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The construction of a cosmopolitan space in Plutarch’s On Exile

Abstract: This contribution examines the construction and promotion of a cosmopolitan space in Plutarch’s On Exile, the only Plutarchan treatise where the term ko-smios means ‘citizen of the world’. The speaker rejects a restricted conception of space by challenging historical, legendary, and ideological constructions through which the Athenians defined themselves in the space of their city-state. He gives the Athenian philosopher Socrates, known for his attachment to his city, a cosmopolitan profile and he presents Theseus as a universal hero. At the same time, he challenges preconceived ideas linked to the notions of homeland and exile by questioning the Athenian foundation myth of autochthony. The speaker proposes to his addressee a vertical look towards the sky, our true homeland. The contemplation of the celestial landscape allows men to realise the immensity of this landscape over the earth. Such a nature-based cosmopolitanism renders the notions of exile and borders invalid, since the true homeland of man and of his soul is the sky.

Plutarch’s treatise On Exile yields rich insights into Plutarch’s perceptions and representations of space, as space forms its central theme. The work is a consolation speech written in the form of a letter which addresses a young man exiled from Sardis, most likely the young Menemachus of Sardis, whom Plutarch also addresses with political advice in the Political Precepts. The speaker invites the man in exile to reconsider the idea of homeland and encourages him to feel at home everywhere. After a broad consideration of how an effective consolation might be achieved, the speaker asserts in the prologue (599A–600E) that exile is not a genuine hardship but the imaginary outcome of an opinion, δόξα, without any real foundation. Like an official currency, νόμισμα δόκιμον, it can be useful to one person and useless to another (599F). In other words, exile is not an ‘essence’ but rather the outcome of our vision of it. The speaker then highlights the idea that our homeland is the world (600E–602D). He does not reject the notion of homeland but stresses the fact that when we are forced to leave it, we can feel at home at any other location as well. With the help of several examples (602D–604D), he shows to what extent exile is not a cause of poverty or disgrace but, rather, an occasion to accomplish remarkable deeds and lead a quiet life. He then presents various islands as places which are peaceful and far from political troubles, and which liberate from restlessness while offering various pastimes along with commodities that are necessary to life. The speaker goes on (604D–607A) naming poets, historians, and heroes that distinguished themselves in their lives of exile and then disproves unjustified accusations against exile. At the end of the treatise (607A–607F) he says that we are all ex-
iled from the sky and that our virtue along with our wisdom cannot be changed by any location. The wise man who feeds on philosophy can live and be happy anywhere. To the wise man, the world is open, without any borders or limits.

The treatise On Exile is both recognizably a consolation speech and a rhetorical speech that seeks to convince the imagined interlocutor by using arguments based on examples and quotations.¹ It is similar in subject and content to a diatribe, the mainstream philosophical discourse that aims to teach or instruct an audience.² Besides, many of the themes found in Plutarch’s treatise are also developed in letters by different Stoics and Cynics dealing with the same topic. Exile seems to have been a favourite theme in rhetorical schools.³

Even though the principal ideas in On Exile are similar to those developed in treatises and orations by writers such as Teles, Musonius Rufus, Dio Chrysostom and Favorinus,⁴ the speaker in On Exile makes use of some unique themes. Heinz-Günther Nesselrath remarks that, in Plutarch, exile loses all importance, because the speaker offers a prospect of eternity, recommending a mystical ascent.⁵ What I would like to show in this article is that the originality of Plutarch’s treatise also lies in the way the speaker constructs and promotes a cosmopolitan space. This is achieved by keeping a critical distance from the legendary and ideological past of city-states, notably Athens. As we will see, he gives the Athenian philosopher Socrates, known for his attachment to the city of Athens, a cosmopolitan profile.⁶ At the same time, he challenges preconceived ideas linked to the notion of homeland and exile by questioning Athenian foundation myths.⁷ His revisionism goes even further, since he suggests to the addressee a vertical look towards the sky, our true homeland, and offers thus a nature-based cosmopolitanism.

¹ The treatise is most likely posterior to 100 CE. Cf. Ziegler (1949) col. 77; Hani (1980) 134–136; Caballero and Viansino (1995) 8.
² On the literary genre of the diatribe, see Fuentes González (1998) 44–66.
³ According to Cicero, Tusc. 3.34.81, there were set outlines on different themes such as exile that were to be developed.
⁴ On the differences and similarities between Plutarch’s treatise On Exile and those of Musonius Rufus, Teles and Favorinus, cf. Giesecke (1891) 94 ff., and Nesselrath (2007). These ancient authors question the idea that exile is a wrong and a dishonour. See also Dio Chrysostom’s Or. 13 (On Exile).
⁶ Socrates’ cosmopolitan profile is also found in Epictetus, 1.9.1. Cf. Gourinat (2001) 159–161.
⁷ Whitmarsh (2001b) argued that in the discourse on exile during the period that we call the Second Sophistic, the ‘process of self-definition against the classical past extends from literary fashioning to political revisionism’.
From panhellenism to cosmopolitanism: from Heracles to Socrates

The speaker initiates his argument that a man’s homeland is the world by citing words that were attributed to Heracles and to Socrates. Thus, he mentions the following:

Thus Heracles spoke well when he said

_an Argive I_
_or Theban, for I boast no single city;
There is no fort in Greece but is my country;_⁸

whereas the saying of Socrates is still better (βέλτιον), that he was no Athenian or Greek, but a ‘citizen of the world’,⁹ (as one might say ‘Rhodian’ or ‘Corinthian’) ... (On Exile 600F)

There is no clear indication within the treatise as to the circumstances in which these words were said. When we read these quotations, coordinated by the μέν and δέ, the lingering impression is that Heracles and Socrates are discussing with each other. However, Socrates lived in the 5th century BCE, whereas we assign Heracles to a legendary and undefined era that we now call mythological. Plutarch himself, in the Life of Lycurgus, situates Heracles in a legendary time as the poets do, mythologically.¹⁰ In On Exile, then, there is no distinction between historical actions and legendary events. What the speaker is interested in is rather to incorporate and adapt into his speech and reasoning the words of both major figures of Greek culture, so as to give credibility to the perspective on the world and space that he presents.

Heracles appears here explicitly in his panhellenic dimension, since he denies all ties to any particular city:¹¹ ἅπας μοι πόργος Ἑλλήνων πατρ. In contrast to the claim of some city-states or royal dynasties who proclaimed themselves to be descendants of the hero or at least to have a special link to him,¹² Heracles specifies that every Greek city is his homeland.

The panhellenic consciousness that is discernible in the above passage is not new. This consciousness had already shaped itself in the 8th century BCE, with the propagation of the alphabet, the Homeric poems, and the foundation of great sanctuaries and panhellenic celebrations.¹³ But the speaker seems to want to promote a

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⁸ The translations in this article are those of de Lacy and Einarson, in the Loeb.
⁹ ‘Citizen of the world’ is my translation: the Loeb gives ‘Cosmian’.
¹¹ The words of Heracles are, most likely, drawn from a lost tragedy. Cf. Adesp. 392 Nauck TGrFr.
cosmopolitan outlook rather than a panhellenic one. The comparative βελτιόν, ‘better’, clearly expresses his preference for the cosmopolitan words of Socrates. The philosopher appears like a κόσμιος, a ‘citizen of the world’. The adjective is found in this specific sense only in On Exile. This sentence, most likely a quotation from Epictetus,¹⁴ is surprising, because the cosmopolitan portrait of Socrates that emerges here is completely different from the one found in the writings of the 4th century BCE. In Plato’s Apology 37c–e, for instance, Socrates refuses to suggest exile as his punishment. In Crito 52b–c, he explains the reasons why he decided against exile. He specifies that, if the laws were to address him, they would remind him how deeply attached he was to the Athenian laws and to Athens. In a surprising way, in On Exile Socrates becomes the symbol of a cosmopolitan viewpoint that wins over confinement and exile, and even over panhellenism.

**Promoting cosmopolitanism by challenging Athenian myths**

In his attempt to reject the restricted view of space, the speaker challenges historical, legendary, and ideological constructions through which the Athenians defined themselves in the space of their city-state.¹⁵ He takes a critical distance from them, he questions them and puts them on trial in order to favour a much larger principle of extended space, namely, that of cosmopolitanism, over the logic of integration in a specific city-state. He thus sheds new light on Athenian indigenousness, by focussing on the hero Theseus and his relation to the city-state itself, as well as on some monuments and Athenian celebrations.

**Questioning autochthony**

The speaker keeps a critical distance from the myth of autochthony. The Athenians believed that they were the children of Athena and the Athenian land since Erichthonius, their legendary ancestor, was born of Hephaestus’ sperm that fell on the Athenian land when the god tried to rape Athena.¹⁶ Erichthonius as well as the legendary kings Erechtheus and Cecrops were presented in literary texts and in iconography as autochthonous, sprung from the earth, and this was also the case for all the Atheni-
ans, their descendants.¹⁷ The tale of autochthony was a unifying ideological construction, a tool elaborated in Athens that made the Athenians seem permanently established on their land. Autochthony gave them an argument to justify and legitimise equality among citizens, together with a certain feeling of superiority in relation to other people and non-citizens.

Yet, in On Exile, the speaker shows that the Athenians’ autochthonous identity is not enough to keep them in Athens:

On this account you will find that few men of the greatest good sense and wisdom have been buried in their own country, and that most of them, under compulsion from no one, weighed anchor of their own accord and found a new haven for their lives, removing some to Athens, some from Athens. For who has pronounced such an encomium on his native land as Euripides?

Where, first, the people are no immigrants
But native to the soil (αὐτόκθονες); All other cities,
Disrupted once, as in the game, have been
Piecéd out by importation from abroad.

Yet the writer of these lines went off to Macedonia and spent his remaining years at the court of Archelaus. (On Exile 604D–E)

The work from which all these verses are drawn is the Euripidean tragedy Erechtheus that has only reached us in a fragmentary state.¹⁸ The play is set on the Acropolis, in front of the royal palace. Athens is attacked by the Thracian king Eumolpus, the son of Poseidon. Erechtheus, the king of Athens, asks the Delphic oracle whether or not he will defeat the enemy and the god predicts victory as long as he agrees to sacrifice his daughter. Erechtheus and his wife Praxithea agree to perform the sacrifice for the good of the city. After that, Athens wins the battle, and Eumolpus dies. Erechtheus, in turn, is stabbed by Poseidon, who is enraged because of his son’s loss. Poseidon shakes Athens with an earthquake that threatens to knock down the royal palace. Athena then appears as dea ex machina and asks Poseidon to put an end to his

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¹⁸ One of the main sources is Lyc. Leoc. 98 – 104, along with the Papyrus of Sorbonne inv. 2328. For the reconstructed plot of the play and bibliographical references, see Collard et al. (1995) and Jouan and Van Looy (2002). On the different versions of the war between Erechtheus and Eumolpus, cf. Parker (1987) 200 – 205.
vengeance. She also asks Praxithea to introduce new annual rituals in honour of her dead daughters, who would from then on be celebrated as the Hyacinthides, and in honour of Erechtheus, who would receive a sanctuary in the city center where he would be invoked as Poseidon-Erechtheus.¹⁹

The passage of _Erechtheus_ quoted in _On Exile_ is the part where Praxithea speaks and advises Erechtheus to obey Apollo’s oracle and sacrifice their eldest daughter.²⁰ Praxithea heroically makes her choice between her city and her family, between her private ties and the public interest of her fatherland. Praxithea refers here to the autochthonous origin of the Athenians, which is the true pillar of Athenian identity and pride.

Euripides’ play initially tells of Eumolpus’ defeat by the Athenians and thus, indirectly, of Poseidon’s defeat by Athena and ends with the reconciliation of the two gods that had previously fought over Athens and who will be made the recipients of a ritual on the Acropolis. This reconciliation and the pacifism that comes out of it makes perfect sense when we are reminded that the play was most likely staged between 423 and 422 BCE, at the end of the first phase of the Peloponnesian war, when the Athenians were called to continue defending the territory of Attica.²¹ During those years, the Erechtheion was under construction on the Acropolis and is it very likely that the dramatic representation supported the resumption of the construction. The play is thus closely linked to the religious and architectural projects of the Athenians.²² Later, in the 4th century BCE, Lycurgus—who is one of our main sources for this tragedy—in his speech _Against Leocrates_ 100, quotes verses from Praxithea’s speech in order to arouse and awaken Athenian patriotism after the battle of Chaeronea.²³ So, both Euripides and Lycurgus use Praxithea’s speech of civil engagement in order to stir up Athenian patriotism at a critical time in the history of the city, thus legitimating the Athenian claim to autochthony.

The myth of autochthony in _On Exile_, just like any legendary tale, is anchored in a specific political and cultural context.²⁴ The Athenian autochthony myth is mentioned in _On Exile_ as an argument in favour of a cosmopolitan vision of the world. The myth is actualised with a particular, pragmatic goal in view. The speaker in _On Exile_ challenges the validity of this legend by decontextualising the Euripidean passage, since he does not mention the name of the play’s characters. By not mentioning the speaker in the quotation, and by simply saying that its author is Euripi-

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¹⁹ On the cult of Poseidon-Erechtheus, see Lacore (1983). Darthou (2005) stresses the importance of the new integration of Erechtheus into Attic soil through his death and his burial.
²⁰ Eur. _Erechtheus_, fr. 14, vv. 7–10 Jouan and Van Looy.
²⁴ On the pragmatic aspects, the cultic value and the social relevance of the heroic tale actualised in the _Erechtheus_, cf. Calame (2011).
des, he attributes to the poet the words of a character within the play, and thus the theatrical fiction coincides with the historical persona of Euripides. This alteration allows the speaker to assert that the autochthon myth is not quite enough to keep the Athenians in Athens since even Euripides, who was so proud of his homeland, emigrated to Macedonia and spent the rest of his days there. As far as Athens is concerned, it is presented as a city where many foreign people live, while many Athenians have left to live elsewhere. Athens, in Plutarch’s treatise, is presented as a cosmopolitan place and not just as a place of the privileged autochthonous Athenians.

**Theseus and the Theseion: universal references?**

In order to promote the idea of a unified space where there are neither autochthonous nor exiled people, the speaker next discusses Theseus, the hero who was believed to have created the city-state. The speaker emphasises that although he may have been poor, foreign or exiled, Theseus always remained an object of admiration for his virtue. The speaker also mentions an Athenian monument, the Theseion, which, like other important monuments, is the object of honour for everyone, despite the exile that was imposed on Theseus:

> But those who are not carried away by such considerations admire good men, even if they are poor or foreigners or exiles (φυγάδες). Nay, do we not observe that like the Parthenon and the Eleusinium, so the Theseum is saluted with reverence by all (ἄποντας)? Yet Theseus was banished (ἐφυγε) from Athens, though it is because of him that Athens is now inhabited; and that city was lost to him which he did not possess, but himself created. (*On Exile* 607A)

Among all of Theseus’ heroic deeds, the ones that are briefly mentioned here are his unification of Attic demoi, his exile, and the construction of a temple in his honour. These three facts are undoubtedly discussed here because they are useful to the argument. Indeed, the unification in a single city-state is a demonstration of the idea that the speaker defends in the treatise. In the *Life of Theseus*, it is specified that, in order to unite and create a democratic city-state, Theseus destroyed every village and every building of political power in various villages, so as to construct common buildings, accessible to everyone (κοινόν).²⁵ He also established the sacrifice of the *Panathenaea* along with that of the *Metoikia*.²⁶ The names of these two religious celebrations refer to moving (μετά – οίκω) and to the reunion of all (Πᾶν – Αθήνα). Theseus is presented as the legendary figure that brought about the abolition of Attic inner borders and established celebrations glorifying the union of places that were previously separated.

²⁵ Cf. Thuc. 2.15.2, from whom Plutarch’s extract is most likely inspired. According to Thucydides, Theseus performed the synoecism by getting rid of the councils, τὰ βουλευτήρια, and magistrates, τὰς ἀρχὰς, of villages. On the synoecism, cf. Ampolo and Manfredini (1988) 235–237.

²⁶ The details of this tradition developed in the 5th century BCE.
The mention of the hero’s exile and of the Theseion also serves the purpose of Plutarch’s argument, since, despite the departure of Theseus from the Attic land, everyone worships the monument that bears his name. Theseus’ exile was the consequence of Helen’s abduction by Theseus and Pirithous, when they kidnapped (ἀρπάζωντες) her from Sparta as a young girl.\(^{27}\) During his absence from the city, the demagogue Menestheus jeopardised Theseus’ reforms by starting a rebellion in Athens in order to take over power.\(^ {28}\) Moreover, the Tyndarids attacked the city so as to avenge the abduction of their sister. When Theseus came back to the city in the midst of a riot, he attempted to take the helm of political life but he quickly realised that his enemies no longer feared him and that people were corrupted. Theseus was then forced to flee Attica and it is most likely to this departure that the speaker refers in On Exile, when he mentions Theseus’ exile.

Despite his departure, the hero was not forgotten. On the contrary, the speaker specifies that the Theseion, the monument which was attributed to him, was worshipped to his day. The speaker does not give more details about the Theseion. In Plutarch’s Life of Theseus it is said that the bones of the hero were repatriated from Scyros by Cimon, so that they could be deposited in a funeral monument—probably the Theseion mentioned in On Exile—which was located in the centre of the city-state close to the gymnasium.\(^ {29}\) The bones were welcomed with excitement and were honoured by the Athenians.

Referring to the Theseion, right after mentioning Theseus’ exile, the speaker of On Exile shows that exile does not make one forget the value or the deeds of an important hero. On the contrary, the admiration for what the hero has accomplished is still alive given the fact that all people without qualification (ἅπαντες) honour the monument bearing his name. In this way, Theseus not only appears as an Athenian hero but also as a universal hero. Through this universal admiration of the Theseion, the Athenian land and its monuments are configured as cosmopolitan places.

**Philosophical contemplation and celestial space**

In order further to promote cosmopolitanism and his picture of a unified space, the speaker focuses on the natural world, suggesting that exile is the outcome of our judgement, unlike natural elements, which are determined by their own laws:\(^ {30}\)


\(^{28}\) Plu. Thes. 30–33.


\(^{30}\) The natural world is a starting point of philosophical reflection; cf. the introduction of Meeusen and Van der Stockt (2015).
It is by nature (φύσει), that stone is hard; it is by nature that ice is cold; it is not from outside themselves, fortuitously, that they convey the sensation of rigidity and freezing; but banishment, loss of fame, and loss of honours, like their opposites, crowns, public office, and front-seat privileges, whose measure of causing sorrow and joy is not their own nature, but our judgement (κρίσιν). (On Exile 599D)

According to this conception, the speaker asserts that our homeland is not something that has been bestowed to us by nature (600E: φύσει γὰρ οὐκ ἔστι πατρίς), but a construction, νομίζομενης πατρίδος, in the same way as the houses, workshops and doctors’ offices that man makes. He underscores the fundamental difference between what is constructed on the one hand, that is, homeland and exile, and the natural world along with its laws, on the other.

That being said, if our homeland and exile are our own constructions, which places in the world are not? The speaker does not ask the question in these terms. It is not so much a particular place that is so important as our relationship to it. For him, all areas and spaces can become the homeland of a man whose desire is to take root somewhere:

For while loss of wealth cannot easily and quickly be repaired, every city at once becomes a native city (πατρίς δὲ γίνεται πάσα πόλις εὐθὺς ἀνθρώπῳ) to the man who has learned to make use of it and has roots which can live and thrive everywhere and take hold in any region ... . (On Exile 601F)

In order to argue that there are numerous possibilities of residence in the vastness of the world, the speaker specifies that a man only has to look up to the sky and contemplate (ὁρᾷς) the endless ether that surrounds the earth. He says with emphasis:

This is the boundary of our native land, and here no one is either exile (φυγάς), or foreigner (ξένος), or alien (ἄλλοδαπός). (On Exile 601A)

The contemplation of the skyscape allows men to realise the immensity of the landscape over the earth. Such a perception of the space overrides any notion of exile and borders, since the true homeland of a man and of his soul is the sky. Man, the speaker specified shortly before, referring to Plato, is no earthly, or immovable plant, but points to heaven: the head, like a root, keeps the body erect, but it is inverted in order to point to heaven (600F).

From this point of view, man can be seen to act upon his own environment and not the other way around. As the speaker eloquently says:

31 It is interesting that here Plutarch slightly changes Pl. Tī. 90A, since man is presented as a plant that contemplates the sky but at the same time sticks to the earth. For Plato, the plant is suspended, with the higher parts up and the lower parts down. This difference could be explained by the fact that Plutarch does not completely condemn the fact of taking roots in a place. After all, he was so attached to Chaeronea that he never abandoned it, so that his city-state would not become empty. This distinguishes him from the Cynics.
... from a man no place can take away happiness, as none can take away virtue or wisdom; nay, Anaxagoras in prison was busied with squaring the circle, and Socrates, when he drank the hemlock, engaged in philosophy and invited his companions to do the same, and was by them deemed happy. (On Exile 607E–F)

According to this passage, the last paragraph of the treatise, only the wise man who is nurtured by philosophy, who does not let his passions or excessiveness get the better of him, can live anywhere and be a cosmopolitan person. But as it has already been shown in On Exile, a critical outlook on tales and ideological constructions linked to the legendary past of city-states, especially Athens, can contribute to the construction of a cosmopolitan space as well.

It is clear that the speaker promotes a unified space, a cosmopolitan world without borders, a space that resembles that of the Roman Empire. During the Roman era and Trajan’s rule specifically, space was unified and the oikoumenē was constructed not only thanks to military supremacy, but also through the political integration of provinces and through language, the Attic dialect that became the koinē of the elite of the pepaideumens. In On Exile, philosophy meets historical reality and redefines it in its own way.

It should be noted, as a conclusion, that the model of cosmopolitanism constructed by On Exile does not apply to all men in general but chiefly to those who have a philosophical way of living and an intellectual heritage. Let us not forget that the men who are mentioned as examples of exiled figures are all well-known from literary tradition. This is for example the case with Euripides, Simonides, Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon, who were, for Plutarch’s audience, more linked to literary tradition than to the common practices of everyday life. Should we then speak of a cosmopolitanism of an intellectual elite? The question is certainly worth asking.

32 On the importance of a philosophical way of life, see Vamvouri Ruffy (2012) 75–78.