

# Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch

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# CRASSUS AS SYMPOSIAST IN PLUTARCH'S *LIFE OF CRASSUS*

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## Abstract

The references to Crassus as a host of, and a guest at, dinner parties in the *Life of Crassus* suggest a complex persona. Three references appear in the early chapters, followed by the description of the symposium at the Parthian court at the end of *Life*. This paper examines these four passages. It argues that the simplicity of Crassus' repasts are carefully positioned by Plutarch to contrast sharply Crassus' reputation as Rome's most famous plutocrat, and the debauched Parthian symposium redeems partially Crassus for his failure as an imperialist.

The Romans say that the many virtues of Crassus were obscured by the sole vice of desire for wealth; it is likely that this one vice became stronger, weakening the others. (2.1)<sup>1</sup>

This sentence reveals *Nicias-Crassus* to be a study of how a single negative character trait can obscure good character traits, and the (very serious) consequences of such a situation. In the case of Crassus, the vice of avarice (φιλοπλουτία) overshadows his many virtues. This is not the opinion of Plutarch alone, since he reports what his (Roman) sources write. By the time that Plutarch came to write the *Later Roman Lives*, avarice had been the defining historical fact about Crassus for over a century<sup>2</sup>.

Closer inspection of the *Life of Crassus* suggests that Plutarch problematises his exploration of Crassus' love of wealth through the inclusion of well-placed references to his moderation with respect to dinner parties. Three references to Crassus as an abstemious host and guest serve to mediate the discussion of his apparently insatiable taste (thirst?) for the acquisition of wealth<sup>3</sup>. Plutarch concludes the *Life* with an extensive description of a dinner party at the Parthian court, where the debauchery of the Parthians serves to absolve partially Crassus of his *philoploutia* and undertaking of the Parthian expedition.

## I.

Plutarch frequently comments upon his subject's behaviour at dinner parties in the early chapters of the *Life*<sup>4</sup>. Thus in the third chapter one finds the following:

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<sup>1</sup> Translations are adapted from the Loeb Classical Library.

<sup>2</sup> Cicero refers to Crassus' wealth several times: *Att.* 1.4.3 and 2.4.2; *Tusc.* 1.13; *Div.* 2.22; *Off.* 3.75-76. So too Sallust: *Cat.* 48.5. See B. A. MARSHALL, 1976, p. 149; cf. *idem*, pp. 178-9.

<sup>3</sup> E. S. GRUEN, 1977, p. 117 summarises Crassus thus: "an enigma indeed: fearsome and unpredictable, *greedy and beneficent, ostentatious and temperate, affable and explosive*" (italics are mine).

<sup>4</sup> Examples from the *Roman Lives* include: *Sull.* 2.2; *Cic.* 36.3 (there are earlier references at 3.5 and 8.2 where Plutarch comments upon Cicero's delicate digestion); *Pomp.* 2.11-12; *Cat. Mi.* 6.1.

When he entertained at table, his invited guests were for the most part plebeians and men of the people, and the simplicity of the repast was combined with a neatness and good cheer which gave more pleasure than lavish expenditure. (3.2)

If Plutarch disapproved of Crassus, then this passage is unique in that the author appears to express approval of one aspect of his subject's character<sup>5</sup>. Symposia comprise three elements: the meal (both food and drink), the guests, and the conversation or entertainment; Plutarch expeditiously identifies all three in this sentence. Crassus appears to subscribe to the maxim of quality over quantity: the success of his dinner parties is attributed to the entertainment (i.e., intelligent conversation) rather than the amount of food or drink provided<sup>6</sup>. The limited amount of wine ensures that the conversation is not adversely affected<sup>7</sup>. Given the tradition of Crassus as (one of) Rome's wealthiest citizen(s), the placement of this passage early in the Life establishes Crassus as a complex persona, since his tremendous wealth, the process by which he came to acquire it Plutarch begins to describe in the previous chapter (see below, p. 184), does not automatically mean that he enjoys excessive indulgences. That is, one might expect Plutarch to explain how Crassus became wealthy, then explore how he uses his wealth for personal profit. Such an approach would underline effectively Crassus' dominant negative character trait of *philoploutia*. Rather, Crassus appears to be the opposite sort of person: he scolds those who spend money on trivialities, dinner parties included, although his criticism of others is not contained in this Life<sup>8</sup>. His aversion to excessive expenditure is revealed by his treatment of his philosopher-companion Alexander, who was given a cloak for travelling only to have to return it upon the journey's completion (3.8)<sup>9</sup>.

The passage above introduces a section in which Plutarch catalogues Crassus' positive attributes: his desire to be an effective public speaker; his willingness to plead cases when those presumably more talented than he – Pompey, Caesar and Cicero – are unwilling to serve as advocate; his warm greeting towards those he meets in public, especially plebeians; and his strong interest in history and philosophy (3.3-8). These attributes extend from, and feed back into, Crassus' effective execution of his role as symposiarch. The first and last of these – his desire to be an eloquent advocate and his historical and

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<sup>5</sup> F. TITCHENER, 1999, p. 496.

<sup>6</sup> F. TITCHENER, 1999, p. 496: "a certain panache vis-à-vis banquet arranging was definitely a mark in someone's favor, but the main attraction in Plutarch's view should be companionship and conversation".

<sup>7</sup> And his guests are not corrupted, as Plutarch writes that Catiline did (*Cic.* 10.5).

<sup>8</sup> Pompey and Crassus criticise Lucullus for his extravagance (*Luc.* 38.5; Plutarch describes Lucullus' dinner parties at 41). Both R. FLACELIÈRE, 1972, p. 302 and M. G. BERTINELLI, 1993, p. 330 note the sharp differences between Crassus and Lucullus in this respect.

<sup>9</sup> Including an interjection from Plutarch or an indirect quotation from one of his sources: "Alas the patience of this unfortunate man, for his philosophy did not regard poverty as an indifferent condition".

philosophical predilections – are intellectual pursuits, and the latter reveal the probable source of the “good cheer” (φιλφροσύμην) for which Crassus’ guests appreciate – and presumably seek out – his company<sup>10</sup>.

Crassus’ disinclination to host elaborate dinner parties is not a decision he makes on his own, for, as Plutarch writes in the opening sentence of the *Life*, Crassus’ *paideia* shaped his attitudes in this area:

Marcus Crassus was the son of a man who had been censor and had enjoyed a triumph; but he was reared in a small house with two brothers. His brothers were married while their parents were still alive, and all shared the same table, which seems to have been the main reason why Crassus was temperate and moderate in his manner of life. (1.1-2)

The moderate appetite of Crassus’ family is supported by a passage in Macrobius’ *Saturnalia* (3.17.7-9), which ascribes to Crassus’ father a sumptuary law in his tribunate of 103 BCE. By beginning the *Life* in this way, Plutarch implies that his presentation of Crassus may not follow the historical tradition established by his sources<sup>11</sup>. Plutarch immediately establishes Crassus as someone who eschews unnecessary ostentation, and the tautology “temperate and moderate” (σώφρων καὶ μέτριος) situates Crassus in an exceptionally advantageous position upon which he can draw or away from which he can deviate. By how much he does the former or how quickly he does the latter determines the final verdict on Crassus’ character.

A very illuminating perspective is offered by a passage which features Crassus not as a host, but as a guest of Vibius Papias in Spain during Crassus’ self-imposed exile under Cinna:

Now, the meals were abundant, and so prepared as to gratify the taste and not merely to satisfy hunger. For Vibius had made up his mind to pay Crassus every sort of friendly attention, and it even occurred to him to consider the young man his guest, and he was quite a young man, and that some provision be made for the enjoyments appropriate to his years; the mere supply of his wants he regarded as the work of one who rendered help under compulsion rather than with ready zeal. (5.2)

Vibius is the attentive host by providing Crassus’ needs and anticipating his desires. Plutarch does not indicate whether Crassus partook of the extra provisions, gastronomical and otherwise, but one might reasonably expect that had Crassus refrained from so doing, it would be mentioned here. One might postulate that Crassus’ abstemiousness in this instance would have appeared inappropriate; that is, while he became a good host, his behaviour as a guest

<sup>10</sup> *Table-Talk* 6.14b indicates that history and contemporary events are appropriate topics for a dinner party.

<sup>11</sup> *Pace* C. B. R. PELLING, 1979, I do not believe that Pollio (or the Pollio-source) was the main source for *Crassus*. In my view, the most likely main source on Crassus available to Plutarch in this instance was Livy.

was poor. The use of the same word – φιλοφροσύνη<sup>12</sup> – to describe the good cheer of Crassus' symposia and Vibius' provision of Crassus' needs establishes a connection between Vibius and Crassus as host. Crassus does not emulate Vibius in terms of the kind of repast provided, but Vibius remonstrates the need for being a convivial host. In other words, Vibius exerts a positive influence, helping to mould Crassus into the congenial symposiarch for which he becomes famous. This passage appears as part of the only extended anecdote in the *Life*; therefore, the decision to include it strongly suggests that Plutarch believed it was important to establishing Crassus' character, which in turn confirms the importance of the previous references to symposia in the *Life*<sup>13</sup>.

## II.

The three references to Crassus' as symposiast discussed above are contained in the first five chapters of the *Life*; that is, they end approximately one-sixth the way in. And these passages do not stand on their own, but are surrounded by passages which indicate Crassus' avarice<sup>14</sup>. The first reference follows directly from Plutarch's opening comments about Crassus' family in the form of an anecdote of Crassus' suspected involvement with the vestal Licinia (1.4). Seeking to acquire her substantial home cheaply, Crassus fell under suspicion of corrupting her. Ironically, Crassus' avarice absolves him of this serious accusation, that he does not have a more serious flaw: deviant sexual inclinations. Crassus' involvement with Licinia, it ought to be noted, probably involved entertaining her or being her guest at dinner; it was the frequency with which this occurred that brought Crassus under suspicion.

The most famous example of Crassus' *philoploutia* appears in the description of his acquisition of property in the second chapter, where he takes advantage of the misfortune of others when he buys homes on fire (2.5). This was clearly something of which Plutarch disapproved, since in the beginning of the *synkrisis* (1.1), he declares that the manner through which Nicias became wealthy was "more blameless" (ἀμεμπτοτέραν). Plutarch notes disapproval of Crassus for his proscribing someone in order to acquire his property, which he does without Sulla's permission (6.8). We might identify an additional passage referring to Crassus as a good symposiarch in the sentence immediately prior, which might be seen as partially negating the unwarranted proscription, when Plutarch writes that Crassus on one occasion saves Sulla from military defeat, an action for which his only request is to ask for dinner for his men (6.7, δείπνον τοῖς στρατιώταις)<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> The word is used for a third time at 12.3 (negated with οὐ μῆν) to describe the absence of friendship or spirit of co-operation between Crassus and Pompey during their first consulship.

<sup>13</sup> T. W. HILLARD, 1987, p. 23 calls it "outstanding". The source appears to be Fenestella, identified by name at 5.6. See B. A. MARSHALL, 1976, pp. 177-8.

<sup>14</sup> See also T. SCHMIDT, 1999, pp. 303-4.

<sup>15</sup> Plutarch mentions another large feast at 12.3 and *Syn. Nic.-Crass.* 1.4 (see below, n. 30), where Crassus feeds the people (τὸν δῆμον), also providing them with grain for three months. These passages do not contradict the impression of Crassus for which I argue in section I. In both instances, Plutarch makes the point that Crassus provided for a very large number of

The passages identified here are deftly interwoven with the passages on Crassus as symposiast, and, depending on one's perspective, Crassus' abstemiousness as symposiast weakens the negative impression of his *philoploutia*, or his *philoploutia* dilutes the positive impression of his moderate provision and consumption of food and drink. It would seem preferable to choose the former over the latter, since these early examples of Crassus' avarice do not necessarily portray him in a negative light. The first two are similar in that they reveal Crassus' desire to achieve the maximum benefit for the minimum price. This is similar to what he does as a host: getting the maximum benefit (making friends and political allies) for the lowest possible cost (offering a simple repast). And while Crassus desires to acquire property, despite his immense resources (which in addition to money and land includes a very large number of slaves, some of whom are builders and artists), he does not construct himself a new (that is, a larger and more ostentatious) home. In fact, Plutarch indirectly quotes a *bon mot* of Crassus that those who are fond of building are their own worst enemies (2.6)<sup>16</sup>.

Political actions – in as far as Crassus' political career is covered by Plutarch – which one might expect to be presented as additional evidence of Crassus' avarice in fact appear relatively innocuous. His plan to annex Egypt, for instance, which Plutarch calls a “dangerous and violent policy” (13.2), does not appear to have been undertaken out of the expectation of personal profit. Most importantly, Crassus' tremendous joy at being assigned Syria as his province is initially represented as the desire for recognition (*philotimia*), not financial gain (16.1-2)<sup>17</sup>.

### III.

If the positive references to Crassus as symposiast do not obviate the negative impression of his ineffectiveness as a political figure and his failure as imperialist in Mesopotamia, that is, his *philoploutia* remains the dominant impression, then the biographer redeems partially Crassus through his intricate construction of the final episode of the *Life*: the dinner party at the Parthian royal court (33.1-7). The positive generalities of Crassus' symposia weigh favourably against the grotesque details of the Parthian party<sup>18</sup>.

citizens; he does not necessarily provide luxurious repasts. In fact, that he provides bread (12.3, *ἄντων*) implies that he provides basic sustenance only.

<sup>16</sup> A similar thought appears to be expressed by Juvenal (10.105-09).

<sup>17</sup> This is the approach taken by B. A. MARSHALL, 1976, p. 177. Note Florus 1.46.1: “Both gods and men were defied by the avarice (*cupiditas*) of the consul Crassus, in coveting the gold of Parthia (*dum Parthico inhiat auro*), and its punishment was the slaughter of eleven legions and the loss of his own life”. But note the *synkrisis* of *Nicias-Crassus* (4.1-4), where Plutarch suggests that Crassus ought not to be blamed for his Parthian failure, since he was only undertaking an expansive military campaign; Pompey, Caesar, and Alexander were praised for the same. Crassus receives criticism from Plutarch when he does not advance immediately but waits for his son to arrive from Gaul. Instead of using that time productively by arranging for training exercises for his soldiers, he devotes himself to counting the money he has been able to collect in Syria and Palestine (17.8-9).

<sup>18</sup> A. V. ZADOROJNYI, 1995, p. 180: “Plutarch constructs his Parthia as a moral antiworld,

Most striking is Crassus' involuntary participation in this dinner party through the presentation of his head<sup>19</sup> during the staging of the final moments of Euripides' *Bacchae*<sup>20</sup>. In *Crassus*, then, intellectual discussion and drunken revelry are mutually exclusive activities; Romans appear to do the former, Parthians indulge in the latter. Granted, that the Parthians are drunk is not stated explicitly by Plutarch, but reading between the lines it is clear that Plutarch intends for them to be perceived as intoxicated. Plutarch therefore redeems Crassus by representing him as the (Greco-Roman) ideal against which the Parthians consciously position themselves. If "to Plutarch statecraft was stagecraft"<sup>21</sup>, then in *Crassus* the opposite is true also. Reading the narrative of Crassus' Parthian misadventure as an extended metaphor for his (lack of) leadership ability, the depravity of the Parthian symposium appears as a highly condensed parallel which illustrates their inability to govern themselves, which indirectly redeems both Crassus' political actions (including the Parthian campaign itself) and (ironically) Roman politics of this period.

Crassus' lack of a clearly defined role as either host or guest in the symposium endangers the Parthians, who, delighting and participating in the spectacle, inadvertently cross the boundary from being spectators to Bacchants, from dinner guests to entertainment, instead of redirecting their efforts towards critical appreciation of dramatic art or serious political discussion. In the case of Surena, his behaviour at the dinner party – grabbing Crassus' head and completing the verse instead of the actor in an act of obeisance to Hyrodes – abnegates the positive impressive of Surena and the Parthian troops which Plutarch crafts in the previous chapters<sup>22</sup>. Surena inadvertently engages in amateur dramatics through which he seamlessly and instantaneously downgrades his political and social position, from triumphant military commander to mediocre actor (and shortly afterwards disenfranchised corpse; see below). This contrasts very sharply a symposium hosted by Crassus, where, to recall the main passage on Crassus' dinner parties, his guests were "for the most part plebeians and men of the people" (τὰ πολλὰ δημοτικὴ καὶ λαώδεις),

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where the notion of *philanthropia* is unknown, or even deliberately challenged". Cf. G. PAUL, 1991, p. 157: "In Greco-Roman historiography accounts of symposia and *deipna* often have a cautionary or admonitory effect. The incidents related may range from there merely disquieting to the murderously dire but their effect is to disturb and dissipate the atmosphere of ease and joy that the ideal symposium or dinner is expected to create". Plutarch revisits an Eastern symposium in *Artaxerxes*: see in this volume E. ALMAGOR.

<sup>19</sup> A. V. ZADOROJNYI, 1995, p. 181: "I do believe, that nearly all the acts of the Parthians, like cutting-off heads...that appear so cruel and perverted to Plutarch, are in fact ritual". Plutarch thought the harsh treatment of the defeated enemy was a sign of βαρβαρικός: A. G. NIKOLAIDIS, 1986, p. 241; D. BRAUND, 1993, p. 469.

<sup>20</sup> Euripides' *Bacchae* permeates Plutarch's *Crassus*, with Crassus as a Pentheus figure: D. BRAUND, 1993. Scholars point out the symmetry of Plutarch's references to Euripides at the end of both *Crassus* and *Nicias*, but with very different results: M. G. A. BERTINELLI, 1993, p. 422; D. BRAUND, 1993, p. 469; R. FLACELIÈRE, 1972, p. 310; A. V. ZADOROJNYI, 1995, p. 180.

<sup>21</sup> G. W. M. HARRISON, 2005, p. 59 calls this episode "melodramatic".

<sup>22</sup> See the analysis of T. SCHMIDT, 1999, pp. 301-2. On murder and decapitation at a dinner party, see G. PAUL, 1991, pp. 164-66.



Romans who may have courted Crassus' attention in order to advance their own position in Rome's political and social circles, as well as to improve their minds.

The most noticeable difference between Roman and Parthian symposia manifests itself in the performances of Hyrodes and Crassus as symposiarch, where Plutarch intends for the men to be compared, and for Crassus to appear the better person. Plutarch ascribes to both men an extensive knowledge of literature, but only Crassus appears to derive a benefit from this knowledge. Plutarch suggests this through the placement of his description of the literary tastes of each man in relation to the description of his behaviour as symposiarch. Crassus is described as a good host with his knowledge of history and philosophy noted several sentences later (see above, 182-3). Hyrodes' extensive knowledge of literature is mentioned first, followed by the description of the Parthian party. Plutarch therefore establishes Hyrodes' literary expertise, and by implication his cognizance of, and for the reader insists upon the expectation of, the proper social conventions described therein, which presumably includes symposia, before revealing his disregard for the same<sup>23</sup>. By revealing Crassus' literary predilections *after* describing his (repeated) successful performances as symposiarch, there is no such expectation placed upon him, although the statement reinforces Plutarch's judging Crassus' parties to be intellectually edifying.

To recall a point made earlier, the quality of the company is the main criterion by which a dinner party is judged in this *Life*. The Parthian dinner party appears to meet this criterion, but Plutarch replaces pleasure with treachery in the final sentences of the *Life* (33.8-9), in which he describes the deaths of Hyrodes and Surena. The death of the latter at the hands of the former confirms the superficiality of the camaraderie at the dinner party, since to kill a guest during or after dinner is inappropriate (in narrative-time Plutarch places the murder as immediately following the dinner party)<sup>24</sup>. The deaths of Hyrodes and Surena underline the degeneracy which Plutarch describes in the earlier passage. The ultimate failure of a Parthian symposium, then, is the fact that those in attendance quickly turn against each other, which contrasts very sharply the conviviality of Crassus' symposia.

#### IV.

And Nicias? Nicias and Crassus share the dubious honour of being their country's wealthiest citizens at a time when said wealth would presumably enable them to achieve a political position far greater than their natural abilities (or lack thereof) would normally allow, and thereby prove equal to, or

<sup>23</sup> Plutarch notes that Crassus' soldiers were found to have erotic texts in their possession, but this is mitigated by the Parthian reading of the *Bacchae* later: A.V. ZADOROJNYI, 1997, pp. 181-2 and 2005, p. 120.

<sup>24</sup> Plutarch elsewhere writes that Pompey considered fleeing to Hyrodes' court after his defeat at Pharsalus (*Pomp.* 76.6); ironically he is killed before being received as a dinner guest by Ptolemy.



perhaps even eclipse, their more talented political rivals<sup>25</sup>. Nicias and Crassus are similar in that neither spends money with the explicitly stated expectation of earning political support.

The attitude of both men towards dinner parties reveals their characters, and therefore for Plutarch marks a subtle yet important point of divergence in the pair. Crassus appears admirable because he refrains from offering lavish dinner parties. Nicias appears excessively cautious by refusing to dine with others for fear of being spied upon: “since [Nicias] was inclined to be wary of public informers, he would neither dine with a fellow citizen, nor indulge in general interchange of views or familiar social intercourse” (5.1)<sup>26</sup>. Crassus’ parties contribute to maintaining the established, albeit indirect, avenues of political discourse, in Rome<sup>27</sup>; Nicias’ lack of dinner parties do the opposite in Athens: they closing down, or at the very least severely limit, political discussion. As argued above, Plutarch takes Crassus’ abstemiousness as indicative of his other positive qualities; Nicias’ restraint points to his negative qualities, upon which scholars note Plutarch appears to dwell<sup>28</sup>. Reading *Nicias*, then, serves to bring into sharper focus Crassus’ positive attributes; or, Crassus’ positive attributes accentuate the perception of Nicias’ shortcomings<sup>29</sup>. That *Nicias* comes first in the pair indicates that the latter is probably the case<sup>30</sup>.

## V.

Twenty years ago the *Life of Crassus* was called “a particularly lightweight and anecdotal Life”<sup>31</sup>. While *Crassus* compares (very) unfavourably with the Lives alongside which it was very likely composed, the intricacy of his presentation of Crassus as symposiast enables us to appreciate better this enigmatic text. The references to Crassus as a moderate symposiast juxtaposed with the elucidation of his career as an ineffective politician and failed imperialist enables Plutarch to offer a complex portrait of his subject in a short text. The apparent inconsistency between Crassus’ moderate tastes and his avarice may have been what attracted Plutarch, and therefore by studying the description of Crassus’ gastronomical preferences, one comes to a better understanding why Plutarch wrote *Crassus*.

<sup>25</sup> On Crassus’ inferiority to Pompey and Caesar, which appears to be conveyed in the Lives of all three men, see J. BENEKER, 2005, esp. pp. 320-25.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Per.* 7.4.

<sup>27</sup> On Crassus in Roman politics, see E. S. GRUEN, 1977, and A. M. WARD, 1977; on Plutarch’s treatment of Crassus’ political career, see C. B. R. PELLING, 1986, pp. 161-3. Plutarch appears to imply that Nicias only used his wealth to advance his political career against the actions of Cleon (*Nic.* 3.2).

<sup>28</sup> A. G. NIKOLAIDIS, 1988; J. E. ATKINSON, 1995.

<sup>29</sup> F. TITCHENER, 1991, p. 158 suggests that Plutarch only wrote *Nicias* to provide a Greek pair for *Crassus*.

<sup>30</sup> A passage in the *synkrisis* (1.4) may suggest another view, at least when examining Crassus from the perspective of his *philanthropia*: see in this volume the paper of A. G. NIKOLAIDIS; S.-T. TEODORSSON, 2008, p. 88. On the *synkrisis* of *Nicias-Crassus*, see A. G. NIKOLAIDIS, 1988, pp. 329-33; T. E. DUFF, 1999, pp. 269-75.

<sup>31</sup> C. B. R. PELLING, 1986, p. 161.

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