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Plutarch’s Use of Anecdotes and the Date of *De Tranquillitate Animi*

Plutarch’s *De tranquillitate animi* had been regarded as an early work until Jones, in his seminal article on the chronology of Plutarch’s works, argued for a much later date (after 107 CE)¹. Although I agree with Jones’ late dating, I question his arguments for it. Instead, I argue for a *terminus post quem (TPQ)* around 110 CE by considering an unnoticed parallel between *De tranquillitate animi* and Plutarch’s *Caesar*. This parallel also illustrates Plutarch’s creative use of anecdotes.

Jones adduces three arguments for a late dating of *De tranq. an.* (1) Calling Minicius Fundanus ὁ κράτιστος, as Plutarch does at 464f, would be most fitting after Fundanus’ consulship (107 CE). (2) At 470c Plutarch ridicules the power hunger of Chians, Galatians, and Bithynians pursuing senatorial careers, thus alluding to political developments under Trajan. (3) *De tranq. an.* was probably written around the same time as *De cohibenda ira*, which also mentions the characters Fundanus and Eros, i.e. after 92-93 CE.

The first argument stands out because it points to a later date than the others. Jones must have regarded this argument as decisive, since he concludes that *De tranq. an.* was written after c. 107 CE². However, the term κράτιστος is a general show of respect and is not tied to a specific title or position³. There is no reason why Fundanus could not have been κράτιστος in Plutarch’s book years before 107 CE. Moreover, the ambitions of senators from the East were not exclusive to Trajan’s reign: Plutarch’s comment on this could just as well have been made in the time of Nerva (as Swain suggests) or even Domitian (as Pelling notes)⁴. If this is granted, the *TPQ* for *De tranq. an.* is pushed back to coincide more or less with the *TPQ* for *De coh. ira*: around 92-93 CE. Then again, the relative chronology of *De tranq. an.* and *De coh. ira* cannot be established and there is no indication that the two works were written around the same time apart from the shared mention of Fundanus and Eros, who could well have been

¹ C. P. Jones, “Towards a Chronology of Plutarch’s Works”, *JRS* 56, 1966, 62–63.

² Jones (n. 1) 73. Cf. also C. P. Jones, *Plutarch and Rome*, Oxford 1971, 137; S. Swain, *Hellenism and Empire. Language, Classicism, and Power in the Greek World AD 50-250*, Oxford 1996, 170 n. 102.

³ See E. Groag, “C. Minicius Fundanus,” *RE* 15.2, 1932, 1820 on this passage and E. Dickey, *Greek Forms of Address. From Herodotus to Lucian*, Oxford 1996, 143 on the epithet in general.

⁴ Swain (n. 2) 170; C. Pelling, “Political Philosophy,” in: M. Beck (ed.), *A Companion to Plutarch*, Malden 2014, 159.

long-time acquaintances of Plutarch's. In other words: that *De tranq. an.* is a late work cannot be argued on the basis of Jones' arguments.

I submit that a *TPQ* around 110 CE can be advanced on the basis of a subtle parallel between *De tranq. an.* and Plutarch's *Caesar*. In *De tranq. an.* Plutarch recalls how the excessive ambition of Alexander the Great led to despair:

Ἀλέξανδρος Ἀναξάρχου περὶ κόσμων ἀπειρίας ἀκούων ἐδάκρυε, καὶ τῶν φίλων ἐρωτώντων ὅ τι πέπονθεν, ‘οὐκ ἄξιον’ ἔφη ‘δακρύειν, εἰ κόσμων ὅντων ἀπείρων ἐνὸς οὐδέπω κύριοι γεγόναμεν;’ (*De tranq. an.* 466d-e; ed. Teubner)

Alexander wept when he heard Anaxarchus discourse about an infinite number of worlds, and when his friends inquired what ailed him, 'Is it not worthy of tears,' he said, 'that, when the number of worlds is infinite, we have not yet become lords of a single one?' (tr. Loeb)

In *Caesar*, Plutarch describes how Caesar experiences a moment of dejection which is a bit more down-to-earth but otherwise remarkably similar to that of Alexander, whose biography provides the parallel to *Caesar*:

ὅμοιώς δὲ πάλιν ἐν Ἰβηρίᾳ σχολῆς οὕσης ἀναγινώσκοντά τι τῶν περὶ Ἀλεξάνδρου γεγραμμένων σφόδρα γενέσθαι πρὸς ἐαυτῷ πολὺν χρόνον, εἶτα καὶ δακρῦσαι· τῶν δὲ φίλων θαυμασάντων τὴν αἰτίαν εἰπεῖν· ‘οὐ δοκεῖ ὑμῖν ἄξιον εἶναι λύπης, εἰ τηλικοῦτος μὲν ὣν Ἀλέξανδρος ἥδη τοσούτων ἐβασίλευεν, ἐμοὶ δὲ λαμπρὸν οὐδὲν οὕπω πέπρακται;’ (*Caes.* 11.5-6; ed. Teubner)

In like manner we are told again that, in Spain, when he [i.e. Caesar] was at leisure and was reading from the history of Alexander, he was lost in thought for a long time, and then burst into tears. His friends were astonished, and asked the reason for his tears. 'Do you not think,' said he, 'it is matter for sorrow that while Alexander, at my age, was already king of so many peoples, I have as yet achieved no brilliant success?' (tr. Loeb)

Both anecdotes develop a similar sequence of (1) the subject receiving information (ἀκούων ~ ἀναγινώσκοντα), which (2) makes him cry (ἐδάκρυε ~ δακρῦσαι); (3) the friends of the subject asking what is wrong (τῶν φίλων ἐρωτώντων ὅ τι πέπονθεν ~ τῶν δὲ φίλων θαυμασάντων τὴν αἰτίαν); and (4) the subject replying with a similarly worded rhetorical question (οὐκ ἄξιον [...] δακρύειν, εἰ ~ οὐ δοκεῖ ὑμῖν ἄξιον εἶναι λύπης, εἰ) in which (5) an awesome example ([ruling] an infinite number of κόσμοι ~ Alexander's rule at the same age) is compared to (6) the subject's falling short even of a much more humble goal (ruling one of the infinite κόσμοι ~ doing something λαμπρόν) – (7) at least for the time being (οὐδέπω with a perfect form ~ οὕπω with a perfect form).

Both anecdotes are also found outside of the *corpus Plutarcheum*. Before Plutarch, Valerius Maximus (8.14.ext.2) has Alexander addressing (there is no mention of weeping) his complaint to Anaxarchus (not to his friends as an answer to their question) in the form of a statement (not a rhetorical question). After Plutarch, Aelian dishes up the anecdote in his *Varia*

historia (4.29). This version is even less dramatically developed. Anaxarchus is not mentioned and we do not get a *dictum* from Alexander. Again the weeping, the dialogue with the friends, and the rhetorical question are absent⁵. Other partial versions of the anecdote include even fewer of the relevant elements and should not be considered here⁶.

How Plutarch's version of the famous Caesar anecdote differs from other versions (Suetonius, *Div. Iul.* 7.1 and Cassius Dio 37.52.2) has been discussed by Pelling⁷: it is 'basically the same', except (1) that Plutarch changes the chronology⁸ and (2) that he has Caesar reading about Alexander instead of standing in awe in front of a statue. It should be added that neither Suetonius nor Dio mentions the question asked by the friends and the rhetorical question with which Caesar answers. Moreover, Suetonius' Caesar sighs ('ingemuit') and Dio's groans and deplores (ἀναστέναξε καὶ κατωδύρατο) but neither seems to insist on there being tears. Both the weeping (ἐδάκρυσε) and the friends do pop up along with Caesar's reading about Alexander in the version preserved in Plutarch's *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata*:

τὰς δ' Ἀλεξάνδρου πράξεις ἀναγινώσκων ἐδάκρυσε καὶ πρὸς τοὺς φίλους εἶπεν ὅτι 'ταύτην τὴν ἡλικίαν ἔχων ἐνίκησε Δαρεῖον, ἐμοὶ δὲ μέχρι νῦν οὐδὲν πέπρακται.' (*Reg. et imp. apophth.* 206b; ed. Teubner)

While he was reading of the exploits of Alexander, he burst into tears, and said to his friends, "When he was of my age he had conquered Darius, but, up to now, nothing has been accomplished by me." (tr. Loeb)

The friends' inquiry and Caesar's reply through a rhetorical question are absent from the *Reg. et imp. apophth.* version. Only the version in *Caesar* has this fully developed dramatic construction⁹.

⁵ The absence of tears in Aelian's version is surprising. Aelian, like Valerius Maximus, notes that Anaxarchus' theory of infinite κόσμοι is Democritean. Quite wittily, he ends the anecdote by pointing out that Democritus would have laughed, as he was prone to do, at Alexander if he heard that this was what the ruler made of his cosmology. Presenting Alexander as the weeping, Heraclitus-like counterpart of Democritus would have been an obvious addition to this quip (cf. Juvenal 10.47-50; Lucian, *Vit. auct.* 14). It is hard to believe that, if Aelian knew a version in which Alexander was depicted as weeping, he would have omitted that aspect.

⁶ Seneca the Elder, *Suas.* 1.5; Seneca, *Ep.* 91.17; Juvenal 10.168.

⁷ C. Pelling, *Plutarch. Caesar*, Oxford 2011, 3-4, 183-84.

⁸ According to Pelling (n. 7) 183 Plutarch 'clearly [...] implies that it belongs to the proconsulship [i.e. 61-60 BCE]', while Suetonius and Cassius Dio connect this anecdote with Caesar's quaestorship in Spain (69-68 BCE), which better suits the comparison with Alexander's age. However, I see no compelling reason to disagree with P. Green, "Caesar and Alexander: Aemulatio, Imitatio, Comparatio", *AJAH* 3, 1978, 18-19 n. 20, who claims that 'Plutarch leaves the date wide open'. In any case, there is a chronological displacement in the sense that Plutarch mentions the anecdote when setting out to discuss the proconsulship.

⁹ It is not unusual that an anecdote is more elaborated in the *Lives* than in the *Reg. et imp. apophth.*; for another example involving Caesar (*Caes.* 2 ~ *Reg. et imp. apophth.* 205f-206a) see C. Pelling, "The *Apophthegmata Regum et Imperatorum* and Plutarch's Roman Lives," in: *Plutarch and History*, Swansea 2002, 76-77 and P. A. Stadter, "Plutarch's Compositional Technique: The Anecdote Collections and the Parallel Lives", *GRBS* 54, 2014, 678-79.

How did Plutarch adapt the anecdotes and, more specifically, how did he craft the parallels between the two stories? It is most likely that the role of the friends was originally part of the Caesar anecdote (both in the *Reg. et imp. apophth.* and in *Caesar*) and was imported from there into the anecdote about Alexander and the unlimited κόσμοι, where the role of the friends is not significant in itself¹⁰. A clue for this hypothesis can be found in the aforementioned chronological displacement of the anecdote in *Caesar*. In the anecdote which precedes it (*Caesar* 11.3-4), Plutarch tells how Caesar's friends jokingly wondered if the barbarian village they were passing housed political shenanigans similar to those of Rome. Caesar replied that he would rather be first in that village than second in Rome. The anecdote about Caesar's *imitatio Alexandri* is then introduced as similar (όμοίος) to the previous one¹¹. What the two anecdotes share is not only the general theme of Caesar's ambition¹², but also the dramatic structure of Caesar's friends asking a question and Caesar earnestly replying in a way which must have completely befuddled these friends, thus emphasising that Caesar's ambition transcends every conventional morality¹³.

The dramatic and stylistic elaboration of the anecdote as it appears in *Caesar* makes it clear that Plutarch created the Alexander anecdote in *De tranq. an.* in tandem with this more elaborate version and not with the more rudimentary version of *Reg. et imp. apophth.*, which reflects an earlier stage of Plutarch's engagement with the anecdote¹⁴. This is where the issue of the *TPQ* for *De tranq. an.* comes back in. As Pelling has shown, the *Caesar – Alexander* pair is part of a group of *Lives* which were researched, prepared, and written more or less simultaneously in a relatively short period of time¹⁵. Pelling has also given good reasons for dating *Caesar* around 110 or a little later¹⁶. If, then, the research for *Caesar* started not long before 110 and the Alexander anecdote in *De tranq. an.* bears the dramatic and stylistic marks

¹⁰ Cf. Valerius Maximus 8.14.ext.2, where Alexander voices his lament against Anaxarchus directly: this seems to be sufficient and more plausible as a dramatic setting.

¹¹ In *Reg. et imp. apophth.* 206b the two anecdotes also appear together but their order is reversed.

¹² This is how Pelling (n. 7) 183 explains the chronological displacement.

¹³ A further connection between the two anecdotes can be gleaned from a comparison between *Caes.* 11.5 (γενέσθαι πρὸς ἐστιτῷ) and *Reg. et imp. apophth.* 206b (σύννους γενόμενος): Caesar's moment of reflection before answering the friends' question belongs to the anecdote about the *imitatio Alexandri* in the *Life* and to the anecdote about the barbarian village in the collection of *apophthegmata*. This element must have switched anecdotes between the two versions.

¹⁴ Concerning the composition of the *Reg. et imp. apophth.* and their relation to the *Lives* there are two current hypotheses, which both assume that the *Reg. et imp. apophth.* reflect an earlier stage of Plutarch's engagement with the anecdotes which also appear in the *Lives*. Both hypotheses are compatible with my argument. Pelling (n. 9) argues that Plutarch composed the *Reg. et imp. apophth.* on the basis of his preparatory drafts for particular *Lives*, while according to Stadter (n. 9) Plutarch based the *Reg. et imp. apophth.* on a collection of anecdotes which he curated for himself, partly with the writing of the *Lives* in view.

¹⁵ C. Pelling, "Plutarch's Method of Work in the Roman Lives", in: *Plutarch and History*, Swansea 2002, 1–44.

¹⁶ Pelling (n. 7) 36.

of the Caesar anecdote as it appears in *Caesar* (as opposed to the more rudimentary version in the *Reg. et imp. apophth.*), this means that *De tranq. an.* was written around the same time or later¹⁷.

This leaves one final question: why did Plutarch refrain from using the anecdote about Alexander in the *Reg. et imp. apophth.* or in *Alexander*, which is the parallel biography of *Caesar*? The absence from the former work might be obvious: Plutarch, like Aelian and Valerius Maximus, conceives of the anecdote as a negative example and such anecdotes are avoided in the *Reg. et imp. apophth.*¹⁸. As for *Alexander*, it should be pointed out that the information which Plutarch had on Alexander greatly exceeded what he could include in the biography¹⁹. In this particular case, Plutarch seems to have opted for a different ‘despair scene’, viz. *Alexander* 5.4: when news about new conquests by his father Philip reach the young Alexander, he is desperate because it is starting to look like nothing will be left for him to conquer. This is a scene which is, if not unequivocally positive, at least not wildly hybristic (cf. its inclusion in *Reg. et imp. apophth.* 179d). This mitigated despair scene is much more appropriate in the overall context of the *Alexander – Caesar*, in which Caesar’s ambition receives significantly greater criticism than Alexander’s²⁰. In other words: the inclusion of the Alexander anecdote would not have squared with how, according to Plutarch, Alexander compared to Caesar on a moral level.

Thus, the two parallel anecdotes on excessive ambition did not end up in the two parallel biographies. Instead, Plutarch chose to integrate the Alexander anecdote in his *De tranq. an.*, thus giving an indication of its date of composition (around or after 110 CE). At the same time, a close reading of these anecdotes and their contexts has given us a glimpse of how Plutarch carefully and creatively selected, adapted, and suppressed certain anecdotes in light of the overall composition which he wanted to achieve.

¹⁷ This chimes in with the strong thematic parallels between *De tranq. an.* and the *Pyrrhus – Marius*, which was one of the last pairs Plutarch wrote; see Jones (n. 1) 67; T. Duff, *Plutarch’s Lives. Exploring Virtue and Vice*, Oxford 1999, 105 n. 15.

¹⁸ Pelling (n. 9) 82–83.

¹⁹ J. Geiger, “Plutarch’s Parallel Lives: The Choice of Heroes”, *Hermes* 109, 1981, 93 n. 32.

²⁰ B. Buszard, “Caesar’s Ambition: A Combined Reading of Plutarch’s *Alexander-Caesar* and *Pyrrhus-Marius?*”, *TAPhA* 138, 2008, esp. 185; cf. also *Alex.* 28.3.