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Competition in Context

philonikia in Agesilaus-Pompey

by

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Abstract

In the Lives of Agesilaus and Pompey, Plutarch explores the role of competition in government and demonstrates that the absence or excess of philonikia is detrimental to a state. This balanced treatment of competition’s role in government contrasts with Plutarch’s negative presentation of philonikia in the Moralia, wherein Plutarch is commenting on contemporary society. This paper explores the possible influence that Plutarch’s exposure to contemporary politics had on his presentation of the role of political competition in Agesilaus-Pompey.

Key-Words: Plutarch, Philonikia, Praecepta gerendae reipublicae

Although Plutarch has been characterized as one who lives in the past, he was very much a man of his times. He looked to history for inspiration, but his writings were not intended for those seeking to decipher the past. He wrote for his contemporaries, some of who were engaged in or aspiring towards a life in politics. Plutarch was a connected man, who was well travelled from an early age, and intimate with the political elite and a member of embassies.

1 As quite bluntly stated by R. H. Barrow, 1967, 146: “Plutarch lived in the past. His mind ranges freely over Greek mythology, religion, literature, and history. If he reflects upon these, he reflects upon people and motives, rather than upon movement and development of ideas and thoughts.”

2 See C. P. Jones, 1971, 13–19 for a detailed reconstruction of Plutarch’s activities during his youth. Plutarch mentions his trip to Egypt at Quaest. conviv. 678 C, travelling to Delphi with Ammonius during Nero’s visit at de E Delphico 385 B, and Smyrna’s litigations before the proconsul at anim. an corp. aff. 501E–F. Plutarch mentions his participation in a delegation sent to the proconsul of Achaea at Praec. ger. reip. 816C.