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Plutarch's views on donkeys*

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Abstract

In this contribution Plutarch's views on donkeys are analysed. On the basis of his texts on the matter, it is shown that he was influenced by Egyptian, Jewish and Greek traditions. Having recourse to the so-called allegoresis, Plutarch's opinion on donkeys is presented as the result of his eclectic perspective in the frame of Platonic philosophy.

Key-Words: Allegoresis, Donkeys, Egyptian tradition, Jewish tradition, Middle-Platonism, Music, Myth, Platonism, Plutarch, Typhon.

This article aims to present Plutarch's views on donkeys. After drafting briefly the traditions on which Plutarch appears to build (the Egyptian tradition playing so important a role in his work *De Iside et Osiride*, and the Jewish tradition), I will illustrate the Greek background influencing Plutarch's own opinion. An analysis of Plutarch's most significant texts on this topics follows. Lastly,

a little excursus on *allegoresis* will help us to understand in which sense Plutarch's views on donkeys can be read in (Middle)-Platonic terms.

1. *A fascinating animal with contradictory characteristics*

Of all animals, there is none to which one can associate as many different meanings as the donkey. This is due, basically, to its peculiarities: Less speedy than a horse but sturdier,

* This article is dedicated to my friend and colleague Katharina Luchner. Special thanks go to Norbert Oettinger and Peter Pilhofer for their helpful advice.

a donkey is cheaper to maintain, has good resistance and can move easily on rough grounds. For this reason, from the beginning of history onwards donkeys have been used in Europe and in Western Asia for transporting loads and people or for drawing carts. Today, they continue to play a very important role in some developing countries. In the second millennium BC, epithets like ‘donkey driver’ seem to have accompanied even rulers’ names¹. But on the other hand, precisely because of their hard life, their humble appearance and their vocal expression so dissimilar to the noble neigh of a horse, donkeys were and are regarded as stupid, inferior animals. The word ‘donkey’ used as a personal address is a synonym of intellectual weakness.

Essential for work but detested for their ugliness, admired for their resistance and strength but disregarded as pack animals, donkeys enjoyed both consideration and contempt. As two examples of extremely different views on donkeys, I would like to show the Jewish and the Egyptian cultures. Both are evident in Plutarch’s account.

2. *The Jewish tradition and its influence on Christianity*

In the Old Testament there are numerous references to donkeys as an inherent element of Jewish culture. They generally appear as a reflection of the natural environment of Israel and as an aspect of its agricultural economy². In his interesting book *Jahwes Aufstieg*, M. Vogel³ explains how, among the Jews, divinity came to be identified with a donkey. The appellation ‘Hebrew’ itself infers ‘ass nomads’, ‘donkey-men’ and therefore, if God made man in his own image, in his likeness, one can easily understand why the Jews imagined their God as a donkey and thought of donkeys in terms of animals to be adored.

However, the representation of Jesus in Christianity was also affected by this opinion. That the animal on which Jesus triumphantly entered Jerusalem was a donkey is indisputable⁴. The donkey was in fact, on the basis of *Gen.* 49.11 and *Zech.* 9.9, the Messianic mount⁵. In the nativity scene, donkey and ox were associated with Jesus’ birth on the basis of *Isaiah* 1.3.

¹ Cf. J. D. HAWKINS & A. MORPUGO DAVIES, ‘Of Donkeys, Mules and Tarkondemos’, 256-7.

² Cf. E. NIELSEN, ‘Ass and Ox...’ 263-74.

³ See above all pp. 27-9; 113-4.

⁴ Although the Greek word used in *Mark* 11.1-10 is πῶλος ‘foal’, H.-W. KUHN, ‘Das Reittier Jesu...’, 83-91 conclusively demonstrates that it indicates a donkey.

⁵ J. GNILKA, ‘Das Evangelium nach Markus’, 116-7.

3. Egyptian characterization

The Ancient Egyptians considered animals as holy beings because they saw in them the presence of the Divine⁶. They adored all animals, with the exception of donkeys. Furthermore, although donkeys must originally have been used in Ancient Egypt as plodders and pack animals, the Egyptians even hated them because of their association with the cruel god Set. This divinity, better known in Greek as Typhon, was Osiris's and Isis's envious younger brother. He killed and dismembered Osiris unleashing a long battle with Osiris's son Horus. Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride*, the main source for this myth⁷, tells us that because of Typhon's ability to impede the course of progress towards good, the Egyptians assigned to him the most stupid of all domesticated animals, the ass, and the most savage of all wild animals, the crocodile and the hippopotamus⁸.

4. The donkey in the Greek world

The Greek ὄνος is a foreign word of unknown origin⁹. Donkeys came to Greece and Italy from Asia Minor and were utilized in work or as domestic animals¹⁰. Under the influence of the Egyptians, the Ancient Greeks linked the donkey with Typhon. However, in Greek reception, the figure of the donkey appears to maintain a certain ambiguity. While it is on the one hand Dionysus' animal¹¹ because of its phallic strength, on the other hand, the Greeks also spoke of donkey hybrids' sterility¹².

The same can be said about the connection between donkeys and music. Donkeys were regarded as gross and unmelodious animals. According to the followers of Pythagoras, the donkey is the only animal not born in tune and therefore completely deaf to the sound of the lyre; hence the expression ὄνος λύρας ἀκούων 'a lyre-hearing donkey' used to indicate someone who has no ear for

⁶ See Porphyrius, *de abst.* iv. 9. 1-10.

⁷ See below.

⁸ *De Iside et Osiride* 50, 371 C: διὸ καὶ τῶν μὲν ἡμέρων ζῴων ἀπονέμουσιν αὐτῷ τὸ ἀμαθέστατον, ὄνον· τῶν δ' ἀγρίων τὰ θηριωδέστατα, κροκόδειλον καὶ τὸν ποτάμιον ἵππον. Cf. J. HANI, *La religion égyptienne...*, II, 638-63.

⁹ H. FRISK, *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* II, 398.

¹⁰ V. HEHN, *Kulturpflanzen und Haustiere*, 132-3.

¹¹ This is found, for instance, in the *Dionysiaca* by Nonnus of Panopolis. On a tetradrachme from Mende (on the Chalcidice peninsula in Macedonia) c. 430 BC, the god of wine and fertility is depicted seated on a donkey.

¹² Cf. Empedocles, Fr. 82 D.-K.

music. Greek mythology also recounts the story of King Midas who judged against Apollo during a musical contest and subsequently had his ears changed to those of a donkey as punishment for his musical incompetence. According to another legend, Midas was given donkey's ears because he was initiated into the rites of Dionysus. In addition, some attributed to donkeys a fine sense of hearing¹³ and the origins of Greek music can be sought in mythological figures that had to do with donkeys, such as satyrs and silens, the Centaurs and Midas himself¹⁴. If the epithet 'donkey' used as an address was a curse that denoted stupidity, awkwardness, stolidity, indolence and ugliness¹⁵, we should not forget that 'donkeys' were also seen as the initiated in some Orphic rituals¹⁶ relating to the Dionysian cult¹⁷.

In any case, a Homeric passage would seem to summarize the Greek opinion on donkeys. In *Il.* 11.558-65 Ajax is compared to a donkey. If, on the one

hand, the simile indicates that Ajax has been 'mishandled' as a donkey by his enemies, on the other hand its intention is to underline the hero's enormous strength¹⁸.

5. *Plutarch's account*

a) The donkey and Typhon

In *De Iside et Osiride*, Plutarch records the Egyptian tradition according to which donkeys were associated with Typhon. Due to their resemblance to the cruel god in terms color, stupidity, lasciviousness and obstructing power¹⁹, donkeys were maltreated and humiliated in many rituals. In *De Iside et Osiride* 30, 362 F, for example, Plutarch refers to certain festivals in Kopto during which an ass was thrown over the edge of a precipice²⁰.

The habitants of Kopto were not alone in their hatred of donkeys because of the association with Typhon. In Busiris and Lycopolis, no trumpets were used because these made a sound

¹³ Cf. Philo, *de post. Cain.* 161: ἀκοαῖς γε μὴν ἢ ὁσμαῖς πολλῶ τῶ περιόντι τὰ ἄλογα κεκράτηκεν, ὡς καὶ ὄνος μὲν, τὸ δοκοῦν ἐν ζῴοις εἶναι νωθέστατον, κωφὴν ἂν ἀποδείξει τὴν ἡμετέραν ἀκοὴν ἐλθῶν εἰς ἐπίκρισιν.

¹⁴ M. VOGEL, *Onos Lyras* I, 13-5.

¹⁵ G. HOFFMANN, *Schimpfwörter der Griechen und Römer*, 25.

¹⁶ A. BERNABÉ, *Poetae Epici Graeci* II, fr. 578,25.

¹⁷ O. SCHÜTZ, *Zwei orphische Liturgien*, 253-4; M.-L. WEST, *Orphic poems*, 170-1.

¹⁸ See also M. VOGEL, *Onos Lyras* I, 35-6.

¹⁹ *De Iside et Osiride* 30, 362 F; 31, 363 C; 50, 371 C.

²⁰ ἔστι δ' ὅτε πάλιν ἐκταπεινοῦσι καὶ καθυβρίζουσιν ἐν τισιν ἐορταῖς, τῶν μὲν ἀνθρώπων τοὺς πυρροὺς [καὶ] προπηλακίζοντες, ὄνον δὲ κατακρημνίζοντες, ὡς Κοπτῖται, διὰ τὸ πυρρὸν γεγονέναι τὸν Τυφῶνα καὶ ὀνόδη τὴν χροάν.

like an ass, an animal that was regarded as unclean and as a bearer of obscure powers. That is why in the month of Payni and Phaophi the device of an ass tied by a rope (31, 362 F-363 A²¹) was imprinted upon sacrificial cakes.

As the donkey was associated with Typhon, the Egyptians also gave abominable persons this nickname. This is so in the case of Artaxerxes III, the most hated of all Persians kings, who was called 'the Ass'²².

b) The sacredness of donkeys

Immediately after reporting Artaxerxes III's nickname, Plutarch²³ adds (*De Iside et Osiride* 31, 363 C²⁴):

But those who relate that Typhon's flight from the battle was made on the back of an ass

and lasted for seven days, and that after he had made his escape, he became the father of sons, Hierosolynimus and Judaeus, are manifestly, as the very names show, attempting to drag Jewish traditions into the legend²⁵.

Thus the *De Iside et Osiride* offers an example of the fact that Plutarch was aware both of the Egyptian tradition and of the Jewish tradition. In *Quaest. Conv.* iv. 5. 3, 670 E he also relates that the Jews prized the donkey highly and also abstained from the hare because of its resemblance to a donkey²⁶.

The sacredness of donkeys is also evident in the passages in which Plutarch presents the donkey as a bearer of omens. An example is to be found in the *Life of Caius Marius*, 38. 6²⁷:

²¹ Βουσιρῖται δὲ καὶ Λυκοπολιῖται σάλπιγξιν οὐ χρῶνται τὸ παράπαν ὡς ὄνω φθεγγομέναις ἐμπερές. καὶ ὄλωσ τὸν ὄνον οὐ καθαρὸν ἀλλὰ δαιμονικὸν ἠγοῦνται ζῦλον εἶναι διὰ τὴν πρὸς ἐκεῖνον ὁμοιότητα καὶ πόπανα ποιοῦντες ἐν θυσίαις τοῦ τε Παῦνι καὶ τοῦ Φαωφί μηνὸς ἐπιπλάττουσι παράσημον ὄνον δεδεμένον.

²² *De Iside et Osiride* 31, 363 C: ἀπολαύειν δὲ καὶ τὸν ὄνον, ὥσπερ εἴρηται [362 F], τῆς ὁμοιότητος διὰ τὴν ἀμαθίαν καὶ τὴν ὕβριν οὐχ ἦττον ἢ διὰ τὴν χρόαν οἶονται· διὸ καὶ τῶν Περσικῶν βασιλέων ἐχθραίνοντες μάλιστα τὸν Ὀχον ὡς ἐναγῆ καὶ μιαρὸν, ὄνον ἐπωνόμασαν. κάκεῖνος εἰπὼν 'ὁ μέντοι ὄνος οὗτος ὑμῶν κατευωχίσειται τὸν βοῦν' ἔθυσεν τὸν Ἄπιν, ὡς Δείνων ἱστόρηκεν.

²³ English translations of Greek passages are taken from the Loeb editions, unless otherwise stated.

²⁴ οἱ δὲ λέγοντες ἐκ τῆς μάχης ἐπ' ὄνου τῷ Τυφῶνι τὴν φυγὴν ἐπὶ τὰς ἡμέρας γενέσθαι καὶ σωθέντα γεννηῆσαι παῖδας Ἱεροσόλυμον καὶ Ἰουδαῖον, αὐτόθεν εἰσι κατάδηλοι τὰ Ἰουδαϊκὰ παρέλκοντες εἰς τὸν μῦθον.

²⁵ Cf. Tacitus, *Histories* 5. 2.

²⁶ *Quaest. Conv.* iv. 5. 3, 670 E: 'Οὐ δ<ῆτ' εἶπεν> ὁ Λαμπρίας ὑπολ<αβῶν> 'ἀλλὰ τοῦ μὲν λαγωῦ <φειδον>ται διὰ τὴν πρὸς τὸν μένον ὑπ' αὐτῶν μυ...στα θηρίον ἐμπερέστατον.

²⁷ ὡς ἀγόμενος πρὸς τῆ οἰκίᾳ τῆς Φαννίας ἐγεγόνει, τῶν θυρῶν ἀνοιχθεισῶν ὄνος ἐνδοθεὶς ἐχώρει δρόμῳ, πύόμενος ἀπὸ κρήνης ἐγγὺς ἀπορρευούσης· προσβλέψας δὲ τῷ Μαρίῳ

When, as he was led along, he had come to the house of Fannia, the door flew open and an ass ran out, in order to get a drink at a spring that flowed hard by; with a saucy and exultant look at Marius the animal at first stopped in front of him, and then, giving a magnificent bray, went frisking past him triumphantly. From this Marius drew an omen and concluded that the Deity was indicating a way of escape for him by sea rather than by land; for the ass made no account of its dry fodder, but turned from that to the water.

In the *Life of Alexander* 73. 3, a tame donkey kills a magnificent lion as a sign that Alexander should keep away from Babylon²⁸. In fr. 182 Sandbach, Tiberius

receives a prediction of his future throne from a donkey which emits many large sparks while being groomed²⁹.

c) The donkey as a curse, a symbol of a very hard life

While Plutarch on the one hand describes the donkey as a ‘holy’ animal capable of bringing omens, on the other hand he also shares the Greek *communis opinio* whereby the donkey was looked upon as a pack animal with a very hard life³⁰. According to this view, those who are compared with donkeys also have a miserable, not enviable life³¹. To be associated with a donkey is, in any case, not a compliment³² as the donkey is, after all, the most stupid of all domesticated

λαμυρόν τι καὶ γεγηθός, ἔστη πρῶτον ἐναντίον, εἶτα φωνὴν ἀφῆκε λαμπρὰν καὶ παρεσκίρτησε παρ’ αὐτὸν ὑπὸ γαυρότητος. ἐξ οὗ συμβαλὼν ὁ Μάριος ἔφρασκεν, ὡς διὰ θαλάσσης αὐτῷ μᾶλλον ἢ διὰ γῆς ὑποδείκνυσι σωτηρίαν τὸ δαιμόνιον· τὸν γὰρ ὄνον οὐ προσέχοντα τῇ ξηρᾷ τροφῇ πρὸς τὸ ὕδωρ ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ τραπέσθαι.

²⁸ ἠνώχλει δ’ αὐτὸν <καὶ ἄλλα> σημεῖα πολλά. καὶ γὰρ λέοντα τῶν τρεφομένων μέγιστον καὶ κάλλιστον ἡμερος ὄνος ἐπελθὼν καὶ λακτίσας ἀνεῖλεν.

²⁹ Τούτου (sc. Σεβήρου) ὁ ἵππος ... ψηχόμενος σπινθηρας ἀπὸ τοῦ σώματος πολλούς τε καὶ μεγάλους ἠφίει ... ἀλλὰ καὶ Τιβερίω ὄνος, ὡς Πλούταρχος ὁ Χαίρωνεύς φησιν, ἔτι μειρακίω ὄντι καὶ ἐν Ῥόδῳ ἐπὶ λόγους ῥητορικοὺς διατρίβοντι τὴν βασιλείαν διὰ τοῦ αὐτοῦ παθήματος προεμήνυσεν.

³⁰ Cf. *Aet. Rom.* 48, 276 C: ‘Διὰ τί τῇ τῶν Κωνσουλίων ἑορτῇ καὶ τοὺς ἵππους καὶ τοὺς ὄνους στεφανοῦσι καὶ σχολάζειν ἐῶσι;’ πότερον ὅτι Ποσειδῶνι μὲν ἄγουσιν Ἰππεῖω τὴν ἑορτὴν ὁ δ’ ὄνος τῷ ἵππῳ συναπολαύει καὶ συμμετέχει τῆς ἀδείας; ἢ ὅτι ναυτιλίας φανείσης καὶ κομιδῆς κατὰ θάλατταν ὑπῆρξέ τις ἀμωσγέντως ῥαστώνη καὶ ἀνάπανσις τοῖς ὑποζυγίοις;

³¹ Cf. *De cupiditate divitiarum* 5, 525 E: σὺ δὲ τοσαῦτα πράγματα συγγεῖς καὶ ταράττεις καὶ ‘στροβεῖς σεαυτὸν’, κοχλίου βίον ζῶν διὰ τὴν μικρολογίαν, καὶ τὰ δυσχερῆ πάνθ’ ὑπομένεις οὐδὲν εὖ πάσχων, ὡσπερ ὄνος βαλανέως ξύλα καὶ φρύγανα κατακομίζων, ἀεὶ καπνοῦ καὶ τέφρας ἀναπιμπλάμενος λουτροῦ δὲ μὴ μετέχων μηδ’ ἀλέας μηδὲ καθαριότητος.

³² Cf. *De liberis educandis* 14, 10 C: “ἄρ’,” ἔφησε, “καὶ εἴ μ’ ὄνος ἐλάκτισεν, ἀντιλακτίσαι τοῦτον ἠξιώσαστ’ ἄν;”.

animals³³. Plutarch shows nonetheless some compassion towards donkeys. In quoting Aeschylus in fr. 193, l. 33-5 Sandbach, he confirms his generally benevolent attitude towards animals in disagreement with their abuse by men.

d) The donkey and Platonism. The role played by *allegoresis*

The influence of the Platonic tradition is first manifest in records relating to the link between the donkey and music. Plutarch is aware that donkeys were considered as unmelodious, but that, despite this fact, flutes were made from the bones of donkeys, as he reports in *Sept. sap. conv.* 5, 150 F³⁴. After a lyric quotation from Cleobulina 'Full on my ear with a horn-bearing shin did a dead donkey smite me', he writes:

So we may well be astonished that the ass, which otherwise is most gross and unmelodious, yet provides us with a bone which is most fine and melodious. 'That, without question', said Neiloxe-

nus, 'is the reason for the complaint which the people of Busiris make against us of Naucratis; for we are already using asses' bones for our flutes. But for them even to hear a trumpet is a sin, because they think it sounds like the bray of an ass; and you know, of course, that an ass is treated with contumely by the Egyptians on account of Typhon.

But the influence of Platonic philosophy is, in my opinion, most evident in fr. 107 Sandbach (= Fr. cclxx. 1-6 Marzillo) where the donkey, because of its resemblance to Typhon, is seen as a creature symbolizing all that is earthly. Here Proclus – whence the fragment is taken – by explaining Hesiod's *Works and Days* 791, seeks to point out that mules are associated with the moon and recalls to Plutarch's association of the donkey with Typhon³⁵:

'Laborious mules upon the twelfth': They associate mules with the moon; hence some say that she rides in a mule cart. The

³³ Cf. *De Iside et Osiride* 50, 371 C.

³⁴ ὥστε θαυμάζειν τὸν ὄνον εἰ παχύτατος καὶ ἀμουσότατος ὢν τᾶλλα λεπτότατον καὶ μουσικώτατον ὁστέον παρέχεται. Καὶ ὁ Νειλόξενος “ἀμέλει ταῦτ’,” ἔφη, “καὶ ἡμῖν τοῖς Ναυκρατίταις ἐγκαλοῦσι Βουσιρίται· χρώμεθα γὰρ ἤδη τοῖς ὄνοις εἰς τὸν αὐλόν. ἐκείνοις δὲ καὶ σάλπιγγος ἀκούειν ἀθέμιτον, ὡς ὄνα φθεγγομένης ὅμοιον. ὄνον δ’ ὑπ’ Αἰγυπτίων ἴστε δήπου διὰ Τυφῶνα προπηλακίζομενον”.

³⁵ οὐ ρῆας δὲ δωδεκάτη ταλαεργούς· τὰς ἡμίονους οἰκειοῦσι τῇ σελήνῃ· διὸ καὶ τινες αὐτὴν φασιν ἐφ’ ἡμίονων ὀχεῖσθαι. καὶ γὰρ ὁ μὲν ἵππος ἠλιακόν ἐστι ζῷον ὡς εὐδρομον, <ὁ δ’ ὄνος> χθόνιον ὡς Τυφῶνι φίλον καὶ συνουσιαστικόν· ἡ δὲ σελήνη μέση ἀμφοῖν, γῆς μὲν ἔχουσα τὸ σκοτίζεσθαι, ἡλίου δὲ τὸ οἰκεῖον εἰληχένας φῶς. διὰ τοῦτο μὲν οὖν ὀκείωται πρὸς αὐτὴν ἡ ἡμίονος.

reason is that the horse is a solar animal, as being a swift runner, whereas the donkey belongs to the earth, as being dear to Typhon and given to copulation; the moon, however, is intermediate between sun and earth, having the earth's characteristic of being darkened, and the sun's of having its own light; so there is a natural association between the moon and the mule".

The word 'donkey' in the Greek text was integrated by H. Schultz³⁶ on the grounds of the passages from *De Iside et Osiride* discussed above. Although the *allegoresis* present in this explanation is a clear element of Proclus's exegetical method, the fragment can be led back to Plutarch since allegorical interpretation was already present in Middle Platonism, as W. Bernard has shown³⁷. *Allegoresis*, i.e. the allegorical interpretation of verse texts that were not necessarily intended to be interpreted in this way, was not a new phenomenon. However it acquired a new dimension from the Middle-Platonists onwards. Bernard distinguishes two types of *allegoresis*: 'substitutive Allegorese',

typical of the Stoics, consisting in replacing a mythological word or story in the exegesis with other terms (for example: the goddess Hera is not the traditional figure we know from the epics, but a substitutive noun for 'air'); on the other hand, 'dihairetische Allegorese', that moves wholly in the frame of Platonic dialectic. Innovation of this last kind of *allegoresis*, whose highest expression is to be found in the commentaries of the Neoplatonists, consists in retaining both the literal and the allegorical meaning. Abiding by the example mentioned above, Hera is in this case the air, while remaining nevertheless the goddess, understood as a 'person' in the Neoplatonic sense, in charge for all the forces relating to air³⁸. Through a detailed analysis of *De Iside et Osiride*³⁹, Bernard sets out to demonstrate that by interpreting the Egyptian myth, Plutarch refuses the explanations derived from both the Stoic and Ancient Egyptian wisdom in order to present his version of the legend in 'dihairetical', Platonic terms⁴⁰. According to chapters 45-57 Isis, Osiris, Horus and Typhon are understood as personal divinities operating in different fields. Typhon

³⁶ H. SCHULTZ, "Die handschriftliche Überlieferung...", 68.

³⁷ W. BERNARD, *Spätantike Dichtungstheorie*, 283-6.

³⁸ For this second type of *allegoresis*, I would prefer the definition 'komplementäre Allegorese', cf. P. MARZILLO (forthcoming).

³⁹ W. BERNARD, *Spätantike Dichtungstheorie*, 183-275.

⁴⁰ Cf. G. DITADI, *L'intelligenza degli animali...*, 27.

himself is seen as all that is harmful and destructive and as its cause⁴¹, incorporating all that in fire, drought or sea is immoderate and disordered by reason of excesses or defects⁴². The same point of view is also presented in *De Iside et Osiride* 49, 371 B⁴³:

But Typhon is that part of the soul which is impressionable, impulsive, irrational and truculent, and of the bodily part the destructible, diseased and disorderly as evidenced by abnormal seasons and temperatures, and by obscurations of the sun and disappearances of the moon, outbursts, as it were, and unruly actions of the part of Typhon.

In addition, the apotropaic role of cultic rattles in scaring and rejecting Typhon during the worship of Isis⁴⁴ is linked to the symbolism Plutarch sees in the Egyptian myth⁴⁵. Here, the rite refers to Typhon's destruction powers. On the upper part of the rattle, whose shape is circular, is represented the sublunary sphere which is subject to reproduction and destruction.

If animals are for Plutarch in the exegesis of the Egyptian myth a "miroir naturel permettant de penser ce qui demeure purement intelligible"⁴⁶, the earthly donkey was the sole means of visualizing Typhon.

6. Final considerations

In the light of the passages examined here, it can be said that Plutarch in his own reports on the donkey has integrated the different traditions he had at his disposal – the Jewish, the Ancient Egyptian and the Greek traditions – and revised them from his own eclectic perspective. In my view this can be attributed to the fact that he was a Platonist. In his time, Platonism came to consist in syncretistic tendencies combining Plato's thinking with other cultures and doctrines. Not by chance did the most important exponents of so-called Middle Platonism, Philo (20 BC- AD 50) and Apuleius (123/125- c. 180) attempt a profound reassessment of Jewish wisdom and the religious beliefs of Ancient Egypt in Platonic terms. And Plutarch did the same. The

⁴¹ *De Iside et Osiride* 45, 368 A.

⁴² *De Iside et Osiride* 64, 376 F-377 A: οὐδὲ πῦρ Τυφῶνα πάλιν οὐδ' αὐχμὸν οὐδὲ θάλατταν, ἀλλ' ἀπλῶς ὅσον ἐστὶν ἐν τούτοις ἄμετρον καὶ ἄτακτον ὑπερβολαῖς ἢ ἐνδείαις Τυφῶνι προσνέμοντες.

⁴³ Τυφῶν δὲ τῆς ψυχῆς τὸ παθητικὸν καὶ τιτανικὸν καὶ ἄλογον καὶ ἐμπληκτον, τοῦ δὲ σωματικοῦ τὸ ἐπίκηρον καὶ νοσῶδες καὶ ταρακτικὸν ἁωρίαις καὶ δυσκρασίαις καὶ κρύψεσιν ἡλίου καὶ ἀφανισμοῖς σελήνης οἷον ἐκδρομαὶ καὶ ἀφηνιασμοὶ [καὶ] Τυφῶνος.

⁴⁴ Cf. *De Iside et Osiride* 63, 376 CD.

⁴⁵ J. HANI, *La religion égyptienne...*, II, 432-3.

⁴⁶ J. BOULOGNE, "Le culte égyptien...", 205.

sacredness of the donkey drawn from the Jewish tradition eased Plutarch's acceptance of Ancient Egypt's identification of the donkey with Typhon. Through Plutarch's allegorical exegetical method, Typhon/donkey became a symbol of all that had to do with the 'qualitatively bad' world of generation.

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