

# Plutarque

## Éditions, Traductions, Paratextes

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ANNABLUME

# THE SHIFTING REALITIES OF PLUTARCH'S NATURAL PROBLEMS (A NOTE ON THE RECEPTION OF *QUAESTIONES NATURALES*)

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**ABSTRACT** — The contribution at hand aims to provide a short overview of the reception of a collection of natural problems by Plutarch of Chaeronea, entitled *Quaestiones naturales*. The history of this work and its value for the history of science is examined against the backdrop of the reception of Ps.-Aristotle's *Problemata physica*, which served as Plutarch's model. By examining the different ways in which Plutarch's work was excerpted, adapted, reframed and translated by later authors I try to determine how it was evaluated in later times and in which socio-intellectual milieus it circulated. Among these later authors are 1) the 11th century Byzantine polymath and 'Chief of the Philosophers' Michael Psellus, who incorporated several of Plutarch's natural problems (in an adapted form) in his encyclopaedic *De omnifaria doctrina*, 2) the Spanish humanist and Jesuit Juan de Pineda, who also drew on Plutarch's natural problems in his *Diálogos Familiares de la Agricultura Cristiana* (1589), 3) the Dutch Protestant scholar, professor and doctor Gybertus Longolius and 4) the Spanish humanist Pedro Juan Núñez, who both produced a Latin translation of the work (in 1542 and 1554 respectively).

**KEY WORDS** — Plutarch, *Quaestiones naturales*, reception, history of science

The contribution at hand aims to provide a short overview of the reception of a collection of natural problems by Plutarch of Chaeronea, the *Quaestiones naturales*. Notwithstanding its peculiar natural scientific contents, being modelled, more precisely, after the Aristotelian *Problemata physica*, the collection seems to have been of particular interest to a number of later authors, who excerpted, adapted, reframed and translated the original Greek text in different ways. Examining this process is important in determining how Plutarch's text was evaluated in later times and in which socio-intellectual milieus it circulated. Our take on the matter, common in the history of science, rests on the idea that world views can shift over time, and can be different from person to person or from society to society. This contribution will not so much be concerned, therefore, with Plutarch's science of natural problems from a synchronic perspective (examining how *Quaestiones naturales* relates to the contemporary scientific paradigm and how it fits in with Plutarch's own natural philosophical project) but from a diachronic one<sup>1</sup>. From this perspective, the value of Plutarch's

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<sup>1</sup> For a study of Plutarch's science of natural problems from a synchronic perspective, see Meeusen 2014 and 2017.

*Quaestiones naturales* for the history of science can be examined by studying how later authors picked it up and adopted it to suit their specific authorial needs.

The 11th century Byzantine polymath and ‘Chief of the Philosophers’ Michael Psellus is especially worth mentioning here, as he incorporated several of Plutarch’s natural problems (in an adapted form) in his encyclopaedic *De omnifaria doctrina*. There is controversy about the authenticity of two chapters in Psellus’ text that may contain the remains of two lost *Quaestiones naturales* (viz. *Q.N.* 40–41 = §§ 170 and 188 Westerink). On the basis of a number of parallels in Plutarch’s natural problems and the order of Psellus’ sources in the first redaction of *De omnifaria doctrina* (which only covers natural scientific topics), there may be reason to accept the authenticity of these chapter (as re-edited by Psellus), but this remains uncertain. The least that can be said is that there is a Plutarchan core to the two chapters<sup>2</sup>. Clearly, the merit of Psellus’ (first redaction of) *De omnifaria doctrina* lies in its attempt to create a genuine Christian cosmology (a nice chapter to illustrate this is provided by the one about earthquakes, § 164.2: τὸν σεισμόν ποιεῖ μὲν ὁ θεός κτλ.). As I have argued elsewhere, Psellus’ work nicely illustrates how Pagan knowledge, including Plutarch’s natural problems, was hesitantly accepted by the author and what intellectual restrictions were imposed on it by the religious (i.c. Christian-Orthodox) establishment of his time<sup>3</sup>. Notably, Psellus does not label his excerpts as being drawn from Plutarch. In fact, it seems that Psellus, through Plutarch’s lens, looked at, and approved of, *Aristotle’s* causal approach in the *Problemata*, which he does mention explicitly<sup>4</sup>. Importantly, Psellus addressed his *De omnifaria doctrina* to the Byzantine emperor, God’s regent on earth. The relationship between such encyclopaedic knowledge and imperial power is not of disinterest, as it provides a better understanding of what highly placed Byzantine figures were expected to know, or, at the very least, to have read.

A similar case of religious adoption of Plutarch’s natural problems is found in the *Diálogos Familiares de la Agricultura Cristiana* (1589) by the Spanish humanist and Jesuit Juan de Pineda. In this work, the author relies heavily on Plutarch’s authority (amongst that of other Pagan authors) and, at points, incorporates several passages from *Quaestiones naturales* in his Christian discourse. As Ramón Palerm has shown, the author of this work “through an ongoing confrontation of the Christian and Pagan worlds, struggles to win for

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<sup>2</sup> For further discussion, see Westerink 1948, 3, Sandbach 1965, 143 and Meeusen 2012, 107–110. Senzasono 2006, 50–51 refuses to include both problems in his edition on grounds of the uncertain attribution in comparison to Longolius’ problems (see further).

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion of the reception of Plutarch’s *Quaestiones naturales* in Psellus’ *De omnifaria doctrina*, see Meeusen 2012. For the reception of Plutarch’s *Quaestiones conviviales* in the same work see Id. forthcoming.

<sup>4</sup> See Meeusen forthcoming.

the Christian cause the content of the ancient traditions, to which he gives an obvious moral sense in a didactic–doctrinal tone”<sup>5</sup>. The cases of Psellus and de Pineda, thus, show how later, Christian authors – both in the Orthodox East and in the Reforming West (de Pineda speaks with little respect of the Spanish Inquisition) – used Plutarch’s natural problems as a basis for their own inquiries, not so much by addressing them anew, but by exploiting them as a *Fundgrube* of exotic materials to be assimilated into the context of a new (i.c. Christian) world system.

The situation is different in other cases, though. The scholarly interest in Plutarch’s *Quaestiones naturales* in the Humanist era is reflected mainly in the production of new editions and Latin translations (mostly in collective volumes with other works from the *corpus Plutarcheum*). The 1542 Latin translation by the Dutch Protestant scholar, professor and doctor Gybertus Longolius deserves specific mention here. In this version, the Aldine problems (*Q.N.* 1-31) are followed by eight additional problems (*Q.N.* 32-39) that were extracted, as Longolius indicates in a marginal note, from a Milanese manuscript (*Hucusque Aldinum exemplar sumus secuti: quae sequuntur, ex Mediolanensi sunt exemplari*)<sup>6</sup>. Unfortunately, this manuscript has been lost ever since, and the Greek text is still missing today. Considering the numerous parallels in Plutarch’s other works and the same general style and method of explanation, it is beyond debate, however, that these additional problems are authentic<sup>7</sup>.

Even if Longolius, so we know from his dedicatory letter to Hermann Xylonius (abbot of the imperial Benedictine monastery of Werden in Westfalen, where he took up residence for a while), composed his translation in order to find some repose after his reading of Galen’s writings (*ut ex longa et diutina Galeni lectione me recrearem*), it seems that he looked at Plutarch’s *Quaestiones naturales* in the first place as a medical physician and a scientist. This is not

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<sup>5</sup> Ramón Palerm 2011, 621 (see 629-632 for an analysis of the *Quaestiones naturales* material). Notably, the aspect of moral philosophy is entirely absent in Plutarch’s natural problems (see Meeusen 2013).

<sup>6</sup> The same note can be found in the reprint of Longolius’ translation in the collective volume of Latin translations of Plutarch’s *Moralia* published in Paris in 1544 by Michel de Vascosan. Unfortunately, no effort was done by the editor of that work to consult the Milanese manuscript, nor could it be retraced by Xylander or any later scholar. In addition, a scholar from around the XVI<sup>th</sup> century alluded to Longolius’ note in the margin of a copy of the 1509 Aldine edition (Ambrosiana S Q E I 20), where he wrote in his own hand: *Desunt problemata octo quae in eo quod versum est exemplari inveniuntur*. The same note was copied by another XVI<sup>th</sup> century scholar in his *Plutarchi variae lectiones* (Ambrosiana 723, R 115 sup.), where we read: *in extrema pagina haec habentur: desunt problemata octo quae in eo quod versum est exemplari inveniuntur*. Cf. Hubert – Pohlenz – Drexler 1960, viii-ix.

<sup>7</sup> For further details on Longolius’ translation, see Morales Ortiz 1999 and Meeusen 2016b. For a general account of the Latin translations of Plutarch’s *Moralia* dating from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the XV<sup>th</sup> century, see Becchi 2009.

so remarkable considering the collection's physical and physiological content. Longolius makes an effort, for instance, to restore the *quaestio* of *Q.N.* 30, 919B, where the manuscripts provide a very lacunary reading. Wyttenbach conjectured *Διὰ τί τῶν ἀμπέλων τὰς ἀκάρπους, <τοῖς δ' ἀκρέ>μοσι <καὶ ἔρνεσι>ν εὐτρο<φού>σασ τραγᾶν <λέγο>μεν;* ("Why do we say that vines that do not fruit but flourish with branches and shoots go goatish?"). Longolius' version runs as follows: *Quare vites, cum nimia ubertate lasciviunt, et minus feraces sunt, et aliquando exarescunt? cuius rei causam quidam in syderationis morbum referunt.* Sandbach notes that we see Longolius' personal imagination at work here<sup>8</sup>. He may, indeed, very well be relying, in this case, on his own medical knowledge in mentioning the *syderationis morbus*<sup>9</sup>.

Longolius' case can be confronted with that of the Spanish humanist Pedro Juan Núñez, who also translated the Aldine *Quaestiones naturales* into Latin (the work was printed in 1554 in Valencia by Joan Mei from Flanders). The fact that this translation was appended to Theodor Gaza's Latin version of Ps.-Aristotle's and Ps.-Alexander's *Problemata physica* is important<sup>10</sup>, since it nicely illustrates how Plutarch's natural problems were conceived of as being an inherent link in the ongoing tradition of natural problem literature, which was initiated by Aristotle and his direct Peripatetic successors (see also Psellus' case above).

Notably (and conclusively), the practice of solving Aristotelian natural problems lasted well until the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, when new collections of problems made their appearance and older ones were constantly copied, translated and commented upon<sup>11</sup>. Plutarch's natural problems were, thus, considered as a continuation of a unified and long-lasting scientific tradition and as a genuine contribution to the Aristotelian study and understanding of 'problematic' natural phenomena as well as to the development of a certain

<sup>8</sup> Pearson – Sandbach 1965, 142.

<sup>9</sup> See L&S, s.v. *sideratio*: "A disease produced by a constellation, a blast, sideration; of plants, a blast, a blight". If Longolius is, indeed, relying on his own knowledge in *Q.N.* 30, his source may have been Plin., *HN*, 17, 222: *proprium tamen siderationis est sub ortu canis siccitatum vapor, cum insita ac novellae arbores moriuntur, praecipue ficus et vitis*. Note that Longolius also corrects the Aldine reading of *Q.N.* 26, 918B (αἱ κύνες ἐσθίουσι, ἢ ὅταν καὶ χολὴν ἐξεμῶσιν). As Xylander conjectured, Plutarch is probably arguing here that bitches eat grass in order to vomit forth their bile (αἱ κύνες ἐσθίουσι πόαν, ἵνα τὴν χολὴν ἐξεμῶσιν), which is also how Longolius understood the text (*canes nausea correpti, cum bilem per vomitum expellere conantur, gramen adpetunt*). Longolius may perhaps be relying on Pliny again. Cf. Plin., *HN*, 25, 91 (with Arist., *HA*, 612a). See Morales Ortiz 1999, 149, n. 25.

<sup>10</sup> This work was printed as *Problematum Aristotelis sectiones duae de quadraginta. Problematum Alexandri Aphrodisieii libri duo Theodoro Gaza interprete ad haec Eruditissima problemata Plutarchi. Extant apud Borbonium bibliopolam. Valentiae, Typis Ioannis Mey, Flandri* (Raya) 1554. See Morales Ortiz 1998, 253-257 and 2000, 90.

<sup>11</sup> Generally useful here are Flashar 1962, 370-382, Blair 1999 and the contributions in De Leemans – Goyens 2006 (with a selected bibliography at 295-317). See also esp. Lawn 1963 and Filius 1999.

method for explaining them. I have tried to nuance this view elsewhere by arguing that Plutarch did not have the intention with his natural problems to be regarded as an Aristotelian scientist (pointing out that they are based on a Platonic-Academic fundament), but history clearly decided otherwise<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> See Meeusen 2014, 2016a and 2017.

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