

BARBARIANS IN PLUTARCH'S POLITICAL THOUGHT

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Despite the title of this paper, the reader should be warned from the start that the barbarians are *not* central to Plutarch's thought.¹ This is even more striking when it comes to political issues: only rarely are the barbarians and their political organization mentioned in Plutarch's works. In the so-called political treatises², for instance, they are virtually inexistant. One interesting thought is found in *Ad principem ineruditum* (780C-D), when Plutarch mentions the famous anecdote of the Persian king being reminded every morning by one of his chamberlains that his power is subordinate to the higher power of the god Oromasdes. This is not what one would normally expect to be said in relation with the Persian king, since he usually stands as a symbol for unlimited power.³ But of course this is precisely Plutarch's point here: if even an absolute monarch as the Great King obeys to a higher power, so the more should the 'educated ruler' (who, by the way, does not need to be reminded of it every day, as Plutarch adds in 780D). Another interesting statement about the political system of the Persians comes from *De unius dominatione* (826E): Plutarch, if he really is the author of this little treatise, remarks that, among the three existing political systems, the Persians have opted for the 'autocratic and irresponsible royalty' (*αὐτοκρατη βασιλείαν καὶ ἀνυπεύθυνον*).⁴

Apart from these two examples, the barbarians are hardly ever mentioned in the political treatises and when they are, their rôle is reduced to mere anecdotes: in *An seni sit gerenda res publica*, for instance, the Libyan king Masinissa is mentioned, alongside Phocion and Cato, as an example of an elderly statesman still in full possession of his faculties (791E), while Darius and the Scythian Ateas figure as illustrations for intelligence in action (792C)⁵; in the *Praecepta gerendae rei publicae*, Plutarch briefly mentions the harsh character of the Carthaginian people, which makes them intransigent in political matters (799D-E), and he

¹ For similar warnings, see Schmidt (1999) 329-330; Schmidt (2002), 57.

² *Maxime cum principibus philosopho esse disserendum* (776A-779C); *Ad principem ineruditum* (779D-782F); *An seni sit gerenda res publica* (783A-797F); *Praecepta gerendae rei publicae* (798A-825F); *De unius dominatione* (826A-827C, possibly spurious).

³ As early as in fifth-century authors, cf. Hall (1989) 192-195; in Plutarch, see below.

⁴ The English translations of Greek quotations are taken from the volumes of the *Loeb Classical Library*.

⁵ See also *Reg. et imp.* 172F (Darius) and 174D (Ateas).

refers to Hannibal, among others, as a man who was not able to share his political power (812E).

These examples, and a few more⁶, are all rather insignificant and do not show any attempt of political analysis. Further study reveals that this is actually the case for references to barbarians throughout Plutarch's oeuvre. One may of course deplore the loss of the *Quaestiones barbaricae*,⁷ where interesting thoughts about the political customs of the barbarians may have been developed, but in the absence of such a work, one has to admit that the barbarians do not seem to be an issue for Plutarch in his political thinking. Is there any point, then, in treating this subject at all? Despite all negative premises, this paper aims at showing that some insight into Plutarch's political thought may nevertheless be gained from his general presentation of the barbarians.

From a general survey of the passages in which barbarians are mentioned by Plutarch, it appears that these are mainly represented as

(a) lawless peoples:

Plutarch uses words such as ἄνομος (*Quaest. rom.* 269A) and ἀθεσμός (*De fort. Alex.* 328B) to describe their lack of political organization, but it is interesting to note also the repeated use of the doublet βάρβαρος καὶ παρανόμος (*Pel.* 21.5; *De superstit.* 171B; *Iside* 358E)⁸. So the barbarians in general are seen as people either without law or without respect for the law. This holds for peoples located on the fringe of the world, like the Scythians and the Indians (cf. *Pomp.* 70.4), but it also applies to various other peoples. One thinks for instance of the description of the inhabitants of Spain in the *Life of Marius* (6.2), mere tribes which 'still considered robbery as a most honourable way of living', or in the *Life of Sertorius* (14.1, 16.2-3), where Plutarch repeatedly stresses their lack of discipline and of organization. The same applies to nordic tribes such as the Cimbri and the Teutones (*Mar.* 11.3-14; 14.1; 19.2), and also to the 'kingless' Thracians (*Alc.* 36.5).

The absence of political organization is usually seen as a lack of civilization. In that respect the *De Alexandri Magni fortuna aut virtute* is particularly interesting because it displays a strong rhetorical contrast between the savage and lawless populations of Asia and Alexander's mission of civilization (328A-329A): in this long passage Alexander is shown

⁶ Within the political treatises, barbarians are further mentioned only at *Praec. ger. rep.* 815E, 820D, 821D-E, 824C.

⁷ Catalogue of Lamprias, no. 139.

introducing among savage tribes (ἀγρίοις ἔθνεσιν, 328B; ἄθεσμα καὶ ἀνήκοα φῦλα, 328B; ἀνημέρου καὶ θηριώδους διαιτης, 328E) an organized form of life based on Greek ‘political’ concepts such as ‘city’ (πόλεις, 328A; 328E), ‘law’ (νόμους, 328B), ‘peace’ (εἰρήνην, 328B) and ‘magistracies’ (Ἐλληνικοῖς τέλεσι, 328E).

(b) paradigms of monarchy:

The most frequently described political organization of the barbarians, however, is monarchy. This, of course, is not peculiar to Plutarch: ever since the Persian Wars, the barbarians have been associated with the idea of absolute monarchy. As is clear from the above quotation from *De unius dominatione*, this is to be understood as the negative form of monarchy, which comes close to tyranny and despotism, two other forms of government which Plutarch categorically rejects.⁹ It is interesting to note, en passant, that there is a cluster of ideas between tyranny, despotism and barbarians in Plutarch’s works, as may be seen even in the vocabulary used to describe these forms of government.¹⁰

Just as for tyranny and despotism, Plutarch heavily and repeatedly stresses the negative components of barbarian monarchy, which can mainly be summarized as

1. absence of law (i.e. despotism, arbitrary rule): e.g. *Artax.* 23.5; *Ages.* 9.2-4.
2. absence of freedom (i.e. δουλεία): e.g. *Sull.* 22.6; *Luc.* 18.4; 21.5.
3. absence of free speech (i.e. lack of truth, flattery, etc.): e.g. *Luc.* 21.6; 26.4-5; *Eum.* 13.10.

To these can be added a vast number of moral shortcomings inherent to the barbarian monarchy, such as ὕβρις (‘insolence’), extravagance, cruelty, intrigues, corruption, faithlessness, etc. In that respect, the *Life of Artaxerxes* may at first sight look like an exception because of the various positive characteristics granted to the Persian king, but in reality this biography is precisely an illustration of the life of intrigues and of the abuse of power at the Persian court.¹¹

Thus, being described either as lawless people or as paradigms of an absolute monarchy, the barbarians constitute a powerful negative pole in Plutarch’s works, with one notable exception

⁸ The two terms of such doublets tend to be synonymous, see Teodorsson (2000), Schmidt (1999) 17-22, Schmidt (2000) 457-460.

⁹ For a list of passages in which Plutarch condemns tyranny and despotism, see Aalders (1982) 34-35.

¹⁰ See e.g. *Eum.* 13.10; *Cleom.* 13.1-9; *Mul. virt.* 250F-251A; *De aud. poet.* 36F; see also the *Life of Timoleon (passim)* and the second part of the *Life of Alexander*, cf. Schmidt (1999) 294-298; further examples in Aalders (1982) 22-23 and Frazier (1996) 128-129.

¹¹ See Schmidt (1999) 315-324.

however: Anacharsis, who is the only barbarian with positive political views. These are mainly expressed in the *Septem Sapientium Convivium*, with some interesting remarks about the good king (152A), the best form of democracy (154E) and the best form of ‘domestic’ government (155A-D). As it appears, however, these must be understood as Plutarch’s own views. Besides, the positive image of Anacharsis was inherited from the long tradition around this figure.¹²

That the barbarians should constitute a negative pole in Plutarch’s works is, of course, by no means surprising. This is too obviously the characteristic of Greek thought in general as to need any further explanation here. Still, the use that Plutarch makes of this negative pole of the barbarians is, I believe, the interesting side of the question.

The example from *De fort. Alex.* (328A-329A) mentioned above has already shown that Plutarch uses the barbarians - the savage and lawless populations of Asia - as a foil to bring out the great achievements of Alexander and the superiority of the Greek political system, based on values such as πόλις, νόμος and εἰρήνη. The same can be observed about the action of Timoleon in Sicily, another example of the triumph of Greek civilization over tyrants and barbarians combined (*Tim.* 35.1-4): in contrast with the savage state to which the island had been reduced (νῆσον ἐξηγριωμένην), Plutarch highlights Timoleon’s achievements in four short formulas which celebrate the major political values of the Greeks, i.e. ‘conclusion of war’ (πολέμου τις λύσις), ‘institution of law’ (νόμων θέσις), ‘settlement of territory’ (χώρας κατοικισμός) and ‘arrangement of civil polity’ (πολιτείας διάταξις). These are, almost to the word, identical with those of Alexander. They mark a clear contrast between the ‘lawless’ and the ‘lawful’ and demonstrate the superiority of ‘democracy’ over tyranny and barbarity.

This opposition between tyranny and ‘democratic’ values is a concept which occurs also in relation with monarchy, although in a slightly different way, in the *Life of Cleomenes* (13.1-3): in this fairly long passage, Plutarch effectfully contrasts the wealth and extravagance, haughtiness and pomp of the ‘other kings’¹³ with the simple, plain and unpretentious manners of Cleomenes, and concludes by saying that people who came in contact with him ‘were completely won over’ (κατεδημαγωγοῦντο). The use of this word at the end of the passage is very interesting, as its usual negative meaning is clearly to be replaced by a positive tone.

¹² On the figure of Anacharsis in Plutarch’s works, see Kindstrand (1981) 44-48 and Ungefehr-Kortus (1996) 146-186; also Schmidt (1999) 260-261.

In accordance with the context, the translation offered by Flacelière and Chambry seems particularly apt: ‘ils étaient conquis par ses manières démocratiques’ (‘they were completely won over by his democratic manners’).¹⁴

Of course, in the latter passage, the distinction is not between ‘monarchy’ and ‘democracy’ (since Cleomenes himself is a king), but between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ monarchy. Interestingly enough, this theme also comes up with some insistence in the *Life of Alexander*. The famous saying of Alexander at the battle of Issos, after the Macedonian had taken hold of Darius’ immensely rich tent, immediately comes to mind: ‘This, as it would seem, is to be king’ (Τοῦτον ην, ὡς ἔοικεν, ἐφη, τὸν βασιλεύειν, *Alex.* 20.13). The meaning of this sentence has been diversely interpreted, but the right interpretation seems to be, once more, that of Flacelière and Chambry, who understand: ‘Voilà donc en quoi consistait pour Darios la royauté’ (‘This is what, in the eyes of Darius, it meant to be king’).¹⁵ If this interpretation is correct, it implicitly presents Alexander, by contrast to Darius, as the ‘good’ king. Alexander shows indeed much indifference to all this incredible wealth, which is highlighted even more by the contrast with the attitude of Alexander’s own soldiers, who ‘were like dogs in their eagerness to pursue and track down the wealth of the Persians’ (24.3). Alexander’s unconcern for money is also illustrated later in the *Life* (57.1-2), when he ordered the booty accumulated by his army to be burnt before setting off toward India. This indifference to money is the attitude of the ‘good’ king, as is explicitly said in *De fort. Alex.* 342A:

Αλεξάνδρῳ δὲ ἐπέταττε ἡ Ἀρετὴ τὸν βασιλικὸν καὶ θεῖον ἄθλον, οὐ τέλος ην οὐ χρυσὸς υπὸ μυρίων καμήλων περικομιζόμενος οὐδὲ τρυφαὶ Μηδικαὶ καὶ τράπεζαι καὶ γυναικεῖς οὐδὲ Χαλυβώνιος οιωσ οὐδὲ Υρκανικοὶ ἰχθύες, ἀλλ ἐνὶ κόσμῳ κοσμήσαντα πάντας ἀνθρώπους μιᾶς ὑπηκόους ἡγεμονίας καὶ μιᾶς ἐθάδας διαιτῆς καταστῆσαι.

‘But upon Alexander it was Virtue who laid the kingly and god-like Labour, the end and aim of which was not gold, carried about by countless camels, nor the Persian luxury, banquets, and women, nor the wine of Chalybon, nor the fish of Hyrcania, but to order all men by one law and to render them submissive to one rule and accustomed to one manner of life.’

¹³ It may well be that Plutarch had Hellenistic rather than barbarian kings in mind here, but his description matches all the negative stereotypes of barbarian monarchy as well. See Marasco (1981) 459-465; Schmidt (1999) 128-132.

¹⁴ Flacelière-Chambry (1976) 53.

¹⁵ Flacelière-Chambry (1975) 55 n. 2.

A similar idea is implied in the words of the Persians ambassadors, impressed by young Alexander's superior intelligence (*De fort. Alex.* 342B): 'This boy is a "great king", our king is only wealthy' (ὁ παῖς οὗτος βασιλεὺς μέγας, ὁ δὲ ἡμέτερος πλούσιος).

The theme of Alexander as the 'good' king also comes up in the description of his attitude towards the Persian women (Darius' mother, wife and two of his daughters), taken prisoners after that same battle of Issos. The respect which Alexander shows for these women is explicitly presented as 'the most beautiful and most royal favour' (ἡ δὲ καλλίστη καὶ βασιλικωτάτη χάρις ην..., *Alex.* 21.5) and a few lines below Plutarch explains that Alexander did not touch any of these women because 'as it would seem, he considered the mastery of himself a more kingly thing than the conquest of his enemies' (ἀλλὰ Αλέξανδρος, ὡς ἔοικε, τοῦ νικᾶν τοὺς πολεμίους τὸ κρατεῖν ἐαυτοῦ βασιλικώτερον ἥγούμενος, *Alex.* 21.7). And a few chapters later (*Alex.* 30.1-14), Alexander's noble attitude is praised by Darius himself!

Likewise, the barbarian *τρυφή* ('luxury') to which Alexander's companions have succumbed gives Plutarch the opportunity of presenting Alexander as the 'good' king, since Alexander explains to his friends that 'it is a very servile thing to be luxurious, but a very royal thing to toil' (δουλικώτατον μέν ἐστι τὸ τρυφᾶν, βασιλικώτατον δὲ τὸ πονεῖν, *Alex.* 40.2), and later on, being criticized by his friends, he says 'that it was the lot of a king to confer favours and be illspoken of therefore' (φάσκων βασιλικὸν ειναι τὸ κακῶς ἀκούειν εν ποιοῦντα, *Alex.* 41.2).

Just as in the *Cleomenes*-passage quoted above, there is a clear shift here from a political concept ('monarchy') towards a moral issue (the 'good' king), which is quite revealing of Plutarch's moralism. More importantly, however, the previous examples show an all too obvious contrast between the barbarians, either as lawless people or as paradigms of monarchy, and the values which, in the eyes of Plutarch, make the superiority of the *Greek* political system and the *Greek* civilization in general. This is most explicit in the cases of Alexander and Timoleon, but also quite obvious with Cleomenes. It seems legitimate, then, to ask where the Romans stand within this dichotomy. As it appears, Plutarch uses this method of contrast for the Romans in the same way as for the Greeks, and yet in a slightly different manner. An illustration of this is offered in a passage of the *Quaestiones Romanae* (269A) which has been often discussed in recent publications¹⁶:

¹⁶ See in particular Preston (2001) 97-98 and Goldhill (2002) 269-270, with further bibliography.

Διὰ τί τὸν Ἰανὸν διπρόσωπον οἴονται γεγονέναι καὶ γράφουσιν οὕτω καὶ πλάττουσιν; Πότερον ὅτι τῷ μὲν γένει Ἐλλην ἐκ Περραιβίας ην, ὡς ἱστοροῦσιν, διαβὰς δ εἰς Ιταλίαν καὶ συνοικήσας τοῖς αὐτόθι βαρβάροις μετέβαλε καὶ γλωτταν καὶ δίαιταν· ἥ μᾶλλον ὅτι τοὺς περὶ τὴν Ιταλίαν φυτοῖς ἀγρίοις καὶ ἀνόμοις χρωμένους ἔθεσιν εἰς ἔτερον βίου σχῆμα, πείσας γεωργεῖν καὶ πολιτευεσθαι, μετέβαλε καὶ μετεκόσμησεν;

‘Why do they suppose Janus to have been two-faced and so represent him in painting and sculpture? Is it because, as they relate, he was by birth a Greek from Perrhaebia, and, when he had crossed to Italy and had settled among the savages there, he changed both his speech and his habits? Or is it rather because he changed the people of Italy to another manner and form of life by persuading a people which had formerly made use of wild plants and lawless customs to till the soil and to live under organized government?’

The interesting point is that Janus, who is definitely a Roman god, is presented in this passage as being of Greek origin, which means that the elements of civilization he introduces among the barbarians are to be understood as Greek values. This short passage should certainly not be over-estimated, but it is quite revealing of Plutarch’s general attitude.

Another illustration of this can be found, for instance, in the *Life of Lucullus*. The idea spreads over several chapters. In short, when Lucullus has overcome king Mithridates, he is said to have restored order in the province of Asia by introducing ‘justice’ (δίκης, 20.1), ‘laws’ (θεσμῶν, 20.1; πολλῆς εὐνομίας, 23.1) and ‘peace’ (πολλῆς εἰρήνης, 23.1), i.e. exactly the same values as were highlighted for the Greek heroes Alexander and Timoleon. At first sight, then, this looks like a clear instance illustrating the fact that Greece and Rome shared the same values in Plutarch’s eyes. However, as Simon Swain has shown, throughout the *Life* the accent is put on Lucullus’ Hellenism, and therefore the values he defends are, in fact, also to be understood as typically Greek.¹⁷

Slightly different is the case of Sertorius (*Sert.* 14.1-4):

ἐκ τε δὴ τούτων θαυμαζόμενος ἦγαπάτο παρὰ τοῖς βαρβάροις ὁ Σερτώριος, καὶ ὅτι Ἀρμαικοῖς ὄπλισμοῖς καὶ τάξεσι καὶ συνθήμασι ἀφαιρων τὸ μανικὸν καὶ θηριώδες αὐτῶν τῆς ἀλκῆς ἀντὶ ληστηρίου μεγάλου στρατὸν ἐποιεῖτο τὴν δύναμιν. ... Μάλιστα δ ειλεν αὐτοὺς τὰ τῶν παιδῶν. Τοὺς γὰρ εὐγενεστάτους ἀπὸ τῶν ἐθνῶν συναγαγὼν εἰς Ὁσκαν, πόλιν μεγάλην, διδασκάλους ἐπιστήσας Ἐλληνικῶν τε καὶ Ἀρμαϊκῶν μαθημάτων, ἔργῳ μὲν ἐξωμηρεύσατο, λόγῳ δ ἐπαίδευεν, ὡς ἀνδράσι γενομένοις πολιτείας τε μεταδώσων καὶ ἀρχῆς.

¹⁷ Swain (1992).

‘In consequence of these successes Sertorius was admired and loved by the Barbarians, and especially because by introducing Roman arms and formations and signals he did away with their frenzied and furious display of courage, and converted their forces into an army, instead of a huge band of robbers. (...) But most of all were they captivated by what he did with their boys. Those of the highest birth, namely, he collected together from the various peoples, at Osca, a large city, and set over them teachers of Greek and Roman learning; thus in reality he made hostages of them, while ostensibly he was educating them, with the assurance that when they became men he would give them a share in administration and authority’.

Here, Sertorius is described as introducing two major values: military discipline and education (allegedly in view of forming the young for the duties government and administration). These values may be considered genuinely Roman, especially military discipline, but it should be pointed out that Plutarch cannot refrain from saying that the education given to these young barbarians was Greek as well as Roman.

In sum, there is always some Greekness lurking when it comes to the values introduced by Romans. The contrast with the barbarians has shown that the Romans are clearly on the ‘good’ side, so to say, except that this ‘good’ side is to be understood as Greek.

However, I have not noted contrasting examples involving Romans and barbarians where a reflection on the ‘good king’ would be going on as in the cases of Alexander and Cleomenes. This, of course, may be due to the cautiousness of Plutarch regarding this rather delicate question, with the unavoidable reference to the political system of the Roman empire. But such a contrasting discussion may actually be going on in Plutarch, though implicitly rather than explicitly. With the barbarians, and especially the barbarian monarchy, Plutarch has set up a negative standard by which the Greek and Roman leaders are or may be judged. It works through *exempla* and may thus be deduced by the reader himself even without explicit statements by Plutarch.¹⁸ The barbarian monarchy is a powerful example of what a king should *not* be. With this counter-example in mind, the reader will be able to judge the Greek and Roman ‘kings’ or ‘king-like’ figures on their positive values (as, for instance, in the cases of Alexander, Cleomenes, and Numa¹⁹), but also on their wrong-doings and shortcomings (as,

¹⁸ A similar idea is expressed by Aalders (1982) 22-24 in relation with the Hellenistic kings.

¹⁹ For a positive evaluation of Numa as opposed to a barbarian stereotype, see *Num.* 3.7-8; for Alexander and Cleomenes, see above.

again, for Alexander, but also Demetrius, Antonius, Caesar²⁰). But here we are touching upon a much wider, moral issue, which lays beyond the scope of this modest contribution.

²⁰ Cf. barbarian-like features in the behaviour of Demetrius: *Demetr.* 1.7-8, 14.2-4, 41.5-8, 42.1-11; of Antonius: *Ant.* 9.5-9, 19.4, 28.1-2, 37.3-6, 56.6-10; Alexander's 'barbarization': from *Alex.* 42 onwards; Caesar's aspiration to monarchy: *Caes.* 57.1-2, 60.1-2.

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Abstract

Although the barbarians are not central to Plutarch's political thought, they nevertheless offer an interesting insight into certain aspects of it. They are generally represented either as 'lawless' people or as paradigms of an absolute monarchy, and thus constitute a negative pole in Plutarch's works. As such, they function as a standard against which Greek and Roman leaders and institutions may be measured and judged. As in the case of Alexander, the image of the savage and lawless barbarians works as a foil to bring out the superiority of the Greek political system. The action of Timoleon in Sicily is another such example of the triumph of Greek political culture. Furthermore, the negative image of the barbarian monarchy generates an anti-model of the 'good' monarchy. This leads to an explicit discussion of the theme of 'good' king in the case of Alexander, but may also function as an implicit reference to the political system of the Roman empire.

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