I. PLUTARCH'S LIFE

The fifth and fourth century BC were truly the pinnacle of Greek history and culture. In those golden days, one could deliberate on political matters with Themistocles and Pericles; discuss our human condition with Socrates and Plato and the past with Herodotus and Thucydides; watch the superb plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides; visit the brand-new Acropolis at Athens or consult Apollo at Delphi; drop in at Polyclitus' workshop or marvel at a skilfully decorated black-figure Panathenaic amphora. It was, however, also a period in which Greeks were still Greeks, whereas the rest were conveniently despised as barbarians. Greeks confidently bashed barbarian brains in (at Marathon, for instance, or Plataea) and were even proud of it. After all, they did it in a culturally justified way. With fellow Greeks, matters were somewhat different. Their brains were likewise crushed, to be sure, and even in such cases, the slaughter was usually not devoid of a certain feeling of ideological superiority, yet to refined Greek ears, the cracking of Greek skulls must have sounded differently from the smashing of the skull of an ordinary effeminate barbarian. Athenians, Spartans, and Thebans could often drink each other's blood (in a skilfully decorated cup), no doubt, but in the end, they all remained fellow Greeks.

This moving scene radically changed with Alexander the Great. His military campaigns entailed an enormous increase of scale. More and more, Greek culture did not merely flourish in Greece itself (and, of course, in Asia Minor and southern Italy), but it also exerted its influence as far as Egypt and India. As a result, the traditional dichotomy between Greeks and barbarians had to be reinterpreted. Even former barbarians could now exercise the privilege of slaughtering one another in a culturally justified way. The world would never be the same.

In the days of Plutarch of Chaeronea, the situation was even more complex. At that time, Greece had long been subjected to Roman rule – or, according to the official Roman point of view, had been delivered from Macedonian dominion. Yet this liberation did not constitute a straightforward blessing for Greece. In 146 BC, Corinth was competently sacked by the troops of L. Mummius, the survivors were sold as slaves, and the works of art were destroyed or transported to Rome. Sixty years later, it was Athens' turn. After Sulla had quelled the Greeks' renewed hope of freedom by defeating the army of

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Mithridates VI Eupator at Chaeronea, Athens was plundered. In 48 BC, Greece again provided a battlefield for Roman armies, when the legions of Caesar and Pompey clashed with one another at Pharsalus in Thessaly. These continual confrontations took their toll and entailed a general population decline and an economic crisis in Greece. Applying Calgacus' pointed maxim (Tacitus, *Agr.* 30.5), including its rhetorical hyperbole, one could say that the Romans turned Greece 'into a desolation and then called it peace'.

Even if Greece had not completely been changed into a desolate wilderness, the situation was far from rosy. In Plutarch's *On the obsolescence of oracles*, the character Ammonius describes the contemporary circumstances as follows (413F–414A):

> Greece has far more than its share in the general depopulation which the earlier discords and the wars have wrought throughout practically the whole inhabited earth, and...today the whole of Greece would hardly muster three thousand men-at-arms, which is the number that the one city of the Megarians sent forth to Plataea.[1]

This statement, again, is not without some rhetorical exaggeration for the sake of the argument,[2] yet it is not totally unfounded. The Greek mainland suffered hard times indeed.

In 27 BC, Greece became a Roman province, governed by a proconsul with praetorian rank who had his seat at Corinth (which had been refounded as the Roman *Colonia Laus Iulia Corinthiensis*). This inaugurated a period of relative stability (although the Greeks, true to their reputation, were always prone to sedition) and even a gradual economic revival. Due to the definitive loss of all their political and military powers, the Greeks had no choice but to retreat to the safe ground of their cultural supremacy. They knew well enough that they were politically toothless but invincible on the battlefield of education. Thus, they emphasized the brilliant achievements of their famous predecessors in literary works. The heroic victories over the Persians at Marathon, Salamis, and Plataea, for instance, or the lasting achievements of great figures like Pericles and Lycurgus were praised to the skies – although there was no prospect of imitating them in real life. The Greeks, in short, were relegated to their schools and there fed upon their great past, which was for them not merely a source of pride but

[1] The translations, unless otherwise indicated, are borrowed from the Loeb Classical Library, often with slight modifications.

[2] See esp. Alcock 1993: 25–92 and *passim*.

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part and parcel of their identity. Being Greek meant being the intellectual heir of this unrivalled Greek tradition; being Greek, in short, became tantamount to being *pepaideumenos* (an educated man) – at least for those who felt they fitted that description. And the Romans, strikingly enough, soon took over this ambition and tried to be as cultivated as the Greeks. Horace's apt saying that 'conquered Greece conquered its rough victor' (*Epistles* 2.1.156) was pertinent indeed, and the attitude of the Roman members of Plutarch's circle actually provides one of its most illustrative examples (see below).

The order and relative rest brought about through the Roman rule also yielded new opportunities at the local level. Little by little, the Greek *poleis* began to recover from the previous rough times. In all likelihood, this also happened in Chaeronea, Plutarch's hometown. Chaeronea was only a little town, though with a great history. There the Greeks lost their freedom in the decisive battle against Philip of Macedon in 338 BC. There, as mentioned above, they also lost their dream of liberation when Sulla defeated Mithridates' army. Chaeronea occupied a strategic position, on the road that connected southern and northern Greece, and with a good connection to the Corinthian Gulf, which made it attractive for trade. Its vast plain did not merely qualify as a perfect battlefield but could also be exploited for agricultural purposes. The local aristocracy could benefit from this favourable location in order to increase their wealth and consolidate their power. It is likely indeed that Chaeronea, like most Greek cities in that period, was controlled and administrated by a few aristocratic families – families like that of Plutarch.

1. Plutarch's family

There can be no doubt that Plutarch was the scion of a rich and noble family that probably owned substantial pieces of fruitful land. A passage from *On the slowness of divine punishments* suggests that the family claimed descent from King Opheltas of Thessaly and from Daiphantus, a famous commander from Phocis (558A–B). About Plutarch's great-grandfather Nicarchus, we only know that he was forced by Antony's troops to carry wheat on his shoulders, down to Anticyra (on the Gulf of Corinth), with whips (*Ant.* 68.7–8). Plutarch's grandfather Lamprias is much better known. He often

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appears in the *Table Talk* as an agreeable, cultivated, and intelligent table companion, showing a basic knowledge of poetry and philosophy and being capable of independent thinking.[3] Plutarch's father is characterized along the same lines. Several scholars argue that he appears as less cultivated and more superficial than Lamprias,[4] but on closer inspection, he turns out to be no less familiar with poets and philosophers (615E–616B) and he even criticizes Aristotle (656C–D). Moreover, he often raises interesting questions that provide the starting point for philosophical discussions (642A; 655E–F; 656C–D). This, in Plutarch's eyes, is a typical feature of the ideal teacher,[5] so that, in this respect at least, Plutarch's father is not inferior to his grandfather Lamprias. He generally appears as a broad-minded intellectual, the kind of man, indeed, who takes care that his children receive an excellent education and are introduced into cultivated aristocratic circles.

As far as we know, Plutarch had two brothers. The elder one, Lamprias (called after his grandfather), is the main speaker in two dialogues (*On the face that appears in the orb of the moon* and *On the obsolescence of oracles*) and frequently intervenes in the *Table Talk* too.[6] He is portrayed as a particularly gifted (626A) and clever man, thoroughly familiar with the different aspects of the rich intellectual tradition, intelligent and funny, never afraid of provoking his interlocutors with controversial points of view. Like Plutarch, he had been a student of Ammonius (*De E* 385D–386A) and indeed usually thinks along Platonic lines.[7] Finally, Lamprias was apparently active at the oracle of Lebadeia (*De def. or.* 431C). In short, he had an intellectual profile that was very similar to that of Plutarch himself.

Plutarch's other brother, Timon, participates in the discussion of the dialogue *On the slowness of divine punishments* and may have been the principal speaker of the lost dialogue *On the soul*. His interventions in

[3] *Quaest. conv.* 622E; 669C–D; 678D–679E; 680A–B; 684A–B; 684C–D; 738A–C; see also *Ant.* 28.3–12.

[4] E.g. Ziegler 1951: 642; C. Jones 1971: 9; Sirinelli 2000: 29; cf. Volkmann 1869: i.21. In *Quaest. conv.* 641F–642A, he is characterized as an expert in horse-breeding.

[5] Roskam 2004a: 103 and 108–13 on Ammonius.

[6] *Quaest. conv.* 617E–619A; 626A–C; 643E–644D; 669C–E; 670E–671C; 705B–706E; 715A–716C; 726D–727A; 740B–D.

[7] In *Quaest. conv.* 635A–B, the character 'Plutarch' points out that his brother prefers The Walk (τὸν περίπατον) and The Lyceum (τὸ Λύκειον) to the Epicurean Garden. This statement, however, should be understood in its sympotic context, as an apt saying, meant to defend Lamprias against the attacks of the Epicurean Xenocles and to introduce an interesting topic for discussion. Moreover, the characterization is not at odds with Lamprias' Platonic outlook. As a matter of fact, every Platonist would prefer Aristotle to Epicurus.

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the *Table Talk* illustrate a similar *paideia* ('education'; 616C–F and 639B–D): yet another fruit from the same tree! Plutarch underlines his warm feelings for his brother Timon in a well-known passage from *On brotherly love* (487D–E):

> And for myself, though I have received from Fortune many favours which call for gratitude, that my brother Timon's affection for me has always balanced and still balances all the rest, no one is unaware who has ever had any dealings whatever with me.

Such statements are often taken at face value in scholarly literature and one easily understands why. After all, short *obiter dicta* like this one constitute by far the most important source about Plutarch's life and personality, so that it is difficult to completely ignore them. Yet we should bear in mind that Plutarch's self-disclosure is always closely connected with its argumentative context. This also appears in the above quotation, where the emphasis on Plutarch's great brotherly love in a treatise which precisely deals with this subject directly contributes to Plutarch's own image-building as a consistent and thus trustworthy philosopher who practises what he preaches. Some methodological caution is justified, then, although this does not imply that all of Plutarch's statements about himself and his experiences should a priori be regarded with great suspicion. They often provide a glimpse into his personality or an interesting snapshot from his life and can as such be used, with due caution, as an interesting source for Plutarch's daily activities and interests (see also fr. 184).

2. Childhood and youth

Plutarch was probably born around AD 45. This can be inferred from his dialogue *On the E at Delphi*, where he relates that he was present in Delphi when Nero visited the sanctuary (385B), that is, in AD 67. At that point, Plutarch was still a young man (391E). The term *neos* is, of course, rather vague, but if we may presume that Plutarch was then in his early twenties, he was indeed born around AD 45.[8]

[8] He may in fact have been a little bit younger. In 387F, he says that he was at that time still fond of mathematics but would soon embrace the maxim 'avoid extremes' when he had become a member of the Academy (ἐν Ἀκαδημείᾳ γενόμενος). This suggests that either he had only recently become a student of Ammonius or even that he was not yet a member of his school. In that case, the date of his birth may have been closer to AD 50.

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The wealth and culture of his family guaranteed an excellent education. Thus the little Plutarch soon wrote his first letters on his tablets, was later introduced to the poets, and gradually acquired an encyclopaedic knowledge. His body was not neglected either: the young child trained his muscles and ran the *stade* and the double course. Higher studies followed, presumably in nearby Athens, where Plutarch first developed his rhetorical skills. The impact of this study of rhetoric can be felt throughout his life. Scholars have sometimes postulated an early phase in Plutarch's literary career in which rhetorical interests seem to be predominant;[9] in line with this hypothesis, a few 'rhetorical' speeches (see Chapter III, §5) are regarded as youthful works. This is not impossible, but no compelling arguments can be found for such a view, as a similar rhetorical approach is not absent from his later works either. It is prominent in Plutarch's philosophical polemics, in several discourses, in many sections from the *Parallel Lives*, and even in several late works, where we can easily find many passages that combine philosophical depth with the virtuoso panache of the brilliant orator. We do not know the name of Plutarch's teacher of rhetoric, but it is certain that he exerted a strong and lifelong influence on his talented pupil.

Plutarch's studies in rhetoric were followed by philosophical studies at the school of the Platonist Ammonius.[10] There he learned the basics of Platonic philosophy, with its radical dichotomy between the realm of intelligible being and the sensible world of becoming. There he also learned what it meant to look for the truth, to pursue virtue and insight – in short, to be a philosopher. Indeed, in Ammonius' school, Plutarch joined the guild of philosophers, at a fairly early age. He would never leave it.

During the following years, he would have further opportunities to develop his talents in the best possible way. He was still relatively young when he travelled to Alexandria.[11] There he could discover a flourishing intellectual centre with a well-established Platonic tradition and a superb library.[12] And in his hometown, Chaeronea, he entered

[9] See, e.g., Krauss 1912: 4; Ziegler 1951: 716–17; Flacelière 1964: 16; C. Jones 1971: 14–16 and 76; Lamberton 2001: 44; see also Hirzel 1895: ii.124–7.

[10] On the person of Ammonius, see C. Jones 1967; on his philosophical profile, see Opsomer 2009a.

[11] His grandfather Lamprias was still alive at that point: *Quaest. conv.* 678C–E. According to Stadter 2015b: 73 and 194–5, Plutarch went to Alexandria on an embassy to Vespasian's court in AD 69 or 70. See also Stadter 2015b: 188–98 on Plutarch's Alexandrias.

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upon a political career. Plutarch recalls how he was sent in his youth on an embassy to the proconsul in Corinth (*Praec. ger. reip.* 816D):

> I recollect that when I was still a young man, I was sent with another as envoy to the proconsul; the other man was somehow left behind; I alone met the proconsul and accomplished the business. Now when I had returned and was to make the report of our mission, my father left his seat and told me in private not to say 'I went' but 'we went,' not 'I said,' but 'we said,' and in all other ways thus to associate my colleague in a joint report.

This charming anecdote shows us Plutarch's father as an intelligent politician but also throws light on the situation of the young Plutarch himself. The Chaeronean community apparently put its trust in the young man in order to negotiate its affairs with the proconsul. This illustrates again the influence of Plutarch's family – an ordinary farmer's son would not have been sent to the proconsul – but also shows that, at that time, the Chaeroneans already recognized the intellectual capacities of Plutarch and were willing to put their confidence in him. Even if the issue was in all likelihood not a matter of life or death, it nevertheless entailed some responsibility to represent the whole community before the proconsul. And thus, Plutarch quite early in his life came into contact with the powers that be.

He was still young when a voyage to Rome brought him to the beating heart of the empire. This first trip to Rome has more than once been understood in the context of Plutarch's supposed ambitions as an itinerant sophist.[13] In Rome, he would have tried to gain a reputation with the Roman audience and he may even have made a tour through Italy for the sake of such self-promotion. This hypothesis, however, ignores the fact that the young intellectual who went to Rome had already been studying for several years in Ammonius' school. In other words, Plutarch, in spite of his rhetorical talents, arrived in the city as a young intellectual and philosopher. In the proem to the *Life of Demosthenes*, he relates himself how he passed his days in Rome (*Dem.* 2.2):

[12] Eudorus of Alexandria helped to lay the foundations of Middle Platonist philosophy in the first century BC; see Dillon 1977: 115–35; Bonazzi 2007. Closer in time to Plutarch, Philo of Alexandria developed a sophisticated exegesis of the Old Testament on the basis of Platonist philosophy. Nothing suggests, though, that Plutarch was familiar with Philo's works.

[13] See, e.g., C. Jones 1971: 14–15. Cf. also Russell 1972: 7, who argues that Plutarch first aimed at a brilliant career as a sophist but failed and then turned to philosophy.

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During the time when I was in Rome and various parts of Italy I had no leisure to practise in the Roman language, owing to my public duties (χρειῶν πολιτικῶν) and the number of my pupils in philosophy (τῶν διὰ φιλοσοφίαν πλησιαζόντων).

This suggests clearly enough that his interests and activities in Rome had always been philosophical. His lectures probably dealt with the same kind of topics which he so often discussed later, viz. general moral issues or historical themes approached from a philosophical perspective. The clear distinction that is often made between a rhetorical and a philosophical period in Plutarch's life, each with its own ambitions, is not based on tangible evidence. Plutarch never felt any difficulty in combining both, with rhetoric acting as the servant of philosophy (*ancilla philosophiae*).

3. Adulthood

As Plutarch reached manhood, he began to manage his own *oikos* (household), administering his property, controlling his finances, directing his slaves, and organizing his personal affairs. This aspect of his life is not directly discussed in his works and has received little attention in scholarly literature, although a well-functioning *oikos* is the material *sine qua non* of all his writing and thinking. It is likely that Plutarch entrusted the daily management of his property to a steward, but his voluminous oeuvre is, at least indirectly, also the fruit of hard-working slaves and a good major-domo.

Whereas we do not know the latter's name, we have more information about Plutarch's wife and children. An important source in this respect is the *Consolation to his wife*, a letter in which Plutarch comforts his wife, Timoxena, for the premature death of their little daughter. Timoxena is there characterized as a virtuous and cultivated woman, a paragon of moderation and maternal love.[14] Once again, however, we should bear in mind that Plutarch's self-disclosure in this work should not be taken at face value but also reflects, at least to a certain extent, his attempt to present himself, his wife, and his children as a model family.[15] The consolation also reveals that several of Plutarch's children died young: apart from the little Timoxena (named after her

[14] In *Con. praec.* 145A, Plutarch refers to a work *On love of ornament* (Περὶ φιλοκοσμίας) written by Timoxena.

[15] Russell 1993b; Claassen 2004. See also, however, Baltussen 2009: 85–7, for arguments in support of the sincerity of Plutarch's personal engagement in the *Consolation to his wife*.

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mother), two sons did not reach adulthood. Three other sons survived their father. Autobulus and Plutarch received the treatise *On the generation of the soul in the Timaeus* (1012A), and Soclarus is mentioned near the beginning of *How the young man should listen to poetry* (15A). Later inscriptions show that at least two of them were Roman citizens.[16]

At home, Plutarch directed his own Platonic school. This did not have a strongly institutionalized and official character, but was rather a kind of private school where a group of young students and more mature adults met one another for philosophical discussions and instruction.[17] They read and commented upon important texts from the philosophical canon, such as Plato's *Timaeus*, a dialogue that was much discussed in Platonic circles and about which Plutarch had his own idiosyncratic views (see Chapter II, §3.1). Alongside Plato, other authors from other philosophical schools likewise received attention. For instance, the polemical treatise of the Epicurean Colotes entitled *That conformity to the doctrines of the other philosophers makes it even impossible to live* was first read in a group and then systematically refuted by Plutarch (*Adv. Col.* 1107E–1108C). After Plutarch's lengthy reply, the company continued the discussion and elaborated further arguments against the Epicurean view (*Non posse* 1086D; see Chapter II, §3.2). This introduction to the philosophical tradition was further completed by a series of discourses (διαλέξεις) on different topics (ethics as well as physics, history, and literature, and so on).[18] The curriculum at Plutarch's school, then, combined a fairly broad *paideia* with philosophical depth, stimulating independent thinking and a sincere search for the truth.

Plutarch's *oikos* and his school were not separated by high walls but often merged with one another. This especially appears from the *Table Talk*, in which Plutarch recalls the philosophical conversations that were held over wine, both at his home and elsewhere. Setting aside the difficult problem of the historicity of the talks,[19] we can learn much about the kind of topics that he and his friends were

[16] See *SIG* 844A on Autobulus and *IG* 9.1.61.41–2 on Soclarus.
[17] See esp. Glucker 1978.
[18] See esp. La Matina 2000; also Roskam 2009b: 26–8.
[19] Most scholars now adopt a sensible middle position, arguing that the talks are rooted in conversations that really took place but that Plutarch himself significantly elaborated and polished the original arguments. See, e.g., Ziegler 1951: 886–7; Teodorsson 1989: 12–15; Pordomingo Pardo 1999; Sirinelli 2000: 379–82; Titchener 2009; Roskam 2010: 46–8; Klotz and Oikonomopoulou 2011: 3–12; Meeusen 2016: 162–5; Nikolaidis 2017: 260–3.

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interested in, and about their behaviour during symposia. Several times, young students were present at these drinking parties and even intervened in the discussion. At such moments, the framework of the school and the informal perspective of friendly talks blend into each other. This results in a community of congenial *pepaideumenoi* who pass their time in learned philosophical conversations, in short, in philosophizing together (συμφιλοσοφεῖν).[20]

At this point we may take a closer look at the circle of Plutarch's friends and acquaintances. More than a hundred names can be found in his works, and all of them belong to the cultivated upper class.[21] Plutarch characterizes them as politicians and men of letters (ἄνδρες πολιτικοὶ καὶ φιλόλογοι)[22] and they are his main target readers.[23] Not surprisingly, several of them are philosophers, not only Platonists (like Plutarch's good friend Theon) but also Pythagoreans (Philinus), Stoics (Sarapion), and Epicureans (Boethus). Plutarch also mentions many doctors and several priests (including Nicandrus, his colleague Euthydemus, and Clea, priestess at Delphi). In short, we meet the *fine fleur* of the contemporary local aristocracy. Many of them were politically active (like Philopappus, Herculanus, or Euphanes) and belonged to distinguished families who had been influential for several generations. Furthermore, Plutarch's circle was open to powerful Romans who shared the same cultural background and had a similar intellectual profile. L. Mestrius Florus, for instance, consul under Vespasian (Suetonius, *Vesp.* 22) and later proconsul of Asia (*SIG* 820), is often mentioned in the *Table Talk* as an erudite interlocutor and a good friend. He also obtained Roman citizenship for Plutarch.[24] Even more important was Sosius Senecio, twice consul under Trajan (AD 99 and 107) and one of the most powerful men of his day. In Plutarch's works, he appears as a learned man, thoroughly familiar with literature and philosophy, and as a close friend.[25]

[20] Cf. the phrase διαλέγεσθαι καὶ συμφιλοσοφεῖν ('converse and philosophize together') in *Brut.* 12.3. For the term συμφιλοσοφεῖν, which expresses the activities in Plutarch's school very well, see also *De prof. in virt.* 77C; *De tuenda* 122B; *De genio Socr.* 578F; *Dion* 20.3; *Brut.* 24.1; *Sol.* 26.1; *Cic.* 24.8.

[21] See, e.g., Ziegler 1951: 665–96; C. Jones 1971: 39–64; Puech 1992; Sirinelli 2000: 167–98.

[22] *De tuenda* 137C; see also *Quaest. conv.* 715B; Van Hoof 2010: 23. On Plutarch's conception of philology, see Van der Stockt 2019.

[23] For Plutarch's readers, see, e.g., Wardman 1974: 37–48; Stadter 1988: 292–3 and 2015b: 45–55; Duff 2007–8: esp. 7–11; Muccioli 2012: 44–53 (on the *Parallel Lives*); and Van Hoof 2005–6 and 2010: 19–24 (on the *Moralia*).

[24] This appears from an inscription (*SIG* 829A) which mentions 'Mestrius Plutarchus the priest'.

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Several works (including the *Parallel Lives* and the *Table Talk*) were dedicated to him.

Plutarch, then, kept in touch with many members of the ruling elite. Yet an important caveat is in place here. Contrary to what is often suggested, this extensive network did not merely consist of staunch friendships. The many dedications tell us little about the actual relationship between Plutarch and his dedicatee,[26] and often rather illustrate Plutarch's networking strategies. Similarly, the shared conviviality of Plutarch's guests or hosts at different symposia need not presuppose intimate friendship but may equally well be rooted in the politics of a social player.[27] In one of his works (*On having many friends*), Plutarch unmasks πολυφιλία ('abundance of friends') as a contradiction in terms: true friends are extremely rare indeed. Elsewhere, he points out that the politician should have a powerful Roman friend in order to help him whenever necessary (*Praec. ger. reip.* 814C). This clearly reflects an insight into the importance of strategic networking, and the use of the singular (φίλον τινά) is perhaps not only motivated by a concern for feasibility – most young politicians would be more than glad to be on good terms with one powerful Roman – but even makes this position compatible with a philosophical perspective on friendship. In this light, Mestrius Florus, and later Sosius Senecio, qualify for being called Plutarch's Roman friends in the pregnant sense of the word; the others probably do not. Similarly, a few Greek aristocrats, such as Theon, Philinus, or Soclarus, may be considered as Plutarch's intimate friends. The others are involved in a subtle game of inclusion and exclusion, in which ties are strengthened for the sake of reciprocal benefit, and amicable contacts prove advantageous for all parties.

In order to build, expand, and maintain this large network, Plutarch often invited and hosted these men at his home in Chaeronea. No less often, he was himself invited by others and thus he frequently travelled through Greece. We find him back in Athens and in Delphi, but also in Aedepsus in Euboea (*Quaest. conv.* 667C), Corinth (675D), Elis (664B), Hyampolis (660D), Patras (629F), Sparta (*Lyc.* 18.2), and Tanagra (*Cons. ad ux.* 608B). He also returned to Rome. With Florus, he traversed Italy, visiting Bedriacum (*Oth.* 14.2), Brixellum

[25] He was present at the wedding of Plutarch's son; *Quaest. conv.* 666D.
[26] Thus correctly Russell 1972: 10–11.
[27] This aspect of Plutarch's persona is discussed in detail by Van Hoof 2010.

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(18.2), and Ravenna (*Mar.* 2.1). This tour through Italy is often connected with Plutarch's first trip to Rome, in line with the hypothesis of his ambitions as an itinerant sophist, but since, as we have seen, the latter theory lacks decisive proof, it is equally possible that this journey to the north of Italy took place at a later stage, after the contacts with Florus were already intensified. In Rome, Plutarch probably again lectured on philosophical subjects (*De cur.* 522D–E):

> When I was once lecturing in Rome, that famous Rusticus, whom Domitian later killed through envy at his repute, was among my hearers, and a soldier came through the audience and delivered to him a letter from the emperor. There was a silence and I, too, made a pause, that he might read his letter; but he refused and did not break the seal until I had finished my lecture and the audience had dispersed. Because of this incident everyone admired the dignity of the man.

Like so many anecdotes, this one is difficult to date. If the incident occurred during a later stay at Rome, as is sometimes assumed,[28] it again illustrates the continuity of Plutarch's career, in which public lectures were part and parcel of his activities as a philosopher.

All these journeys cast a different light on Plutarch's famous statement in the proem to the *Life of Demosthenes* (2.2): 'But as for me, I live in a small city, and I prefer to dwell there that it may not become smaller still.' This sentence is often quoted as evidence for Plutarch's patriotism and for his devotion to his native city.[29] This is precisely the impression that he wants to create, yet here, too, his self-disclosure is not devoid of subtle rhetoric.[30] Plutarch never hid himself away in the sticks. He was a citizen of Athens (*Quaest. conv.* 628A), Delphi, and Rome, as well as Chaeronea, and we may well recall that he was not at home when his daughter died. Chaeronea was probably, indeed, quite small, but it often had to get along without its most famous citizen.

There can be no doubt, though, about Plutarch's influential position in his hometown. Through his social standing, his broad network, and his erudition, he became one of the leading figures of the town. No

[28] Barrow 1967: 38; C. Jones 1971: 23; Puech 1992: 4856; *contra* Russell 1968: 132 and Flacelière and Irigoin 1987: xxxi.

[29] Dodds 1933: 98; C. Jones 1971: 3; Aalders 1982: 15; Titchener 2002. Plutarch's patriotism is frequently regarded as the main motivation for his attack on Herodotus. I argue against this view in Roskam 2017b.

[30] On this proem to *Demosthenes–Cicero*, see Mossman 1999; Zadorojnyi 2005; Beneker 2016; Chrysanthou 2018.

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wonder then that he held the eponymous archonship (*Quaest. conv.* 642F; cf. 693F). An inscription (*SIG* 829A; cf. *An seni* 785C–D) shows that he was also a member of the Amphictyonic Council.[31] Moreover, he did not avoid minor political duties. A passage from the *Political precepts* shows that he was once responsible for building activities in Chaeronea (811B–C):

> Epameinondas advanced the *telearchy* to a position of great consideration and dignity, though previously it had been nothing but a sort of supervision of the alleys for the removal of dung and the draining off of water in the streets. And no doubt I myself seem ridiculous to visitors in our town when I am seen in public, as I often am, engaged in such matters…But I say to those who criticize me for standing and watching tiles being measured or concrete or stones being delivered, that I am not building this for myself, but for my native place.

This is one further sample of Plutarch's sophisticated self-fashioning. It is far from plausible that he was himself actively working with shovel or pickaxe. We may presume that the *telearchy* was basically a smaller administrative task and that Plutarch cleverly used it to enhance his reputation as a benefactor of his community,[32] following the lead of the great philosophically trained statesman Epameinondas himself.[33]

Plutarch, then, was deeply involved in municipal politics, at both its higher and lower levels. This political commitment should be understood in light of his political philosophy, which in turn cannot be understood without insight into the precise situation of the *poleis* at that time and of the dynamics of local politics in general. As in most cities of Greece in that era, Chaeronea had a certain autonomy. Internal matters were decided upon by the council and the people. Though democracies by name, most cities were in fact aristocracies ruled by the most important families. These tried to keep the populace under control by large donations (for buildings and festivals, for instance) and in turn received honour and managed to maintain the social *status quo*. This so-called euergetic system is well documented

[31] He may also have been Boeotarch and Agonothete at the Pythian games (thus C. Jones 1971: 25–6, on the basis of *An seni* 785C; cf. Gianakaris 1970: 32), but this is beyond proof.

[32] See Carrière and Cuvigny 1984: 181: 'It is possible that Plutarch's modesty was a bit feigned, for it was very honourable, even in a small city, to take the initiative for building or to supervise works, as the inscriptions show' ('Il se peut que la modestie de Plutarque soit un peu feinte, car il était fort honorable, même dans une petite cité, de prendre l'initiative de constructions ou d'être le curateur des travaux, comme le montrent les inscriptions').

[33] See Wardman 1974: 102–3. Epameinondas broke the military supremacy of Sparta in the Battle of Leuctra (371 BC). As a result, his city, Thebes, for a while became the leading *polis* in Greece (until the Battle of Mantinea in 362 BC).

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through a great number of honorary inscriptions from the whole Greek world and through literary sources, and it is also discussed in Plutarch's political works (see Chapter IV, §7).

Finally, Plutarch maintained a strong relationship with the oracle at Delphi. At a mature age, he became one of the two priests of Apollo at the Delphic shrine (his colleague was Euthydemus; *Quaest. conv.* 700E).[34] The priesthood was for life and Plutarch would hold it for many Pythiads, as he says himself (*An seni* 792F). As well as several administrative responsibilities, the office entailed active involvement in ritual acts. Plutarch summarizes his duties very briefly as 'sacrificing, leading processions, and taking part in a chorus' (792F). While growing older, the Chaeronean philosopher continued to attend the rituals, with a crown on his head. His office did not require a permanent presence in Delphi, but it is more than likely that he often stayed at the sanctuary and was involved in the daily routine. For not every day of Plutarch's life was an intellectual banquet of high-minded philosophical discussions. Often, it was business as usual, with day-to-day worries and doubtless irritations. After all, even Plutarch was a mortal.

4. Old age and beyond

Plutarch himself was only too aware of this, even more so when he crossed the baneful threshold of old age. Several passages in his work suggest, however, that he had come to terms with his existence. He gladly welcomes the revival of Delphi (*De Pyth. or.* 409A–C), pointing to

> many additions in the form of buildings not here before and many restored that were dilapidated and in ruins…It is true that I feel kindly toward myself in so far as my zeal or services may have furthered these matters with the co-operation of Polycrates and Petraeus.[35]

And he repeatedly expresses his appreciation of the blessings of the *Pax Romana* (*De Pyth. or.* 408B–C):

[34] On Plutarch's priesthood at Delphi and its importance for his life and thinking, see Jaillard 2007; Casanova 2012; Thum 2013: 118–21; Stadter 2015b: 82–97.

[35] The 'I' speaking here is Theon, not Plutarch (see Schröder 1990: 15–18), yet the latter would no doubt have been willing to appropriate Theon's words.

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For my part, I am well content with the settled conditions prevailing at present, and I find them very welcome, and the questions which men now put to the god are concerned with these conditions. There is, in fact, profound peace and tranquillity; war has ceased, there are no wanderings of peoples, no civil strifes, no tyrannies, no other maladies and ills in Greece requiring many unusual remedial forces.[36]

Although it is always risky to isolate such passages from their context, it is hard to resist the conclusion that the old Plutarch was satisfied with his world and that he had reached the peace of mind he valued so highly.

His old age was a period of continuity and further consolidation. He remained active in local politics and continued his priesthood at Delphi, and, of course, he kept writing. It was also a period of great recognition. According to a late source, he received the *ornamenta consularia* from Trajan (*Suda* 4.150.27–9). These were usually awarded for personal services to the emperor, but sometimes also as a mere favour or as acknowledgement of a meritorious career.[37] If Plutarch indeed received the *ornamenta*, it is reasonable to suppose that it was through Senecio's intercession. The powerful Roman could thus pay back the big literary favours he had received from Plutarch, while the latter truly reaped the fruit of his friendship with a ruler (καρπὸν ἐκ φιλίας ἡγεμονικῆς, *Praec. ger. reip.* 814C). The *Suda* adds that governors of Illyria were told to ask Plutarch's advice before taking any decision. It is far from certain whether this information is reliable but, if it is, it was the result of a political network that had been built and maintained for decades.

Another late source (Syncellus, *Ecl. Chron.* 659 Dind. = p. 426 Mossh.) tells us that Hadrian made Plutarch procurator of Greece. This information, again based on a single and late source, is to be regarded with caution, although it cannot be ruled out that the philosopher did indeed receive this honour.[38] However that may be, he had reached the sunset of his life. We still have an honorary inscription for the new emperor Hadrian which mentions Plutarch as the *epimelete*

[36] Again Theon speaking (see previous note). See also *De fort. Rom.* 317B–C; *De tranq. an.* 469E; *An seni* 784F; *Praec. ger. reip.* 805A and 824C; Bravo García 1973: 185–9; Boulogne 1994: 37–8. According to Dillon 1997, Plutarch even regarded this universal Roman peace as the end of history.

[37] Rémy 1976. Quintilian for instance, had received them under Domitian.

[38] The testimony is accepted by Ziegler 1951: 657–8; Bowersock 1969: 57, 65, and 112; C. Jones 1971: 29–30 and 34; Carrière and Cuvigny 1984: 63–4; Flacelière and Irigoin 1987: li; Lamberton 2001: 12; and others. Swain 1996: 171–2 is more sceptical. On Plutarch's possible relations with Hadrian, see also Bowie 1997.

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or administrator of the Amphictyonic Council which administered the Delphic sanctuary (*SIG* 829A). What follows is silence, the silence of death. His belief in the immortality of the soul and his initiation into the mysteries of Dionysus (*Cons. ad ux.* 611D) may have comforted Plutarch in his last moments, together with the confident idea that he, after Horace's famous saying (*Carm.* 3.30.1), had completed a monument more lasting than bronze.

Plutarch's fame only grew after his death. Following a decree of the Amphictyonic Council, Delphi and Chaeronea honoured him with a herm with an inscription (*SIG* 843A). This was the beginning of an exceptionally rich reception history. He was often quoted by ancient authors and was not even forgotten in the Middle Ages. During the Byzantine period, the learned Maximus Planudes laid the basis of our Greek texts, while the first translations, and later the Aldine editions, were made in the Italian Renaissance. The famous French translation of Jacques Amyot (the *Parallel Lives* in 1559, the *Moralia* in 1572), followed by the English translation of Thomas North (1579), inaugurated a new phase in the reception of Plutarch's oeuvre, as he became a major source of inspiration of many coryphaei of Western cultural history. Authors like Shakespeare and Montaigne, Bacon, Ben Jonson, Racine, Rousseau, and many more, were deeply influenced by the Chaeronean. A detailed study of the reception history of Plutarch's work would easily fill several volumes; it falls, however, outside the scope of the present book.[39]

Plutarch, then, never died. His fame and influence lasted through the centuries.

A man from Seriphos told Themistocles that he did not owe his great reputation to his own efforts at all, but to his city. 'Very true,' retorted Themistocles, 'I should never have become famous if I had been a Seriphian, and neither would you if you had been an Athenian!'[40]

[39] The classic study is still Hirzel 1912. See also Aulotte 1965 (on Plutarch and Amyot); Konstantinovic 1989 (on Plutarch and Montaigne); and Pade 2007 (on Plutarch's *Lives* in fifteenth-century Italy). Also several collections of articles, including Gallo 1998; Ferreira 2002; Guerrier 2005; Aguilar and Alfageme 2006; Volpe Cacciatore 2009; Pérez Jiménez 2010; and Beck 2014a: 531–610. The most recent contribution is Xenophontos and Oikonomopoulou 2019, which contains a panorama of thorough discussions that range from late antiquity into the twentieth century.

[40] *Them.* 18.5; trans. Scott-Kilvert 1960.

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In this respect at least, Plutarch surpassed Themistocles. He did not need his native city, small as it was, in order to acquire perennial fame. Moreover, from his day on, Chaeronea was no longer only the city connected with the loss of Greek freedom and the destruction of the hope for the future. It had also become the place where Greek *paideia* celebrated one of its most impressive triumphs. Chaeronea, in short, was no longer the city of the great disaster: it had become the city of Plutarch.

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