

A NOTE ON DIVINE HONOURS FOR ANTIGONOS GONATAS

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Resumo. Há praticamente um século, W.W. Tarn concluiu que Antígono Gônatas nunca havia sido honrado como um deus. Ele baseou seu ponto de vista (considerado posteriormente “a visão tradicional” sobre o assunto) não apenas na influência da filosofia estoica mas também em uma passagem bastante conhecida de Plutarco (*Moralia* 360c), em que Antígono Gônatas responde com sarcasmo ao poeta Hermódoto que “o escravo que carrega meu penico sabe que não sou um deus”. Este artigo propõe uma interpretação alternativa para essa passagem: Gônatas não rejeita as honras divinas, mas apenas uma natureza supostamente similar à divina. Tudo o que podemos depreender de sua fala é um sentimento de desaprovação com respeito àquelas honras, não havendo nada que fundamente a visão tradicional. O contexto do passo de Plutarco torna isso ainda mais claro, pois este constrói uma argumentação contra a prática muito comum de se prestar honras divinas para grandes reis, fornecendo uma lista exemplos dentre os quais a anedota referente a Gônatas constitui o ponto alto de seu raciocínio. Se Antígono jamais tivesse sido reverenciado como deus, o exemplo não faria sentido. Por outro lado, não poderia haver argumento melhor do que citar um rei desaprovando essa prática, mas um rei que – como todos os outros listados antes e depois dele – tenha recebido efetivamente honras divinas.

Palavras-chave. Antígono Gônatas; honras divinas; religião hellenística; culto imperial.

THE AIM OF THIS SHORT NOTE IS TO DRAW ATTENTION TO A TEXTUAL SOURCE that might supplement inscriptional evidence on divine honours for Antigonos Gonatas.¹ Curiously, it is no other than the famous anecdote about Antigonos and his night pot bearer cited in Plutarch’s *Moralia*, a passage which has been used by W.W. Tarn to support his claim that the king was never bestowed with divine honours.² The text is as follows :

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¹ Presented in Habicht, 1996.

² Alongside Tarn’s persistence on character (see Tarn 1913: 21–36, 249–50, 253). According to Tarn, Gonatas had no reason to resort to such measures to legitimize his authority (see also Green (2007: 50). The description of his character bears resemblance to Alexander’s as portrayed by Tarn. In his view, Alexander was rather receptive to godlike honours, since he was taught

Whence old Antigonos, when some Hermodotos in his poems proclaimed him “Son of the Sun and God”, he retorted:

— My night-pot bearer knows no such things.³

There is no hint of denial whatsoever. The king states his contempt for any attribution of godlike nature and descent to himself. He does so with a distinct tone of sarcasm and signifies that he disapproves of any such proclamations. I suggest that the subject of his disapproval was a real phenomenon, a political necessity allegedly disagreeable on moral grounds but yet unwillingly accepted.

Ancient sources inform us of two other Macedonian kings who received divine honours yet they expressed their ambivalence on the issue. Alexander 3rd, when wounded in battle, expressed a skeptical spirit and cited a homeric verse from his favoured Iliad, that it was human and not divine blood that was pouring out of his body.⁴ Closer to Antigonos, his own father Demetrios Poliorketes, whose divine honours are well attested, is said to have expressed his contempt over the Athenians for their urge to honour not only himself, but also his mistresses and some adulators.⁵ Both cases relate to a common and well known practice. Alexander and Demetrios demonstrated the anticipated modesty towards the extravagant honours bestowed by the city states. The ironic response of Gonatas, disapproving the idea but not denying the fact, may be similar.

The context in Plutarch’s *De Iside et Osiride* is illustrative. Plutarch criticises the deification of powerful, yet mortal individuals. He strongly objects to the belief that Osiris, Isis and other divinities of that circle were not imperishable, but had tombs, like Osiris himself.⁶ He argues against the

accordingly by Aristotle and probably was familiar with Isocrates’ reassurance to Philip that if he would subordinate the barbarians, he would be acknowledged as a god (Tarn (1948), v. II, 369). Clearly, Tarn’s persistence on character shaped his views on Alexander’s and Gonatas’ concept of divine honours

³ Plu. *Moralia* 360c : ὅθεν Ἀντιγόνοσ ὁ γέρον Ἑρμοδότου τινὸς ἐν ποιήμασιν αὐτὸν Ἥλιου παῖδα καὶ θεὸν ἀναγορεύοντοσ “οὐ τοιαυτὰ μοι” εἶπεν “ὁ λασανοφόροσ σύνοιδεν”.

⁴ Plu. *Alex.* 28.3 : ὕστερον δὲ πληγῆ περιπεσὼν ὑπὸ τοξεύματοσ καὶ περιαλιγῆσ γενόμενοσ “τοῦτο μὲν” εἶπεν “ὦ φίλοι τὸ ρέον αἶμα καὶ οὐκ ἴχώρ, οἶοσ πέρ τε ῥέει μακάρεσσι θεοῖσιν”. Doubts have been expressed as to whether it was Alexander himself who made that remark or a flatterer (Aristobul. *FGrHist* 139 F 47 (=Ath. *Deipn.* 6.57) attributes it to Dioxiippus and D.L. 9.60 to Anaxarchus), or whether the comment expressed irony, modesty or flattery (Badian (1981), 64; Chaniotis (2003), 444). Other humorous ancient references to Alexander’s divine nature in Plu. *Moralia* 737A; *Alex.* 28.4 (with Ath. *Deipn.* 6.57). Green (1990), 403 stresses that Alexander’s “earthly moments” manifest the difference between a god proper and a godlike mortal.

⁵ Democh. *FGrHist* 75 F 1 (=Athen. *Deipn.* 6.62) : καὶ ἦσαν οὗτοι κόλακεσ κολάκων ὥστε καὶ αὐτὸν τὸν Δημήτριον θαυμάζειν ἐπὶ τοῖσ γενομένοισ καὶ λέγειν ὅτι οὐδεὶσ ἐπ’ αὐτοῦ Ἀθηναίων γέγονε μέγασ καὶ ἀδρόσ τὴν ψυχῆν. For the actual status and purposes of these so called flatterers see Habicht (1970), 55 – 58; Walbank (1984), 88 n. 89; Mikalson (1998), 88.

⁶ Plu. *Moralia* 359A-D.

view that myths were actually distorted narrations, stories about real and distinguished people, about unique individuals that were later proclaimed gods (in his opinion, this view was nothing more than an attempted justification by rulers who wished to be proclaimed gods).⁷ Plutarch writes against Leon and Euhemeros,⁸ the major supporters of the view that gods were mortals of an era long lost in a vague past, real rulers that posthumously were proclaimed gods.⁹ After that, Plutarch lists famous rulers, mortals who despite their great deeds remain in collective memory as humans, not gods : Semiramis, Sesostris, Manes, Cyrus, Alexander. Plutarch is very precise :

“But if some, elated by a great self-conceit” as Plato says, “with souls enkindled with the fire of youth and folly accompanied by arrogance”, have assumed to be called gods and to have temples dedicated to their honour, yet has their repute flourished but a brief time, and then, convicted of vain-glory and imposture, “swift in their fate, like to smoke in the air rising upward they flitted”, and now, like fugitive slaves without claim to protection, they have been dragged from their shrines and altars, and have nothing left to them save only their monuments and their tombs.¹⁰

At this point Plutarch quotes Antigonos the Old, before he continues with a bitter remark made by Lysippos against a work of Apelles, which was depicting Alexander holding a thunder in his fist.¹¹ The phrase is introduced with ὅθεν in order to denote the dependence from the previous phrase. The anecdote is the cornerstone of Plutarch’s argumentation. Divine honours, in Plutarch’s view,¹² are vain, temporary, doomed to pass away shortly after the mortal godlike, to dissolve like smoke leaving behind only the tombstone of the deceased ruler who was proclaimed god. Plutarch’s Antigonos seems to believe exactly the same. To support his opinion, Plu-

⁷ For the tendency of Hellenistic rulers to use that kind of reasoning to support their claims to godlike nature see Green (1990), 55 – 57; Buraselis (2004), 37; Buraselis – Aneziri (2004), 167ff; Buraselis (2007), 179 – 188.

⁸ For Euhemeros see Bosworth (1999), 10; Winiarczyk (2002).

⁹ Plu. *Moralia*. 360A.

¹⁰ Plu. *Moralia* 360C : “εἰ δέ τινες ἐξαρθέντες ὑπὸ μεγαλαυχίας” ὡς φησιν ὁ Πλάτων “ἅμα νεότητι καὶ ἀνοίᾳ φλεγόμενοι τὴν ψυχὴν μεθ’ ὕβρεως” ἐδέξαντο θεῶν ἐπωνυμίας καὶ ναῶν ἰδρύσεις, βραχὺν ἦνθησεν ἡ δόξα χρόνον, εἶτα κενότητα καὶ ἀλαζονείαν μετ’ ἀσβείας καὶ παρανομίας προσοφλόντες “ὠκόμοροι καπνοιο δίκην ἀρθέντες ἀπέπταν” καὶ νῦν ὡσπερ ἀγώγιοι δραπέται τῶν ἱερῶν καὶ τῶν βωμῶν ἀποσπασθέντες οὐδὲν ἀλλ’ ἢ τὰ μνήματα καὶ τοὺς τάφους ἔχουσιν. Transl. by F.C. Babbitt, *Plutarch Moralia*, vol. 5, LOEB Classical Library 306, Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press, 1936.

¹¹ Plu. *Moralia* 360D.

¹² Badian (1981), 28 – 30; Walbank (1984), 89. Considerations as to the long lasting ambiguity on the borderline between divine and mortal can be traced back to Pindar (Nem. 6.1ff, where men and gods form two races that derive from the same origin, Gaia), if not to Homer (in reference to the Dioskouroi : τιμὴν δὲ λελόγγασιν ἴσα θεοῖσι, *Od.* 11.304). More familiar within the hellenistic context is the famous refusal of Callisthenes to acknowledge the godlike nature of Alexander (Arr. *Anab.* 4.11.2-9). See also Borza (1981), and n. 16 below.

tarch needed to illustrate examples of famous rulers who indeed received divine honours, yet prudently acknowledged reality, thus proving the point of the writer. The writer does not deny the existence of divine honours for mortal rulers. He criticises a real phenomenon, the manipulation of god-like honours by rulers in need of legitimacy and superhuman status. He refers to real cases, to a real king who received divine honours, yet verifies the futility of this practice. If Antigonos was really “not worshipped by anybody”,¹³ the crucial position of the anecdote among Plutarch’s arguments would have been meaningless.

The king perhaps witnessed¹⁴ the rise and fall of another godlike ruler, his father. He had seen the divine honours towards Demetrios Poliorketes collapse in Athens, along with his rule. He was aware of an elaborate scheme in Delos, where games and celebrations were held in honour of the Antigonids and the Ptolemies, a reflection of the powerplay in the Aegean.¹⁵ The extent of the people’s belief and a city’s honesty on divine honours for living rulers was (and still is) highly debatable.¹⁶ According to Plutarch many times in the past divine honours had been proven temporary and precarious. Nevertheless, Antigonos could not but accept their usefulness. His response to the poet Hermodotos does not include any sign of denial. Gonatas does not deny reality, he merely comments on the evident irrationality of the concept and he is certain that even “the little people” cannot be convinced of his godlike nature.¹⁷ If, after all, there is any sign of denial in Plutarch’s passage and Gonatas’ response, its subject must be the divine nature of a living ruler, not the divine honours he was actually receiving from city states.

¹³ Tarn (1913), 250

¹⁴ Tarn (1913), 103; Gabbert (1997), 15 - 20.

¹⁵ Buraselis (1982), 146 – 151; Hammond & Walbank (1988), 279, 290 – 295; Reger (1993), 158 – 159; Reger (1994), 44; Gabbert (1997), 54. Bruneau (1970), 577 – 583 claims that festivities and offerings do not coincide with great victories and periods of a strong grip over Delos or the Aegean by a Hellenistic ruler. Thus, he attributes all grandiose acts and practices on the island to a political need for magnificent display of glory and unparalleled success.

¹⁶ A blurring of the boundaries between gods “proper” and godlike or deified mortals can be traced back quite far in the Greek past, it is not a sudden deterioration, as Plutarch conceived it many years after the fact. For the process by which mortals were introduced into the divine sphere and the ideology behind it see Préaux (1978), 239 – 241; Badian (1981), 31 – 44; Fredricksmeier (1981), 148 – 156; Walbank (1981), 209 – 221; Price (1984), 23 – 40; Walbank (1984), 75 – 80, 84 – 96; Walbank (1987), 371 – 374; Green (1990), 55 – 57, 396 – 406; Shipley (2000), 158 – 159; Green (2003), 266 – 274; Buraselis & Aneziri (2004), 164 – 168; Mikalson (2006), 213.

¹⁷ Moreover, the wording *ισόθεος* / *ισόθει τιμαί* implies a clear distinction between an *ισόθεος* king and traditional gods. Walbank (1984), 94 – 95; Green (1990), 402 – 403; Shipley (2000), 156; Chaniotis (2003), 433; Mikalson (2006), 215, 219.

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Abstract. Nearly a century ago, W.W. Tarn concluded that Antigonos Gonatas had never been honoured as a god. He based his view (which was thereafter acknowledged as "the traditional view" on the subject) not only on the influence of the Stoic philosophy but also on a well known passage in Plutarch's *Moralia* 360c, where Antigonos Gonatas retorts sarcastically to the poet Hermodotos that "the servant who carries my night pot knows I am not a god". This paper offers an alternative interpretation of the passage. Gonatas does not reject divine honours, but only his supposed god-like nature. All we can deduce from his statement is a feeling of disapproval for those honours and there is no hint to support the traditional view. The context in Plutarch's text clarifies this further. Plutarch builds a case against a very common practice, the divine honours towards great kings. He lists examples and on the most crucial turn of his argument he adds the anecdote concerning Gonatas. If Antigonos was never worshipped as a god, this example would have been meaningless. There would be no better argument than citing a king's disapproval of this practice, but a king who - like all those listed before and after him - had indeed received divine honors.

Palavras-chave. Antigonos Gonatas; divine honours; Hellenistic religion; ruler cult.