

Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch

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(eds.)

IMPRESA DA UNIVERSIDADE DE COIMBRA
COIMBRA UNIVERSITY PRESS

ANNABLUME

TRUFFLES AND THUNDERBOLTS (PLU., *QUAEST. CONV.* 4.2, 1-2)

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Abstract

In the first part of a chapter of his *Quaestiones convivales* (4.2,1-2) Plutarch seeks to explain the popular belief according to which truffles are produced through the agency of thunder by linking their appearance with the physical phenomena accompanying thunder and lightning. This can be regarded as an example of the attempt – common in Hellenistic and Roman times – to save popular beliefs through scientific, philosophical, or allegorical interpretations, as the Stoics had done in the case of divination.

In the second problem of the fourth book of the *Συμποσιακά*, or *Quaestiones convivales*, Plutarch treats two different matters concerning lightning and thunderbolts, the first of which is paralleled in several ancient writers¹ and will be the object of the present inquiry – namely, the belief connecting the appearance and growth of truffles with thundering. The title of the problem, as formulated by Plutarch, shows that he is more concerned with explaining the reason for the rise of this popular belief than with establishing the real connection, if any, between truffles and thunderbolts: “Why truffles *seem* to be born through the agency of thunder”: διὰ τί τὰ ὕδνα τῆ βροντῆ δοκεῖ γίνεσθαι².

The location of the banquet during which the question was raised is particularly apt: the city of Elis, where Agemachos, the host, served his guests truffles of extraordinary size³. That Elis, in the Peloponnese, was renowned for its truffles is indeed confirmed by Theophrastus and Pliny⁴.

The appearance of the truffles at the banquet is greeted by one of the diners with an ironical allusion, duly underlined by Plutarch, to the popular belief connecting truffles and thunder: “someone said with a smile: ‘these truffles are indeed worthy of the thundering we recently had’, thus scorning those who connect the birth of truffles with thundering”⁵.

This already poses a problem, because according to both Theophrastus and Pliny⁶ truffles were believed to owe their origin to the autumn thunderstorms,

¹ Thphr., *Fr.* 400A Fortenbaugh (= Athen. 62A-C); Plin., *Nat.* 19.37 (clearly drawing on Theophrastus); cf. Apollon. *Mir.* 47, p. 140, 258-259 Giannini. For Theophrastus cf. O. REGENBOGEN, 1940, col. 1444. At Thphr., *HP* 1.6.5 the correction κεραύνιον was proposed for the transmitted κράνιον (which, however, must probably be corrected to γεράνιον).

² The second question is similarly introduced in the title: καὶ διὰ τί τοὺς καθεύδοντας οἴονται μὴ κεραυνοῦσθαι.

³ Plu., *Quaest. conv.* 4.2,1, 664B ὕδνα παμμεγέθη δειπνοῦσιν ἡμῖν Ἀγέμαχος παρέθηκεν ἐν Ἡλίδι.

⁴ Cf. Plin., *Nat.* 19.37 *Asiae nobilissima circa Lampsacum et Alopeconnesum, Graeciae vero circa Elim*, derived from Thphr. *Fr.* 400A (= Athen. 62C).

⁵ Plu., *Quaest. conv.* 4.2,1, 664B ἔφη τις ὑπομειδιάσας ‘ἄξιά γε τῶν βροντῶν τῶν ἔναγχος γενομένων’, ὡς δὴ καταγελῶν τῶν λεγόντων τὰ ὕδνα τὴν γένεσιν ἐκ βροντῆς λαμβάνειν. A. STEIER, 1950, col. 1383, wrongly attributes this remark to Agemachos himself.

⁶ Thphr., *Fr.* 400A (= Athen. 62B) ὅταν ὕδατα μετοπωρινὰ καὶ βρονταὶ γίνωνται σκληραὶ

but both writers, as well as Discorides, concur in stating that the best time for the gathering and consumption of truffles is spring⁷. The words Plutarch attributes to this guest, however, clearly show that the way he refers to this belief makes no provision for an interval between the birth of the truffle and its readiness for consumption, since he mentions *recent* thunderstorms (ἐναγχος γενομένων). This may remind us of a detail connected with the paradoxical nature of truffles, as reported by Pliny, who declares himself to be in doubt whether they grow or attain their size immediately at birth⁸; and Theophrastus, as quoted by Athenaeus, even seems to take it for granted that truffles, like other things created in the earth, are produced instantaneously at their full size⁹ – a statement that appears to be at odds with their alleged birth in autumn and readiness for consumption in spring. Unfortunately the season during which Agemachos' banquet took place is not specified, but a parallel to the way the popular belief is alluded to by this character of Plutarch's is found in Juvenal, who places in spring both the thundering originating truffles and the consumption of the latter as a delicacy¹⁰. This, however, might be a simplification due to the desire to give particular emphasis to the striking connection popular belief posited between thunder and the appearance of truffles.

A second opinion is then reported by Plutarch in *oratio obliqua*, but it is presumably to be understood as put forward at the time by some other guests of Agemachos', as shown by the tense employed: "there *were* some who said" etc.¹¹. According to them thunder produces clefts in the earth, thus guiding truffle seekers – which gave rise to the belief that thunder creates truffles, rather than simply revealing them. This opinion is itself in line with the title of the problem, which, as we saw, is mainly concerned with the origin of the popular belief, but it unambiguously stresses that the latter is mistaken, and its supporters appear to be overly careful to distinguish themselves from the uneducated mass: οἱ πολλοί¹².

It is then Agemachos' turn to express his opinion; he defends the popular belief by referring to the numerous inexplicable phenomena connected with lightning and thunderbolts – aptly described by him as *διοσημίαι* – and urging his hearers not to dismiss as impossible what merely appears paradoxical. In this attitude of the host we recognize the spirit of the principle later stated by Mestrius Florus in the Συμποσιακά: one should not lightly reject traditional

τότε γίνεσθαι, καὶ μᾶλλον ὅταν αἱ βρονταὶ ~ Plin., *Nat.* 19.37 *cum fuerint imbres autumnales et tonitrua crebra tunc nasci et maxime tonitribus.*

⁷ Thphr., *Fr.* 400A (=Athen.62B) τὴν δὲ χρεῖαν καὶ τὴν ἀκμὴν ἔχειν τοῦ ἥρος; Plin., *Nat.* 19. 37 *tenerrima autem verno esse*; Dsc. 2.145 ἔαρος ὀρυττομένη.

⁸ Plin., *Nat.* 19.34 *crescant anne vitium id terrae... ea protinus globetur magnitudine, qua futurum est... non facile arbitror intellegi posse.*

⁹ Thphr., *Fr.* 400A (=Athen. 62A) ἢ τῶν ἐγγεοτόκων τούτων γένεσις ἅμα καὶ φύσις.

¹⁰ Juv., 5.116-118 *tradentur tubera, si ver / tunc erit et facient optata tonitrua cenas / maiores.*

¹¹ Plu., *Quaest. conv.* 4.2,1, 664B ἦσαν οὖν οἱ φάσκοντες κτλ. If this referred generically to a current idea, we would probably have the present tense: *τινές φασι*, or something similar.

¹² Plu., *Quaest. conv.* 4.2,1, 664BC ἐκ δὲ τούτων δόξαν ἐγγενέσθαι τοῖς πολλοῖς ὅτι τὸ ὕδρον αἱ βρονταὶ γεννῶσι, οὐ δεικνύουσι.

views when we are not able to ascertain the causes of inexplicable phenomena, though these are to be sought by resorting to logic¹³. On the other hand, Agemachos is playing his role as a host, in that, as he says at the end of his speech, his goal is to spur the discussion, as a polite way to have his guests contribute their share to the delicacy they are being served¹⁴, and thus ensure the success of the banquet.

Finally, Plutarch himself enters the discussion. His position favors an explanation reconciling the popular belief with more scientific views, but nevertheless, as he remarks himself, it is closely connected with Agemachos' speech¹⁵. The latter had in fact hinted at the fertilizing power attributed by farmers to rain accompanied by thunderstorms¹⁶. It should not escape us, however, that Agemachos had simply referred to the farmers' empirical recognition of the fact, whereas Plutarch endeavors to give it a scientific foundation.

The way he does so is of the highest interest. He starts by stating that the fertilizing power of thunderstorm rain is due to the presence of heat in the rain-water¹⁷. He goes immediately on to say, however, that the purest and most violent portion of the fire present in the rain clouds is released in the form of lightning, whereas the heavier and steamier portion warms up the cloud¹⁸. What we should emphasize here is the fact that Plutarch presents thunder and lightning as mere signs of the appearance of truffles, not as agents in any way. It is in fact the fertilizing heat produced in thunderstorm rain by the heavier particles of fire remaining in the clouds that is responsible for the growth of truffles, whereas lightning is merely the fire which is immediately released, and has no role in the process. The latter, however, can only take place when particles of fire are present in the clouds, and is therefore regularly accompanied by thunder and lightning.

Plutarch continues his speech by stressing the paradoxical nature of the truffle, with remarks paralleled in other writers. Truffles are a sort of disease of the earth in the form of sickly outgrowths¹⁹; they have no roots²⁰; they cannot be born without water²¹. The latter is of course a common observation

¹³ Cf. Plu., *Quaest. conv.* 5.7,1, 680CD; also *Conv. sept. sap.* 20, 163D.

¹⁴ Plu., *Quaest. conv.* 4.2,1, 664D ταῦτα...ἀδολεσχῶ παρακαλῶν ὑμᾶς ἐπὶ τὴν ζήτησιν τῆς αἰτίας, ἵνα μὴ πικρὸς γένωμαι συμβολὰς τῶν ὕδνων πρασσοῦμενος.

¹⁵ Plu., *Quaest. conv.* 4.2,2, 664D αὐτὸν οὖν ἔφην τρόπον τινὰ τῷ λόγῳ δεξιὰν ὀρέγειν τὸν Ἀγάμαχον.

¹⁶ Plu., *Quaest. conv.* 4.2,1, 664D τὰ δ' ἀστραπαῖα τῶν ὑδάτων εὐαλδῆ καλοῦσιν οἱ γεωργοὶ καὶ νομίζουσιν.

¹⁷ Plu., *Quaest. conv.* 4.2,2, 664D αἰτία δ' ἡ τῆς θερμότητος ἀνάμιξις.

¹⁸ Plu., *Quaest. conv.* 4.2,2, 664DE τὸ μὲν γὰρ ὄξυ καὶ καθαρὸν τοῦ πυρὸς ἄπεισιν ἀστραπὴ γενόμενος, τὸ δ' ἐμβριθεὲς καὶ πνευματώδες ἐνειλούμενον τῷ νέφει καὶ συµμεταβάλλον ἐξαιρεῖ τὴν ψυχρότητα.

¹⁹ Plu., *Quaest. conv.* 4.2,2, 664F; 665A τῆς γῆς ... παθούσης τι καὶ μεταβαλλούσης. Cf. Plin., *Nat.* 19.34 *vitium... terrae*; 19.33 *terrae callum*.

²⁰ Plu., *Quaest. conv.* 4.2.2, 665A ἄρριζον; cf. Plin., *Nat.* 19.33. According to Dsc. 2.145, by contrast, the truffle itself is a root.

²¹ Plu., *Quaest. conv.* 4.2,2, 664F οὐδ' ἄνευ ὕδατος ἔχει τὴν γένεσιν; cf. Thphr., *Fr.* 400A (=

referring to all mushrooms²², and Theophrastus and Pliny emphasize this detail in connection with truffles by coupling rain and thunder as their producing factors²³. For this reason several scholars have maintained that the *horti tuber* created by water (*quod creavit unda*) in a poem in Petronius' *Satyrica*²⁴ should be taken to refer to a truffle. The word *tuber* does refer very often to the truffle in Latin, in particular when it is accompanied by the genitive *terrae*. The Italian word for truffle, "tartufo", descends from a Latin rustic form, **territufer*, equivalent to the classic *terrae tuber*. But *tuber* can refer to other underground bulbs and also to visible outgrowths as well. I have argued elsewhere²⁵ that in Petronius' poem, in which the *tuber* is actually *created* by water, it does not refer to a truffle, but to a gourd, which, according to Gargilius Martialis, is nothing but curdled water: *aqua coagulata*²⁶.

Plutarch ends his speech with a further reference to Agemachos' words, by emphasizing the godly and often inexplicable nature of the phenomena connected with thunder and lightning, which his host, as we have seen, had described as *διοσημίαι*²⁷.

If we now keep in mind that Plutarch's explanation makes provision both for thunder and lightning as a *sign* of the phenomenon under discussion and for the physical *agency* of the heat remaining in thunderstorm rain after the purest particles of fire have been released in the form of lightning, we may conclude that his speech is a fine specimen of the general attempt – common in Hellenistic and Roman times – to save popular beliefs through scientific, philosophical, or allegorical interpretations.

Stoicism, for example, considered many forms of folkloric tradition to reflect the original, authentic imprint of the universal *logos*, which became adulterated in later times and/or in social strata more exposed to the debasing influence of a civilization that increasingly moved away from nature and reason, as the Stoics understood them. As far as language is concerned, for example, even such a bitter opponent of archaism, at the literary level, as Seneca must recognize that the most authentic form of expression is found either in ancient authors or in turns of the spoken language handed down even among the uneducated, independently of the mainstream cultural and literary tradition. I have treated these matters in detail elsewhere, and there is no need to dwell on them here²⁸.

Athen. 62B); Plin., *Nat.* 19.37.

²² Cf. e.g. Pl., *St.* 773; Plin., *Nat.* 22.100.

²³ Cf. above, note 6.

²⁴ Petr. 109.10.3- 4 *rotundo / horti tubere quod creavit unda*.

²⁵ A. SETAIOLI, 2006.

²⁶ Garg. Mart. *med. ex oler. et pom.* 6, p. 140, 6-9 Rose = 6.1-3, p. 9 Maire *veteres medici de cucurbita ita senserunt, ut eam aquam dicerent coagulata. Galenus umidae putat virtutis et frigidae, idque ex eo probat quod in cibo sumpta... bibendi desideria non excitat.*

²⁷ Plu., *Quaest. conv.* 4.2, 2, 665A διὸ καὶ μάλιστα τοῖς πάθεσι τούτοις δόξα θεϊότητος πρόσεστι.

²⁸ For the original closeness of language to reality and its gradual adulteration cf. A. SETAIOLI, 1988, pp. 25-32, 37-43; for Seneca's recognition of the closeness of ancient authors and popular

Another area of folkloric tradition in which the Stoics – or most of them – recognized the original imprint of their all-pervading *logos* were the myths concerning the gods, handed down from the remotest antiquity and transmitted, though often adulterated, by poetry. This idea is easily recognizable in the handbook bearing the title *Summary of Greek Theology* written in the I century A.D. by Annaeus Cornutus, who was probably a freedman of Seneca's brother Annaeus Mela, though Seneca himself did not share his attitude. This matter too has been analyzed in detail elsewhere, and needs only a brief reference here²⁹.

But the area in which the Stoics tried hardest to reconcile popular traditions with their own philosophy was of course divination. This form of prediction of the future was theoretically founded on the doctrine of συμπάθεια, the mutual connection and reciprocal influence of all natural phenomena, stemming from the basic ideas of πρόνοια (“providence”) and εἰμαρμένη (“fate”, conceived as an uninterrupted chain of causes), but the need to save the pre-philosophical folkloric traditions connected with divination forced the Stoics to assume a link between the facts traditionally considered as signs and the ensuing phenomena considered to be announced by them – which restricted them to an empirical observation admitting of no experimental test or rational ascertainment of causal sequences. Already Zeno, and later Chrysippus and Posidonius, had to found divination (μαντική) on empirical events or results (διὰ τινὰς ἐκβάσεις)³⁰.

In the orthodox Stoic conception there were of course no fortuitous events: as Quintus, Cicero's brother, makes it clear in the latter's *De divinatione*, man is reduced to the observation of signs only because he cannot grasp the complete chain of the εἰμαρμένη³¹. Reconciling this dogmatic position with the empirical procedure just outlined was no easy task. Posidonius, however, tried at least to shift the problem by allocating to divination the task to inquire, if not the causes of an event, at least the signs of the causes³². This brings us back to Plutarch's explanation of the relationship linking truffles and thunderbolts, with the latter – as we have seen – playing the role of signs of the real cause; but it also places us on a level different from divination, and rather belonging to the realm of conjectural science. Posidonius, however, made a gallant, if ill-fated, attempt to reconcile the latter with divination.

In Cicero's *De divinatione*³³ Quintus, at the beginning of his speech and of the first book, quotes no less than five times his brother's *Prognostica*³⁴, the

spoken language to reality and reason cf. A. SETAIOLI, 2000, pp. 228-31.

²⁹ Cf., among the most recent scholarship, G. W. MOST, 1989; F. BELLANDI, 2003; P. CUGUSI, 2003; C. TORRE, 2003; and the commentary of I. RAMELLI, 2003. These works, as well as several others, have been discussed, and new approaches attempted, in A. SETAIOLI, 2003-2004, pp. 341-67.

³⁰ D. L. 7.149 (cf. *SVF* I 174; II 1191; Posid. F 7 + 27 E.-K.; 258; 371a Th.).

³¹ Cic., *Div.* 1.127; cf. 1.9 *earum rerum quae fortuitae putantur*.

³² Cic., *Div.* 1.127 *etsi causas ipsas non cernunt, signa tamen causarum et notas cernunt*.

³³ I have treated the matter touched on here in A. SETAIOLI, 2005, also discussing, among others, the interpretations given by A. S. PEASE, 1973, S. TIMPANARO, 2001⁶, and J. KANY-TURPIN, 2004.

³⁴ Cic., *Div.* 1.13; 1.14; 1.15 (thrice).

translation in Latin hexameters of the final part of Aratos' poem, dealing with weather forecasts, that is with a conjectural science basing its predictions on rational and reasonable deductions founded on signs physically homogeneous with the results expected: meteorology; and medicine is also mentioned in the same context³⁵. The sixth quotation, closely following upon the previous five, however, comes from a different poem by Cicero, the *De consulatu*, and amounts to a shift from meteorological to divinatory signs: the omens portending Catilina's conspiracy, as listed by the Muse Urania in a long speech³⁶. Quintus can do so because he posits an affinity between divination and conjectural sciences, even though he recognizes them as different: *age ea, quae quamquam ex alio genere sunt, tamen divinationi sunt similiora, videamus*³⁷. At the end of the book and of Quintus' speech, though more conjectural arts and sciences – namely politics, medicine again, navigation, and agriculture – have been mentioned as distinct from divination³⁸, the difference between the two appears to be as good as obliterated; and it is exactly at this point that Posidonius' name occurs³⁹.

In the following book, in which Cicero takes up the discussion in order to explode the very idea of divination, he roundly denies the affinity between the latter and conjectural sciences posited by his brother: *dissimile totum* are his peremptory words⁴⁰. Conjectural arts and sciences differ from divination in that they are based on regular sequences between homogeneous phenomena, rather than on relationships arbitrarily established or taken for granted between disparate events linked by no rationally recognizable causal bonds, as is the case with divination.

But though the evidence provided by Cicero's *De divinatione* clearly shows that Posidonius did posit an affinity between conjectural arts and sciences and divination, an interesting testimony overlooked by both Edelstein-Kidd and Theiler⁴¹ enables us to sketch a more nuanced picture of his position. I am referring to a chapter in Iamblichus' *De mysteriis*⁴² whose contacts with Cicero's *De divinatione* are absolutely evident, down to close verbal parallels, while the Posidonian imprint, and even such Stoic terms as *συμπαθής* and *πρόνοια*, are still clearly recognizable beneath the radically different conception of divination promoted by Iamblichus⁴³. We learn from this text that Posidonius considered the conjectural arts and sciences (navigation and medicine are mentioned) to provide conditional predictions based on signs that are

³⁵ Cic., *Div.* 1.13.

³⁶ Cic., *Div.* 1.17-22 (= *de consul. fr.* II Soubiran).

³⁷ Cic., *Div.* 1.13.

³⁸ Cic., *Div.* 1.111-112.

³⁹ Cic., *Div.* 1.130. Cf. Posidon. F 110 E.-K.; 378 Th.

⁴⁰ Cic., *Div.* 2.47. Here Posidonius is also mentioned, but in reference to his natural researches, not to his theories on divination.

⁴¹ Theiler does refer to this text (Iamb. *Myst.* 3.26) in his commentary (W. THEILER, 1982, pp. 297-9; cf. W. THEILER, 1930, pp. 136-9), but does not include it in Posidonius' fragments.

⁴² Iamb. *Myst.* 3.26, pp. 135-6 Des Places.

⁴³ Cf. note 33, A. SETAIOLI, 2005, pp. 256-8.

reasonable and probable, but not absolutely certain, whereas those offered by divination possess unconditional validity; but we also find the confirmation of the affinity posited between the former and the latter by Quintus in Cicero's *De divinatione*⁴⁴.

It should not escape us that in this connection Posidonius includes in the conjectural arts and sciences any insight drawn from natural phenomena concerning any aspect of reality (εἴ τινα ἐκ φύσεως ἐπιβολὴν εἰς τὰ ὄντα παρειλήφαμεν) – which perfectly fits the connection established by Plutarch between lightning as perceptible sign and a phenomenon otherwise concealed: the growth of truffles, though these are actually produced by a different, if related, cause. Shortly before⁴⁵ Posidonius had proposed two different explanations of the relationship established between the behavior of some animals and impending meteorological changes: the first posited a direct consentaneity between these animals and parts or aspects of the cosmos as a whole – συμπάθεια in the most general sense; the second assumed that they were endowed with a special sharpness of perception – in other words, it appealed to a causal link that could be rationally grasped and to a physical affinity between the sign and the event, which could provide a reasonable foundation for this type of meteorological lore. Plutarch's explanation of the relationship between truffles and thunderbolts, while refusing to discredit the folkloric tradition, shows a similar effort to account for it in a rational and reasonable way. He differs from Posidonius in that he does not aim to endorse the popular belief as such, but rather to explain its origin. The meaning of the title we have hinted at in the beginning is now absolutely clear: "Why truffles seem to be born through the agency of thunder". And of course Plutarch would not, as the Stoics did, extend this attitude to all the traditional superstitions connected with divination.

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⁴⁴ Iamb. *Myst.* 3.26, p. 136 Des Places οὐ δεῖ, εἴ τινα ἐκ φύσεως ἐπιβολὴν εἰς τὰ ὄντα παρειλήφαμεν ἢ τοῦ μέλλοντος ἐπαφήν, ἐγκρίνειν ταύτην ὡς μαντικὴν πρόγνωσιν· ἀλλ' ὁμοία μὲν ἐστὶ μαντικῆ. (cf. Cic., *Div.* 1.13, quoted above, in the text).

⁴⁵ Iamb. *Myst.* 3.26, p. 136 Des Places.

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