

THESES OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Plutarchos *De superstitione* -  
Deisidaimonia in Greek Religion

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Theses of the doctoral dissertation

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## 1. Theme of the dissertation

*De superstitione* is one of the most controversial works by Plutarch standing at the beginning of the Plutarchean *oeuvre*. Accordingly, the main thesis of this work and the argument about superstition and atheism is to some extent discord with other and later works by the author of Chaironeia. Namely: the neutral or rather positive description of atheism, the overwhelming negative account of superstition and excessive religiousness, the rejection of the significance of dreams and omens, the disavowal of the belief in the underworld stand in contrast with the argumentation of the other religious-philosophical works or that of the Lives. These motifs have led some scholars (Hartmann, J. J.: *De Plutarcho scriptore*. Leiden, 1916; Smith, M.: *De superstitione*. In. Betz, H. D. (ed.): *Plutarch's Theological Writings and Early Christian Literature*. Leiden, 1975.) to the opinion that *De superstitione* was not authored by Plutarch. The dissertation rejects this theory, and discusses the work as the unambiguous part of the Plutarchean *oeuvre* maintaining the view that although Plutarch's religious philosophy has developed and changed in his life, the concept of *deisidaimonia* and the portrayal of the superstitious man is beyond doubt Plutarchean.

*De superstitione* is a work by the young Plutarch, the student of the Athenian Academy. Accordingly, in his argumentation he relies to a wide extent on the Greek philosophical tradition. He treats *deisidaimonia* as *pathos* (impulse, emotion) in terms of the Stoic tradition. Otherwise, insofar as he is concerned with the question of fear in front the gods, he adopts the Platonic formulation of god, who is the goodness, and from whom only good can come. So we must not fear the divine sphere, as does the *deisidaimon*. This view is termed as the *Grand Optimal Illusion* (Martin, D. B.: *Inventing Superstition. From the Hippocratics to the Christians*. Cambridge, 2004) of the antiquity emerging from time to time in the teachings of different philosophers and in different philosophical schools. The Plutarchean conception of *deisidaimonia*, as the philosophical-theological discourse regarding the superstition of the antiquity, is based upon this Platonic doctrine.

According to Plutarch ignorance and blindness regarding the gods divides itself into two streams: atheism and superstition. In *De superstitione* we read the comparison of these two false judgements. *Deisidaimonia* has an effect on the whole life of the superstitious man; it disables him and persuades him of the view that the gods are mischievous, malevolent, capricious and jealous beings: all the difficulties in his life, i.e. the diseases, failures, the death of his children etc. come from the gods. This harmful impact leads him to perform excessive ritual actions and ridiculous gestures, e.g. prostration, smearing himself with mud, wallowing in filth, outlandish penance and the worst, human sacrifice. These ritual performances -

according to Plutarch - disgrace the god-given ancestral dignity of the Greek religion. As the gods are good, kindly, magnanimous beings, they never require ritual performances of this kind.

Plutarch's conclusion also fits into the wider philosophical tradition: the appropriate form of piety lies between atheism and superstition. Thus, we must not overleap the moderate middle as we try to escape one, and rush into the other.

## II. Structure of the dissertation

At the beginning of the dissertation stands my Hungarian translation of *De superstitione*, which is followed by a comparison of the ancient and the modern superstition-expressions emphasizing the view that Plutarch is concerned basically not with traditional superstitious actions, as does Theophrast in his *Superstitious Character*, but with fear and with emotional and excessive religiousness resultant from this fear. The main chapters deal with *deisidaimonia* from three aspects. First, I examine the occurrence of *phobos*-, *daimon*-, *deisidaimonia*-expressions in the Plutarchean *oeuvre*. Also, I set *deisidaimonia* into the context of the polis-religion in view of the recent research regarding the Greek polis-religion. I also deal with the religious deviancy and the Plutarchean philosophical perspective, the latter of which cannot be universalized for the whole society.

Secondly, I examine occurrences of phenomena related to *deisidaimonia* in the archaic and classical Greek religion, and sources in which same or akin religious mentality appears (Hesiod, old and new comedy, Plato, Theophrast etc.). Thirdly, I study the religion of the Roman Empire, confront the Plutarchean *deisidaimonia*-critique with other sources (Juvenal, Lucian, Apuleius) in particular with the epigraphic material (Phrygian-Lyidian confession inscriptions), touch on the relationship between *superstitio* and *deisidaimonia*, and examine the works of the early Christian authors (Eusebius, Clement of Alexandria, Origen etc.). At the end of this chapter stands an *Appendix* dealing with the epigraphical occurrences of *deisidaimonia*.

These chapters are followed by a *Commentary* on *De superstitione*. This *Commentary* relies on Latin and Italian commentaries on *De superstitione* (Wytttenbach, D.: *Plutarchi Chaeronensis Moralia*. vol. 6. *Animadversionum Primus. Pars 2*. Oxford, 1810, 993-1038.; Abernethy, G.: *De Plutarchi Qui Fertur De Superstitione Libello*. Königsberg, 1911; Laurenti, R.-Santaniello, C: *Plutarco. La superstizione. Introduzione, testo critico, traduzione e commento*. Naples, 2007.), however, these works do not include important philosophical, cultural - historical, religious - historical, and epigraphical parallelisms (Stoic terminology,

*asyllia, hiketeia*, ritual defilement etc.). By writing the *Commentary I* followed the pattern of the commentary by Hendrik Obsieger (*Plutarch: De E apud Delphos. Über das Epsilon am Apolltempel in Delphi*. Stuttgart) published in 2013. Obsieger - interpreting the Plutarchean work - aimed to show all the philosophical, cultural - historical and philological parallelisms which stand behind the Greek text. The dissertation in this form is a pre-study to the examination of the different discursive strategies in the realm of the Greek religion in the Imperial Period which the philosophers, poets, and the members of the elite used to describe and judge religious deviancy and the ritual praxis of the society.

### **III. Methods and conclusions of the dissertation**

In the last decade the theory of the market-model had a significant impact on the Greco-Roman religious history (cf. North, J.: The Development of Religious Pluralism. In.: Lieu, J. et al. (edd.): *The Jews Among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire*. London, 1992; Bendlin, A.: Looking Beyond the Civic Compromise: Religious Pluralism in Late Republican Rome. In.: Bispham, E. - Smith, Ch. (edd.): *Religion in Archaic and Republican Rome and Italy. Evidence and Experience*. Edinburgh, 2000. etc.).

According to this view, the religious life of the Imperial Period resembles to a market. At this religious market far more religious alternatives are available for the individual than in former periods. These 'religious products' compete with each other; the salesmen (priests, members of a religious group, members of the elite, philosophers etc.) try to sell their cults, their religious conceptions. The worshipper, with commitments and heterogeneous needs, makes a selection: he can choose the new or can dismiss it conserving the old religious forms, or can confound the two. These are the choices available to him.

According to Bendlin (2000) the choice made by the individual in the religious market is determined partly through the society. Yet the individual has his own cultic needs, and is set into the transection of the public and private cults. Bendlin (2000) argues for the 'religious hybrids', who are „resulted from the instrumentalisation of the public domain by private concerns; students of Roman religion shun them as marginal to their systematizations, yet hybrids (...) may have in fact been the rule in the polytheistic society of late republican Rome.” (Bendlin 2000, 132). In my opinion the Plutarchean *deisidaimon* is such a 'religious hybrid.'

I hold the view that the Plutarchean *deisidaimonia*-critique should be interpreted by means of this model. Plutarch's conception of religion and of the traditional dignity of the Greek religion is a 'religious product'. This product was available to other individuals, however, it

was radically antithetical with the prevailing religious mentality of the period: the religiousness, which is criticised by him was widespread in the whole society independently of social status. This transpires if we examine the religious mentality of the period for example through the works by Juvenal, Lucian, Apuleius, or the epigraphic material. The discrepancy at hand can be interpreted as the difference between the discourse-level (by Bendlin: *Diskursebene*) and the society-level (*Gegenstandsebene*) reality; i.e. the critique by Plutarch, Maximus of Tyre etc. are philosophical standpoints which are in many instances not compatible with the religious mentality of the contemporary society.

Bendlin's conception can be compared with that of Jörg Rüpke about the religious deviation (Rüpke, J.: *Aberglauben oder Individualität. Religiöse Abweichung im römischen Reich*. Tübingen, 2011). Rüpke examines the religious individualization of the religion of the Imperial period. He is concerned with the issue of norm violation in the realm of religion and with superstition. Also, he poses the question under what circumstances we can speak about personal religion and superstition, and what are the limits of these expressions. Although Bendlin's and Rüpke's models are - in my view - adaptable to the case of the Plutarchean *deisidaimon*, they cannot describe one crucial aspect of the religiousness of the superstitious man, namely his emotional ritual acts.

In the previous years, Angelos Chaniotis has examined the role of the emotions in the personal religion, and set up a conception in which - akin to the conception of Bendlin - competition also plays a crucial role. However, Chaniotis argues that beside the rational choice made by the worshippers, emotions play a role too (Chaniotis, A.: *Megatheism. The Search for the Almighty God and the Competition Between Cults*. In.: Mitchell, S. - van Nuffelen, P. (edd.): *One God. Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire*. Cambridge; Constructing the Fear of Gods. Epigraphic Evidence From Sanctuaries of Greece and Asia Minor. In.: Chaniotis, A. (ed.): *Unveiling Emotions. Sources and Methods for the Study of Emotions in the Greek World*. Stuttgart; Moving Stones. The Study of Emotions in Greek Inscriptions. In.: Chaniotis, A. (ed.): *Unveiling Emotions. Sources and Methods for the Study of Emotions in the Greek World*. Stuttgart).

The emotional gestures of the Plutarchean *deisidaimon* can be interpreted in the context of the emotional religion of the Imperial Period. We often read about emotional ritual acts of this kind in our literary and epigraphical sources: the characters of Apuleius, or of Lucian's *Philospeudes*, or the residents of Paphlagonia, according to Lucian (*Alexander*), are also *deisidaimones* in the Plutarchean sense of the word. The analysis of these sources can lead us to another crucial ascertainment, namely that the *deisidaimon* does not belong exclusively to a

specific social group. This religious mentality is not the characteristic of the low-born member of the society; the above mentioned characters (i.e. *deisidaimones*) are present in all social strata: the Roman senator, Rutillianus, the client of Alexander of Abonuteichos, the hypochondriac Aelius Aristides, or the affluent characters of Apuleius are well-born, yet their religious mentality is on the same level as that of the Plutarchean *deisidaimon*.

In the previous years, many scholars have questioned the model of the polis-religion (Kindt, J.: Kindt, J.: Polis Religion - A Critical Appreciation. In.: *Kernos*. vol. 22. 2009; Bremmer, J.: Manteis, Magic, Mysteries and Mythography Messy Margins of Polis Religion? In.: *Kernos*. vol. 23. 2010; Eidinow, E.: Networks and Narratives. A Model for Ancient Greek Religion. In.: *Kernos*. vol. 24. 2011. etc.). They argue for the view that magic and other 'low-class' ritual acts also belong to the religion of the polis, in which many competitive and often antagonistic religious narratives are present at the same time. I adopt this view in the interpretation of the Plutarchean work: accordingly, *deisidaimonia* is not a marginal form or the opposite of religion - as Plutarch puts it - but the part of the polis-religion; a religious alternative in the multi-coloured religion of the Greek polis. This religious mentality is condemned from a philosophical point of view, but it is present in the society and forms the personal religiousness of the worshippers.

Plutarch's religious philosophy, his henotheistic conception of the single divine being (see: *De E apud Delphos*), his condemnation of the fear in the personal religiousness, and also his ethical teachings were popular with the early Christian authors. These apologetic writers had labelled the Greek religion as *deisidaimonia*, they had often used in their critique the arguments of Greek authors to illustrate the pravity of the pagan religion. The philosophical-theological discourse about superstition and the Platonic teachings about the goodness of the gods were adaptable to their Christian point of view. Clement of Alexandria and Eusebius also use in many points Plutarchean examples or arguments to argue for the primacy of Christianity.

In the summary of the dissertation I mention discursive strategies, with which Greek and Roman authors criticised the different forms of the ritual praxis. Besides the philosophical-theological discursive strategy we meet gender, emotional, aesthetic, ethnic etc. discourses. In the Plutarchean *oeuvre* these can be found without exception. This summary indicates that the dissertation in its present form is a pre-study to a comprehensive study of the religious discourses of the Imperial period.

#### IV. Publications relevant to the theme of the dissertation

LINDNER, Gyula:

- A babona mint gyulladás. [Superstition as Inflammation]. In.: *Kaleidoscope. Művelődés-, tudomány-, és orvostörténeti folyóirat*. 2012/12.
- A babonáról kicsit másképpen. Plutarchos *De superstitione*. [About Superstition from a slightly different perspective] In.: *Vallástudományi Szemle*. 2012/4. 75-98.
- Ein abergläubischer Schauspieler? - Die Bedeutungsentwicklung von Deisidaimonie. In.: *Acta Classica Universitatis Scientiarum Debreceniensis*. 49. 2013. 191-202.
- A deisidaimonia fogalma a görög feliratokon [Deisidaimonia on Greek Inscriptions]. In.: *Vallástudományi Szemle*. 2013/4. 123-131.
- Emotion und Ergriffenheit. Henotheistische Tendenzen in der kaiserzeitlichen Religion. In.: *Miscellanea Historiae Antiquitatis: Proceedings of the First Croatian-Hungarian PhD Conference on Ancient History. Hungarian Polis Studies* 21. 21-36. 2014.
- Superstition and Propitiation. Plutarch and the Phrygian-Lyidian Confession Inscriptions. Cambridge, 2015. (in press).
- Párhuzamos babonák - A plutarchosi *deisidaimonia* Alexandriai Kelemen és Eusebios műveiben [Parallel Superstitions - The Plutarchean *deisidaimonia* in the Works of Clement of Alexandria and Eusebius]. In.: *Hegyen épült város - Fiatal kutatók és doktoranduszok III. nemzetközi teológuskonferenciája konferenciakötet*. Bp., L'Harmattan, 2015. (in press).