to Pausanias. In contrast, Plutarch follows Theopompus’ positive evaluation of a temperate Lysander. The divergence demands attention. Plutarch does not force the reader’s attention to an alternative ideal. Lysander is not an un-Spartan Spartan, but a Spartan with strong contradictions. It is no coincidence that, for Plutarch, the two main passions of Lysander, his ambition and the spirit of emulation, τὸ φιλότιμον καὶ φιλόνικον, were implanted in him by his Laconian education, whereas Lysander was not by nature ambitious (Lys. 2.2).

8 For Lacedaemonians and σῶφροσύνη see Thuc. 1.69–70; 1.83–84; 1.120.4; North (1966) 102–104; Rademaker (2005) 208–216.
Both terms are often connected with Plato’s τὸ θυμοειδές and are represented by the Laconian State.¹¹ Plutarch indeed maintains in Agesilaus (5.3) that the Spartan lawgiver seems to have introduced the spirit of ambition and rivalry into the state as an incentive to virtue. But ambition is a very common feature in the Lives, as politicians and military persons are normally ambitious.¹² Plutarch does not expect his readers to see here a specific Spartan topos. The fact that he speaks a lot about Spartan education reveals his keen interest in the power of language to offer a persuasive account of Lysander’s motives and to make the audience agree with his analysis of ambition as a Spartan feature of his protagonist.¹³

The situation is essentially different, when Plutarch introduces a natural disposition unusual in a Spartan:

θεραπευτικὸς δὲ τῶν δυνατῶν μᾶλλον ἢ κατὰ Σπαρτιάτην φύσει δοκεῖ γενέσθαι, καὶ βάρος ἐξουσίας διὰ χρείαν ἐνεγκεῖν εύκολος· ὁ πολιτικὸς δεινότητος οὐ μικρόν ἔνιοι ποιοῦνται μέρος.

But he seems to have been naturally subservient to men of power and influence, beyond what was usual in a Spartan, and content to endure an arrogant authority for the sake of gaining his ends, a trait which some hold to be no small part of political ability. (Lys. 2.3, transl. B. Perrin, Loeb)

In the case of flattery, Plutarch offers information the author shares with his readers, namely, that the Spartans are not flatterers. And the use of the phrase, without any comment, underlines a Spartan quality Lysander does not share. In this respect, this statement is ex negativo comparable to the charges of flattery against Cimon. Plutarch rejected the charge of flattery of the demos, attributing to Cimon an aristocratic and Laconian policy (Cim. 10.8: ἀριστοκρατικὴς καὶ Λακωνικῆς). In Lysander, his Spartan ambition is combined with un-Spartan attitudes towards men of power and arrogant authorities. For some, these characteristics illustrate political ability (πολιτικὴ δεινότητος),¹⁴ but the term ἔνιοι provides an interpretation from a distance, as it were; the assessment is not made by the application of standards preferred and advocated by the biographer.

This observation is supported by the comparison between Lysander and the Spartan admiral Callicratidas, where cultural topoi serve as moral indicators. Callicratidas reflects not only a general Spartan ideal, but more specifically Plutarch’s own moral beliefs, so he receives a more laudatory treatment by Plutarch than by Xenophon in the Hellenica.¹⁵ Callicratidas was the justest and noblest of men and the manner of his leadership had a certain Dorian simplicity and sincerity (Lys. 5.5:

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¹¹ So Plat. Resp. 545a; 545b; cf. 548c; 549a; 550b; 553c; 581a-b; 583a; Arist. Pol. 1271a14–16; Frazier (1988) 117.
¹⁴ Δεινότητος is the quality Cimon lacked (Cim. 4.5). But Themistocles, Lysander and Alcibiades possess it: Them. 15.4; Lys. 2.3; 3.2; 11.7; Alc. 10.4; 14.10; 16.1; 23.4; 24.5. Cf. Alexiou (2010) 349–350.
¹⁵ See Moles (1994) 70–84, esp. 71.
The three words indicate the point: Plutarch represents Callicratidas as an archetypal Dorian character, whose methods and policy are in accordance with the ideal of Spartan simplicity and honesty, whatever the outcome. Lysander knows how to flatter Cyrus and gain his favour (4.3); he can gratify his friends and allies (5.4). Callicratidas is quite different; he dismissed flattery as a principle of choice and thought any defeat of the Greeks more becoming to them than flattering visits to the houses of barbarians (6.4). Plutarch exploits the ideological connotations the words Sparta, Dorian, Lacedaemon carry for his Greek and Roman audience. When Plutarch says ‘Callicratidas’ purposes were worthy of Lacedaemon’ (7.1: ἄξια τῆς Λακεδαίμονος), the Spartan admiral is used as a model for a local ideal that in this case embodies long established Greek qualities. Plutarch mentions that Callicratidas was able to compete with the most eminent of the Greeks in terms of his δικαιοσύνη, μεγαλοψυχία and ἀνδρεία.

III

In the Political Precepts 799C–D Plutarch contrasts the changeable and kindly character of the Athenians with the stubbornness of the Carthaginians. He recounts two stories of the Athenians Cleon and Alcibiades, which are intended to support this contrast. In the Alcibiades the protagonist is extraordinary in a number of ways. An essential point to grasp is that Alcibiades does not have the Dorian simplicity of Cimon or Pelopidas or even Coriolanus. In comparison with the simple, straightforward Coriolanus (Cor. 15.5: ἀπλοῦς), Alcibiades was, like Lysander, unscrupulous in his public acts and treacherous (Comp. Alc. et Cor. 2.1). It is never entirely clear which individual dominating force is most prominent in Alcibiades. In the opening chapters of his Life, Plutarch emphasises the many inconsistencies and marked changes of Alcibiades’ character (Alc. 2.1). Alcibiades’ relationship with the people is very impressive in his Life. Strictly speaking, we never see a common local cultural topos shared between Alcibiades and the Athenians, except changeability. That the demos could be assimilated to Alcibiades is in itself significant. As Pelling has argued persuasively, ‘... it will later be the combination of the two, changeable people and changeable Alcibiades, that will produce such a catastrophic mix’.17

If we try, however, to extend the parallel between the Athenians and Alcibiades with respect to changeability, we will find that Alcibiades could never be a paradigmatic Athenian, as his changeability goes beyond that of his polis and works on different levels. The Persian Tissaphernes admires Alcibiades’ versatility and surpassing cleverness (Alc. 24.5–6), because he too was not straightforward, but malicious and fond of evil

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company. The reciprocal flatteries fit into ‘the transformation of Alcibiades polytropos into Alcibiades kolax’ and, in this case, it seems clear that, whatever the similarities between Alcibiades and the Athenian demos, his chameleon mentality makes Alcibiades capable of imitating and practicing everything, good or bad:

Ἀλκibiάδη δὲ διὰ χρηστῶν ἵοντι καὶ πονηρῶν ὁμοίως οὐδὲν ἦν ἀμήμονον οὐδ’ ἀνεπιτήδευτον, ἀλλ’ ἐν Σπάρτῃ γυμναστικός, εὔτελης, σκυθρωπός, ἐν Ἰωνίᾳ χλιαρός, ἐπιτερπής, βάθυμος, ἐν Θράκῃ μεθυστικός, ἐν Θεταλίῳ [cod. C; ἐν Θεταλοῖς; Loeb] ἰππαστικός, Τισσαφέρη δὲ τῷ σαφεὶσθαι συννόμων ύπερέβαλεν ὅγκῳ καὶ πολυτελείᾳ τὴν Περσικὴν μεγαλοπρέπειαν, οὐχ ἄυτόν ἐξιστάτας οὕτω βαδίως εἰς ἑτέρον ἕξ ἑτέρου τρόπον, οὐδὲ πάσαν δεχόμενος τῷ ἠθεὶ μεταβολήν, ἀλλ’ ὅτι τῇ φύσει χρώμενος ἔμελλε λυπεῖν τοὺς ἐντυγχάνοντας, εἰς πάν ἂεὶ τὸ πρόσφορον ἐκεῖνος σχῆμα καὶ πλάσμα κατεδεύτο καὶ κατέφευγεν.

But Alcibiades could associate with good and bad alike, and found naught that he could not imitate and practice. In Sparta, he was all for bodily training, simplicity of life, and severity of countenance; in Ionia, for luxurious ease and pleasure; in Thrace, for drinking deep; in Thessaly, for riding hard; and when he was thrown with Tissaphernes the satrap, he outdid even Persian magnificence in his pomp and lavishness. It was not that he could so easily pass entirely from one manner of man to another, nor that he actually underwent in every case a change in his real character; but when he saw that his natural manners were likely to be annoying to his associates, he was quick to assume any counterfeit exterior which might in each case be suitable for them. (Alc. 23.5, transl. B. Perrin, Loeb)

Plutarch here presents several cultural topoi, which are indeed more applicable than the problematic similarities between Alcibiades and the Athenians. Thus, he presents not an Alcibiades changeable by nature but an Alcibiades who chose to be changeable, a flatterer, who understood how to manipulate those who met him. By examining together some features of Sparta, Thrace, Thessaly, Ionia, Persia, which are not limited to these poleis or nations, nor focused on the relationship between Greek and non-Greek cultures, Plutarch suggests that the chameleon mentality of Alcibiades runs in parallel with his cosmopolitanism. These characteristics form a kind of collective identity shared by a smaller or wider group and they unify the group and the individual who is part of it.

On the other hand, the use of local cultural topoi maps out a distinction between past and present. A good example is Agis and Cleomenes and Sparta’s decline in their time, contrasted with the idealisation of the fifth-century Spartan past. The two Lives reflect a decidedly patriotic colouring of the stories which contributed to the collective memory of Spartans and their contemporaries in the third century BCE, and of Plutarch’s readers in the second century CE. These memories of the past, shared by the community, serve to unify the group and constitute a kind of collective identity, based on persons, symbols, and history. Plutarch attributes the dif-

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19 Cf. De ad. et am. 52B. Because of his chameleon mentality Alcibiades is represented as the greatest flatterer and demagogue (52E). Cf. Russell (1966a) 147 n. 1.
ferences between past and present to the decline of Sparta when Agis and Cleomenes were kings: wealth, luxury, effeminacy (Ag. 3.1; Cleom. 10.4). Throughout the Lives, the two heroes function as models and exceptions, identified with the ancient dignity of Sparta, and various phrases and persons illustrate the mastery with which Plutarch adapted the idealisation of the past to his present needs. Most remarkable is the comparison between Aratus and Cleomenes (Cleom. 16.6–8), in terms of the important role that local cultural characteristics can play at the panhellenic level. Aratus is presented as a true Greek and a great one (Ἐλληνικός γέγονε καὶ μέγας), but he was not free of blame, as, out of personal motives, he proceeded to an act which Plutarch regards as unworthy of a Greek (Cleom. 16.3): ‘He cast himself and all Achaea down before a diadem, a purple robe, Macedonians and oriental behests’ (Cleom. 16.5, transl. B. Perrin), because he did not want to obey Cleomenes, a descendant of Heracles, who was seeking to bring back again that restrained and Doric way of life (σώφρονα καὶ Δώριον) which Lycurgus had instituted. This statement serves to link the local Spartan culture with the wider Greek tradition, by preserving the sharp distinction between Greek and oriental habits.

In this respect, Plutarch’s arsenal of various cultural topoi complements his construction of a polis-identity and cultural memory. Shared features of past and present bring into relief his description of an individual’s character and distinguish between conditions of individuation and forms of collectivity. They are not an expression of an official ideology, but they must contain a good deal of accepted ‘truth’ in order to perform their function, that is, to create specific impressions of the protagonists among Plutarch’s contemporary readers.

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21 I mention some of them: departure from the traditions (Ag. 3.9: τῇ διαφθορᾷ τοῦ πολιτεύματος; Cleom. 18.4: ἔχον ἐκείνης τῆς ἀγωγῆς), ancient dignity of Sparta (Ag. 6.2: τὸ παλαιὸν ἀξίωμα τῆς Ἰπάρτης; 9.1; Cleom. 30.1), worthy of Sparta (Ag. 3.1: ταπεινὰ πράττονα παρ’ ἀξίαν; 10.1; 21.2; Cleom. 36.6: ἄξιως τῆς Ἱπάρτης), truly Spartan (Ag. 13.1: κάλλιστον διανόημα καὶ Λακωνικότατον; Cleom. 13.3; 16.6: σώφρονα καὶ Δώριον), Laconian simplicity (Cleom. 32.3: τὸ Λακωνικὸν καὶ άφελές), Comparison with Agesilaus, Lysander, Leonidas of old (Ag. 14.3), Lycurgus (Ag. 19.7; Cleom. 16.6).

22 See Nikolaidis (1986) 229–244.