Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch

José Ribeiro Ferreira, Delfim Leão, Manuel Tröster & Paula Barata Dias (eds)
BANQUET AND PHILHELLENISM IN THE LIVES OF FLAMININUS AND AEMILIUS PAULLUS

Manuel Tröster
University of Coimbra

Abstract

The Lives of Flamininus and Aemilius Paullus are good examples of Plutarch’s tendency to judge his Roman heroes according to their Hellenic qualities and benefactions to Greeks. While modern scholars rightly stress that both politicians were mainly driven by Roman interests and personal ambition, the biographer chooses primarily to highlight their philanthropic nature as well as their favourable attitude to Greek liberty and culture. Conspicuously, his praise is particularly generous in two episodes related to feasts and spectacles. Following the proclamation of liberty at the Isthmian Games, Flamininus’ policies are celebrated in the course of a banquet, with his achievements being judged equal or superior to those of the most eminent Greek statesmen of the past (Flam. 11). In the Aemilius, it is the protagonist himself who organises splendid feasts in a way that inspires profound admiration on the part of the Greeks (Aem. 28). While Livy’s account suggests that the victory celebrations at Amphipolis should primarily be seen as a show of Roman power, Plutarch essentially describes the event as a pleasant entertainment with a view to revealing Aemilius’ personal qualities. Greek-style festivals and banquets thus provide a most suitable background for presenting the ‘liberators’ of Greece as exemplars of philhellenism and philanthrôpia.

While much attention continues to be devoted to the significance of the Parallel Lives as an expression of a shared Graeco-Roman identity among the imperial élite, recent scholarship has tended to stress the essential Greekness of Plutarch’s outlook and criteria of judgement. Evidently, this does not imply that the Greek heroes are systematically presented as superior to their Roman pairs, yet it is important to acknowledge that the great men of the res publica are often accorded praise and blame on the basis of their attitude to Hellenic culture and their benefactions to Greeks. Thus, the representatives of Rome are expected to prove their worth on a playing field defined by the norms and values of Greek civilisation, and it is by displaying πρᾳότης, φιλανθρωπία, and other qualities cherished by Second Sophistic authors that they earn recognition and acclaim.


2 Rather the protagonists are treated as equals, as can be seen most clearly in the synkrisis. Cf. T. E. Duff, 1999, pp. 257-62, who argues that this is meant to focus the reader’s attention on the moral issues involved. Also note J. Boulogne, 1994, pp. 62-9; idem, 2000, who thinks of a cultural programme.
