Individuated gods and sacred space in Plutarch

Abstract: Despite Plutarch’s ubiquitous references to the names of individuated gods, such gods appear in two capacities only: as mythical figures, that is, as a by-product of the poetic imagination; and as objects of worship in traditional cults. On the other hand, when Plutarchan gods are represented as actively affecting the reality, they are replaced by abstract notions such as God, Tyche or Daimon. Furthermore, as a short excursus on Herodotus shows, individuated gods of traditional religion defined—and were defined by—the ownership of sacred space (temples, altars, etc.). By contrast, Plutarch’s God, Tyche and Daimon were spatially indifferent. Not even Delphi is represented as the sacred ground owned by an individuated Apollo.

Individuated Gods

Divine names of individuated gods are ubiquitous in Plutarch, as a quick glance at the relevant Plutarchan indices shows. But the vast majority of these references do not represent individuated gods as entities actively involved in the historical process. Rather, individuated gods appear in Plutarch almost exclusively in two capacities: as mythical figures, a by-product (so to speak) of the poetic imagination; and as recipients of worship in traditional cults.

While Plutarch diligently documents myths and cults where this is expedient for his biographical or philosophical endeavour, he himself clearly does not share the underlying concept of individuated gods. On the contrary, he is rather outspoken about his view that mythical accounts and the concomitant human worship of individuated, human-shaped gods are make-shift conceptualisations in order to make the underlying metaphysical powers treatable in a literary and ritual fashion. In fact, Plutarch explicitly states that human-shaped gods of traditional representations are flawed concepts: ‘for the deity does not resemble the human in terms of nature, movement, skill and power ... being different in almost everything, it is most of all dissimilar in its works’. Not surprisingly, then, in Plutarch’s view, poets should not be taken at face value when they speak of anthropomorphic gods with a

1 By ‘individuated gods’ I mean gods whose individual features are not restricted to human-shaped iconography (such as Moira, Tyche, Hygeia) but deities that are endowed with a specific human individuality, normally marked by a) a personal name (as opposed to personifications), b) relevant myths with connections to other individuated gods, c) ‘human behaviour’, including ‘failures’, ‘passions’, ‘ambitions’, etc.

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2 Plu. Cor. 38.4.

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human temperament and emotions.³ Language, at any rate, is not to be trusted, according to Plutarch, since the names of individuated gods may be employed as metaphors for their main spheres of competence, without any metaphysical meaning: Hephaestus can stand for fire, Ares for war, and—we may add—Aphrodite for love.⁴ Furthermore, Plutarch is much too perspicacious a thinker to ignore the fact that even when a metaphysical entity is denoted by a specific name, this entity does not have to be the same in all contexts. Take, for instance, Plutarch’s statement: ‘… under the name of Zeus (or Zen) they sometimes address the god, sometimes Fortune (τύχη), sometimes Fate (εἰμαρμένη).’⁵ It does not come as a surprise that, unlike his near-contemporary Pausanias, Plutarch is markedly distanced and often caustic about reports of divine epiphanies in the world of man. To quote just one statement concerning such epiphanies: ‘these fabulous and ridiculous tales (τὰ μυθῶδη καὶ γε-λοῖα) display the attitude of the humans towards the divine, (an attitude) which convention (ἐθισμός) has forced upon them’.⁶

I hasten to add that Plutarch’s disbelief in human-shaped individuated gods is not contradicted by the frequent appearances of human-shaped individuated deities in Plutarchan dreams.⁷ Plutarch’s relation to dreams is complex. In works of his early

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³ Plu. De aud. poet., esp. 16D–17F.
⁴ Plu. De aud. poet., 23A–24C.
⁵ Plu. De aud. poet. 23C–D.
⁶ Plu. Num. 15.6. Numa’s capture of two daimons, Picus and Faunus, and his encounter with Zeus on the Aventine Hill is labeled as ‘surpassing all absurdity (ἀτοπία)’. The tale is well attested in the early first century BCE (Val. Ant., FRHist 25 F 8), and in Augustan poetry (Ov. Fast. 3.291–346). In a similarly suspicious vein, Plutarch reports that in 83 BCE, Sulla captured a Satyr ‘such as sculptors and painters portray’ in a sacred precinct of the Nymphs. Sulla tried to communicate with the Satyr ‘through many interpreters’ (in what language?), but it merely produced a sound somewhere between neighing and bleating, Plu. Sull. 27.1f. The anecdotal/comic character of this passage is of course suggested by his cautious ‘as they say’ and by the explicit lack of all communication between Sulla and the Satyr. Another ‘epiphany’ of Artemis is explicitly said to have been due to the imagination of the citizens of Pellene, who mistook a mortal woman, the ‘daughter of Epigethes’, for the goddess. And, of course, Aratus’ own journals have nothing of that sort, as Plutarch punctiliously observes, Plu. Arat. 32.1–3. Like Herodotus and others, Plutarch mentions heroic battle epiphanies, always with a pinch of salt. Some Athenians saw Theseus participating in the battle of Marathon and thus gave the man heroic status, Plu. Thes. 35.5. But in what follows, Plutarch makes it quite clear that Theseus’ heroization was due not to an epiphany, but to a Delphic oracle which demanded the translation of his bones from Skiros, a deed eventually accomplished by Cimon. It was his new burial place in the centre of Athens that served as the focus of the new hero cult, Plu. Thes. 36, cf. Cim. 8.3–6. The participation of the Aeacidae during the battle of Salamis was an arbitrary conjecture by some fanciful observers, as Plutarch’s wording makes clear. For the only thing ‘they thought to have seen’ were ‘shades of armed men coming from Aigina’, Plu. Them. 15.1, cf. Hdt. 8.64. Last, consider the following: ‘some’ witnessed the Dioscuri accompanying Lysander’s ship on its way to the battle of Aegospotami in 405 BCE, Plu. Lys. 12.1.
⁷ E.g., Plu. Cam. 6.1 [cult statue of Veian Iuno]; Rom. 2.5 [Hestia], Cic. 44.2–4 [Zeus], Cor. 26.2 [Zeus], Arist. 11.2–8 [Zeus], Luc. 10 [Persephone, Athena], Luc. 12.1f. [Aphrodite]; Per. 13.8 [Athena]; Lys. 20.5 [Zeus Ammon], Sull. 94 [Luna, with Brenk (1977) 223f.], Tim. 8.1 [Demeter].
period (such as the *On Superstition*), he ridiculed them, but later on, he connects them with the discussion of the soul and the question of the vision of true forms. What matters here is the observation that throughout his life he considered dreams as essentially a human state of mind, to be explained by science rather than by divine intervention.⁸

In sum, then, Plutarch represents individuated deities as having no impact whatsoever on reality. In Plutarch’s thinking, they are venerable remnants of convention and tradition that may appear in poetic or ritual contexts; but in the real world, as Plutarch sees it, divinity acts in a different shape, namely, in the abstract form of God, Tyche or Daimon (to mention only the most prominent names or attributes assigned to them).

## Sacred space

What consequences does the absence of active, individuated gods have for the notion of sacred space? To begin with, then, the notion of sacred space in Plutarch is no less complex than his notion of God, Tyche, and Daimon. However, unlike these terms, it has not received the same scholarly attention, apparently because Plutarch conceals his quite heretical notion of ‘sacred space’ behind the façade of a very traditional vocabulary.⁹

How is sacred space generally designated? The Greek term par excellence is the ubiquitous ἱερός. Throughout pagan antiquity, the word denotes divine possession of all sorts of objects. Already the poet of the *Iliad* calls a temple ἱερός δόμος.¹⁰ The name of the deity whose possession is indicated by ἱερός is either implied or added in the genitive: the Homeric ἱερὸν Ἄθηναίης is to be rendered as ‘sacred to Athena’.¹¹ By contrast, both Judaism and Christianity avoid ἱερός, apparently because of its markedly pagan/polytheistic connotations: instead, the Septuagint and the New Testament consistently employ the term ἅγιος, where the Greek Gentile would have used ἱερός and the Jew ὑιός.¹²

In short, then, sacred space in a pagan context is ἱερός, that means, the property of a deity. Plutarch is by no means an exception. Time and again, temples are called ἱερός, and the act of dedication, that is to say, the transfer from human to divine ownership, is predictably called καθιερό.¹³ If we then take the employment of ἱερός as

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⁸ Brenk (1977) 16 – 27, 214 – 235; Brenk (1987) 260f. The belief in dreams characterised the superstitious rather than the pious. This view is expressed not only in Plutarch’s theoretical writings, but also in his *Lives*, when Cassius explains the apparition of Brutus’ daimon on merely scientific grounds (Plu. *Brut.* 36f. with Brenk (1977) 124f., 152f.). From an artistic point of view, dreams offered a welcome literary device to introduce the notion of individuated gods and their intervention in the human world, without compromising one’s philosophical/scientific convictions.

⁹ For example, Beck (2012) does not mention sacred space.

¹⁰ *Il.* 6.88f. For ἱερὸν as sacrifice, see *Il.* 1.147. A temple was ἱερὸν since Herodotus, Hdt. 1.183.


¹³ Plu. *Sol.* 4.3.
the basic parameter for the definition of sacred space, Plutarch’s world is full of it. But what does ownership of sacred space mean in practice?

In the world of traditional polytheism, it means first of all that the owner deity is both entitled and able to ward off unwanted trespassers. To demonstrate Plutarch’s conceptual distance from traditional polytheism, I will briefly turn to the notion of sacred space in Herodotus.

The best known passage is Herodotus’ account of the repulsion from Delphi of a Persian detachment by divine intervention in 480 BCE. Herodotus indulges in a rather detailed—and apparently exemplary—description of the chain of events: when the Persians drew near Delphi, the Delphians consulted the god, but ‘the god ordered them to do nothing, saying that he was able to protect his own property’. And so he did: Herodotus suggests (without saying so explicitly) that the god moved his sacred and un-touchable weapons out of the inner sanctum to the open space in front of the sanctuary, and then stopped the Persian advance by means of thunderbolts and landslides. Some say that two local heroes (Phylacus and Autonous) actually engaged in a fight with the aggressors. Thus the Persians abandoned their attack.

To take another very similar Herodotean account: when the Assyrians attacked the temple of Ptah in Memphis in the first half of the seventh century, the priest bewailed the looming disaster to the god’s image. The god comforted his distressed servant in a dream, announcing that he would send his champions. He sent a swarm of field mice to destroy the equipment of the invaders.

Even when sacred space is trespassed upon, Herodotus is keen to detect some punishment of the trespassers among later events. Thus, at Plataea, no Persian corpses are found inside the sanctuary of Demeter, because—according to Herodotus’ own verdict—‘the goddess herself denied them entry because they had turned to ashes her sanctuary (ἱερόν), the shrine at Eleusis’. In fact, the Greek—Persian hostilities had been triggered by the incineration of the temple of Cybele in Sardis by the Greeks in 499 BCE. The Persians retaliated against the Greeks by destroying their sanctuaries, which in turn led to the wrath of the Greek gods and ultimately the defeat of the Persians.

One could heap up the evidence in order to show that, in Herodotus, the gods are fully in charge of their sacred ground, punishing relentlessly either at the moment of trespassing on their land or after a short respite. It should also be noted that in all

14 Hdt. 8.36.
16 Hdt. 2.141.
17 Hdt. 9.65.
19 Protesialus is empowered ‘by gods’ to punish Artayctes for the defilation of his shrine (Hdt. 9.116, 120). The Spartans’ atonement for the murder of Darius’ heralds was labeled by Herodotus or his source as the ‘wrath of Talthybius’ (μῆνις Ταλθυβίου), because it was in Sparta that Talthybius had a shrine and was worshipped as the founding hero of all matters concerning heralds (Hdt. 7.134).
the Herodotean passages just referred to, the divine actors are individuated gods, identified by their names and specific characteristics and commanding their own sacred ground.

Not so in Plutarch. As I have shown in the first part of this article, his individuated gods are mere ciphers. As the driving force of Plutarch’s world, individuated gods are normally replaced by God (θεός, sometimes with an article), Tyche (τύχη = Fortune, in opposition to τὸ οὐτόματον = Chance)²⁰ or Daimon (δαίμων) or another of the approximately twenty terms collected by Swain.²¹ Fortunately, for the scope of this chapter, there is no need for us to discuss these terms in detail here.²² It is enough to stress that Plutarch’s God and Daimon and their like were fully detached from the ritual geography of the world of man. As for Tyche, although Plutarch once refers to the dedication of sacred space to her and the οὐτόματον in his Timoleon, Frederick Brenk is certainly correct when he remarks: ‘Plutarch avoids conceiving τυχή as the Hellenistic goddess personifying the favoring circumstance, the eutychia, of an individual or city’.²³ Moreover, Tyche in Timoleon is a special case anyway and has repeatedly been studied as such in recent times.²⁴ Where then did the Plutarchan concept of divinity, which was ‘basically monotheistic’,²⁵ leave the traditional notion of sacred space? In fact, there was no room for sacred space in Plutarch’s world. Like his individuated gods, his sacred space was a nostalgic reminiscence of a polytheistic past.

As a consequence, in marked contrast to Herodotus, the Plutarchan Apollo is never represented as defending his precinct against trespassers: neither the mercenaries under Philomelus and Onomarchus, who sacked the shrine in 356 BCE,²⁶ nor Sulla, who plundered the god’s treasures during the Mithridatic War,²⁷ are ever really represented as being punished for their sacrilege by Apollo; in the case of Sulla, this

And the flood that drowned part of Artabazus’ troops was (according to the Potidaeans, with whom Herodotus agrees) sent by Poseidon, because some Persians had desecrated the temple and the image of the god in the suburb of their city (Hdt. 8.129). During the battle of Plataea, Pausanias directed his prayer towards the temple of Hera and was promptly rewarded (Hdt. 9.62), apparently by Hera herself.²⁰ For the distinction, see Swain (1989a) 273.
²⁴ Plu. Tim. 36.4: Timoleon dedicates a shrine to Automatia in his house, while he dedicates his entire house to the ‘sacred Daimon’ (ἱερῷ δαίμονι). One should note that in the previous sentence (36.3) Plutarch refers to Timoleon’s letters as his source. For Tyche and Daimon in Timoleon, see Brenk (1987) 311 f.; Swain (1989b), esp. 327 – 334; Tatum (2010); Piettre (2012).
²⁶ Plu. Tim. 30.3f. (shunned by all mankind ‘because they had put themselves under a curse’) for the occupation of Delphi during the Sacred War; see also Plu. Mul. virt., 269E – F. Cf. Paus. 5.3.2 – 4.
may be because he offered amends later on.²⁸ In fact, Plutarch would have had plenty of opportunities to refer to Herodotus’ version of Apollo’s defence of his Delphic sanctuary, especially in his Themistocles and Aristides, but also elsewhere in his Delphic writings. After all, in his extant work he refers to some fifty Herodotean passages.²⁹ Plutarch’s near contemporary Pausanias, who took his information from Herodotus or local tourist guides (who in turn may have drawn on Herodotus), refers to the story. So it is hard to see why it should not have been known to Plutarch.³⁰ In fact, Plutarch more than any other writer would have been expected to mention Apollo’s defence of his property against the Persians (even if only in order to praise his beloved Delphi), had he believed that there was a germ of truth in it. After all, it is Plutarch, not Herodotus, who makes Delphi responsible for the Plataean victory.³¹ The fact is that Plutarch did not believe that the god had protected his sanctuary, but that the temple had been burnt to the ground by the Persians.³²

Plutarch’s silence about Apollo’s intervention in 480 is not due to inadvertence, as can be shown by another omission of the same kind: when Brennus invaded Greece in 279 BCE, he made a bid for Delphi. Eventually, he was repelled by the Delphians and—most importantly—by the decisive intervention of the god himself, which led ultimately to Brennus’ painful death. The story is mentioned by Pausanias and Diodorus, but it appears in its most explicit form in Justin’s epitome of the Philippic Histories of Pompeius Trogus, dating to the Augustan period. All these accounts apparently go back to one or more Hellenistic sources, and a version of the god’s intervention is epigraphically attested shortly after the event.³³ Remarkably, nothing of this is found in Plutarch, who must have known the story, given his position as a Delphic priest and the apparently wide circulation of the story in Roman times. We should also note that Pausanias enumerates in passing a number of pillages of the Delphic treasury. At least in one case, namely, the attack of the Phleghyans, he also reports the god’s personal intervention to protect his property.³⁴ Plutarch, for his part, is silent about this tradition.

Plutarch’s God, Tyche and Daimon may act at meaningful places, without however laying any claim to their ownership. To mention just one case in point, Caesar is

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²⁸ Some Sicilian mercenaries died after a number of illustrious victories. This is attributed to Dike by Plutarch (Plu. Tim. 30.5) and offers only a very general—and far-fetched—sense of retribution. Brenk (1977) 252 argued that the slaughter of the thousand mercenaries at Plu. Tim. 30.2 was due to their earlier sack of Delphi, while in fact these soldiers were punished for their betrayal of Timoleon in Syracuse, as reported earlier (Plu. Tim. 25.3f.). Sulla offered amends at a later time, cf. Plu. Sull. 19.6 with Brenk (1977) 260f.

²⁹ Schettino (2014) 419.

³⁰ Paus. 10.8.7; Hdt. 8.39.


³² Plu. Num. 9.6.

³³ D.S. 22.9.1; Paus. 1.4.4; 8.10.9; 10.3.4; 10.7.1; 10.8.3; 10.23.1; Just. epit. Pomp. Trog. 24.7f.; Syll.³ 398 (transl. in Bagnall and Derow (2004) 34f.; Austin (2006) 129f.).

³⁴ Paus. 9.36.2f.; 10.6.6 – 10.71.
murdered under the statue of Pompey, a fact that demonstrated, according to Plutarch, ‘that it was the work of some Daimon which was calling and guiding the action to this point’. The Daimon intervenes at a specific meaningful place that is intrinsically unconnected to himself. It would be impossible to identify the Daimon with a specific deity and thus turn him into an individuated god. The ultimate purpose of the intervention of God, Tyche or Daimon is never to preclude or punish trespassing, but to guarantee the unfolding of some (fully or partially preordained) divine order.

Of course, Plutarch is not the kind of author to completely break with traditional concepts. There are faint traces of the notion of divine possession of sacred space beyond mere lip service in his work. The most conspicuous passage I could locate is the following: in Plutarch’s *Aristides*, the protagonist received instructions from Delphi before the battle of Plataea, to the effect that the precondition for a Greek victory was vows to numerous individuated gods, namely, Zeus, Hera, Pan and the nymphs, as well as sacrifices to a number of Plataean heroes at their shrines, apart from the injunction to pitch the battle in the plain of Eleusinian Demeter and Kore. Aristides followed the instructions to the letter, and the Greeks were victorious. Underlying this section is clearly the notion of individuated gods bound to sacred ground and potentially intervening as beneficent agents in the course of the battle. But this passage, for whatever reasons, remains an exception.

What about the Pythian Apollo? Is he not a clearly identifiable individuated god, spatially bound to his sanctuary at Delphi? I suggest that he is not, despite the fact that Plutarch is anything but shy about Delphi’s contribution to Greek history over the centuries. At the very end of his treatise *On the Pythian Oracles*, Plutarch remarks that Delphi would not be what it is in his day, unless God had been present at Delphi and allowed the oracle to share in his divine inspiration (συνεπιθειάζοντος). By writing θεός instead of ὁ θεός, Plutarch is decidedly not pointing to Apollo in particular, but to God in general. In what manner, then, is God present at Delphi, and what is the meaning of συνεπιθειάζειν here? In order to find an answer, we have

36 Plu. Arist. 11.
37 Furthermore, in the same *Life*, as well as in the *Life of Lucullus*, a god appears in a dream vision to a protagonist sleeping in or close to the deity’s sanctuary. This suggests a connection between the appearance of the god and the space sacred to him: 1. When Lucullus camped in Aphrodite’s sanctuary in the Troad, the goddess addresses him in a dream in nice hexameters, encouraging him to get up and seize a number of hostile ships; Lucullus immediately does so (Plu. *Luc. 12.1f.*). 2. A Lydian was sent by Mardonius to the sanctuary of Amphiaras, where he slept and in his sleep saw an attendant of the god instructing him leave; when he did not do so, the attendant crushed his skull with a stone (which was actually a foreboding of Mardonius’ death), Plu. *Arist. 19.1f.*
39 Plu. *De Pyth. or. 409C*: ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἔστιν ἄλλως ποτὲ τηλικαύτην καὶ τοσαύτην μεταβολήν ἐν ἁλίγῳ χρόνῳ γενέσθαι δι’ ἀνθρώπινης ἐπιμελείας, μή θεοῦ παρόντος ἐνταῦθα καὶ συνεπιθειάζοντος τὸ χρηστήριον.
to turn to the more common cognate compound ἐπιθειάζειν.⁴⁰ In two passages of his treatise On the Sign of Socrates, Plutarch employs the verb ἐπιθειάζειν in the sense of ‘to inspire’ or ‘to give divine insight’.⁴¹ In both cases, the subject of the verb is the Daimonion, not a specific or identifiable individuated god. If we are allowed to extrapolate from these two passages, we may suggest that also at the end of the treatise On the Pythian Oracles, the faceless God—in the Greek text termed θεός—is actually to be construed as an equivalent to the Daimonion. To corroborate this, we may point to Frederick Brenk’s observation that the Plutarchan Daimonion shows a particular propensity to appear in revelatory or prophetic contexts: time and again, it is the Daimonion that reveals, predicts, forebodes.⁴² On the other hand, both passages in On the Sign of Socrates show that ἐπιθειάζειν is spatially indifferent. ‘Inspiration’ or ‘knowledge of the future’ is granted by the Daimonion to anyone graced with its favour and predisposed to listen to it, be it Socrates or the Pythia, be it in Athens or in Delphi, that is, anywhere and at any time.

⁴⁰ The verb συνεπιθειάζειν appears only once again in Plutarch, in a very different context and with a human, not a god, as the subject of the verb. This passage can thus be ignored without much ado, cf. Plu. Sull. 6.4: Σύλλας ... συνεπιθειάζων τὰ πραττόμενα. Other usages of ἐπιθειάζειν: ἐπιθειάζειν occurs in Plutarch as an equivalent to the Latin inauguoro = to inaugurate, Plu. Cam. 31.3. In Thucydides (2.75) it can also mean ‘to call on the gods/to summon the gods to turn to the gods’ when it refers to a prayer offered by Archidamus.

⁴¹ Plu. De genio Socr. 580D, 589D.

⁴² This includes the δαιμόνιον which warned the Spartan through a (Delphic?) oracle of the ascent of a lame king = Agesilaus (here, τὸ δαιμόνιον presumably stands for ‘Apollo’) (Plu. Ages. 30.1 with ibid. 3.3–5, also Fontenrose (1978) 322 no. 9163), Socrates’ δαιμόνιον predicting the Sicilian disaster (Plu. Alc. 174f., Nic. 13.6), the δαιμόνιον which prepares great things for Marius after sacrifices (Plu. Mar. 8.4f.), and a dozen or more passages collected already by Brenk (1977) 272f. n. 13.