

Ritual and Politics, Individual and Community in Plutarch's Works: The *Life of Nicias* as a test-case

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THIS is a report of my research in progress consisting of two parts. The first part offers a selective update on research involving both a research seminar and an international colloquium that I co-organized with Frances B. Titchener at Rethymnon in 2017, whereas the second offers a sample of my own research on the subject.¹

I

Ritual and Politics, Individual and Community in Plutarch's Works

Plutarch's *Lives* and essays (many with a specifically religious focus) are a mine of descriptions of ritual acts, such as sacrifices, processions, *theoriae*, dedications, ceremonial feasting, public orations, and song and/or dance in religious or secular contexts, whether performed by individuals or groups. Yet, with a few exceptions, Plutarch's take on ritual remains by and large an underexplored area.

One of the reasons has been Plutarch's unfavorable comparison with Pausanias and his silence regarding contemporary Delphic ritual, despite the fact that he was a priest of Pythian Apollo.² Another reason is the antiquity of many of the rituals Plutarch describes, which, in the light of ritual change and innovation overtime and the state of the evidence he had access to, casts serious doubts on the reliability of Plutarch's accounts. Plutarch's silence concerning Delphic ritual, his differences from Pausanias, and the reliability of his reconstructions are all legitimate considerations, but not adequate reasons for overlooking the importance of ritual in this vast corpus.

The purpose of the 2017 colloquium (27–30 April) and the graduate seminar that Frances Titchener and I team-taught along with other faculty members at Rethymnon during the spring-term of that year was to explore ritual in Plutarch's works by asking a series of questions, specifically: how Plutarchan representations of rituals contribute to the characterization of individuals and/or communities?

¹ Many thanks to Paolo Desideri and Judith Mossman for making available their forthcoming papers to me (DESIDERI 2021; MOSSMAN 2021 forthcoming); to Frances B. Titchener for making available to me her forthcoming commentary on the *Life of Nicias* (TITCHENER forthcoming); and to Ewen Bowie and Chris Pelling for their input on the section on Nicias.

² For Plutarch's priesthood see *An seni respublica gerenda sit* 792f. For the comparison of Plutarch with Pausanias on ritual matters see BUCKLER 1992, 4825–29.

What do they tell us about the way individuals relate to their peers or to their community at large and/or the ways cities or other forms of community relate to one another? How do rituals interact with politics (personal and communal, local and inter-state)? How do they affect individual and communal identities?

These and other questions were addressed by the participants of the 2017 colloquium. Titchener and I entertained the idea of coming up with a publication, but since another volume on Plutarch was still in the works, we thought that under the circumstances individual publications by our speakers in journals or collective projects was a more realistic option. Some of the papers stemming from this conference are already published, others are forthcoming.

Before presenting some of my own finds, I wish to give a few examples of approaches to ritual adopted by different participants in the colloquium.³ Through an examination of Roman festivals related to Romulus and the foundation of Rome Paolo Desideri argues that Plutarch used these rituals as historical evidence. Judith Mossman focuses on a characteristically Roman procession, the triumph, and shows how important for Plutarch's characterization of triumphant generals is the way they choose to arrange this ritual celebratory procession. Athena Kavoulaki, who was a participant in the 2017 research seminar, looks at Athenian processions, specifically the Athenian procession to Eleusis in the *Life of Alcibiades* and Nicias' *architheoria* to Delos in the *Life of Nicias*, as vehicles for displaying the splendor of the polis and for space control.⁴ In a paper published in this journal Christopher Pelling looks at the communicative aspect of ritual in the pair *Demetrius–Antony*, focusing on instances of the failure of ritual as a means of communication of statesmen with the people.⁵ To give just one example of Pelling's conclusions, Demetrius misunderstands the terms on which Athenians bestow divine honors on him, thus mistaking show for reality.

II

The manipulation of ritual in the service of a political self-image: Plutarch's *Life of Nicias*⁶

Plutarch had many reservations about Nicias, despite the positive verdict of Thucydides, Aristotle and others.⁷ In the opening of his *Life of Nicias* Plutarch states

³ This is a selective presentation relating only to papers that were subsequently sent to me by the authors. See also ATHANASSAKI 2022 forthcoming.

⁴ KAVOULAKI 2022 forthcoming. Kavoulaki's interest in ritual processions goes back to her doctoral thesis: see KAVOULAKI 1996. See also below pp. 144–45.

⁵ PELLING 2016–17/2017–18 [2020].

⁶ An expanded version of this section will appear in ATHANASSAKI forthcoming.

⁷ See Aristotle, *Constitution of the Athenians* 28.5: 'As to Nicias and Thucydides, almost everybody agrees that they were not only honorable gentlemen but also statesmanlike and patriotic servants of the whole state' (Engl. trans. H. RACKHAM 1952); Thucydides *Histories* 7.86. 5: 'No one of the Hellenes in my time was less deserving of so miserable an end; for he lived

that he has researched his topic meticulously and revisited information that earlier writers had either overlooked or mentioned in passing:

ὅς γοῦν Θουκυδίδης ἐξήνεγκε πράξεις καὶ Φίλιστος, ἐπεὶ παρελθεῖν οὐκ ἔστι, μά-
λιστά γε δὴ τὸν τρόπον καὶ τὴν διάθεσιν τοῦ ἀνδρὸς ὑπὸ πολλῶν καὶ μεγάλων
παθῶν καλυπτομένην περιεχούσας, ἐπιδραμῶν βραχέως καὶ διὰ τῶν ἀναγκαί-
ων, ἵνα μὴ παντάπασιν ἀμελῆς δοκῶ καὶ ἀργὸς εἶναι, τὰ διαφεύγοντα τοὺς πολ-
λοὺς, ὑφ' ἐτέρων δ' εἰρημένα σποράδην ἢ πρὸς ἀναθήμασιν ἢ ψηφίσμασιν εὐρη-
μένα παλαιοῖς πεπεῖραμαι συναγαγεῖν, οὐ τὴν ἄχρηστον ἀθροίζων ἱστορί-
αν, ἀλλὰ τὴν πρὸς κατανόησιν ἥθους καὶ τρόπου παραδιδούς.

(*Life of Nicias* 1.5)

At all events, those deeds which Thucydides and Philistus have set forth—since I cannot entirely pass them by, indicating as they do the nature of my hero and the disposition which lay hidden beneath his many great sufferings—I have run over briefly, and with no unnecessary detail, in order to escape the reputation of utter carelessness and sloth; but those details which have escaped most writers, and which others have mentioned casually, or which are found on ancient votive offerings or in public decrees, these I have tried to collect, not amassing useless material of research, but handing on such as furthers the appreciation of character and temperament.⁸

The reason Plutarch gives for revisiting neglected information and documents is not to rival Thucydides' magisterial historical account, but to understand Nicias' character and behavior – a requirement of the biographical genre.⁹

Taking my lead from Plutarch's emphasis on the value of dedications and decrees for understanding Nicias' character and manner, I shall explore the role of ritual for the characterization of the Athenian general, adopting Stanley Tambiah's definition:

Ritual is a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication. It is constituted of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts, often expressed in multiple media, whose content and arrangement are characterized in varying degree by formality (conventionality), stereotypy (rigidity), condensation (fusion), and redundancy (repetition). Ritual action in its constitutive features is performative in these three senses: in the Austinian sense of performative, wherein saying something is also doing something as a conventional act; in the quite different sense of a staged performance that uses multiple media by which the participants experience the event intensively; and in the sense of indexical values—I derive this concept from Peirce—being attached to and inferred by actors during the performance.¹⁰

in the practice of every virtue' (Engl. trans. B. JOWETT 1881). For the tragic tone of this passage see TITCHENER and DAMEN 2018. Thucydides of course had many reservations about Nicias' generalship: see Thucydides 7. 42. 3 with PELLING 2022 forthcoming *ad loc.* and *ad* 7. 86. 5.

⁸ The Greek quotations and English translations, the latter slightly modified, are taken from B. PERRIN's 1916 Loeb edition.

⁹ For Plutarch's debts to and departures from Thucydides in the *Life of Nicias* see DE ROMILLY 1988 and especially PELLING 1992 and 2000, 47–49.

¹⁰ TAMBIAH 1985, 128. For the performative and communicative character of ritual see also

In what follows I shall explore Plutarch's representation of Nicias' exploitation of the performative and communicative nature of ritual as it emerges from four key episodes: (a) his decision to free one of his servants in the theatre of Dionysus on the spur of the moment; (b) his innovative improvement on the Athenian *theoria* to Delos as *architheoros*; (c) his striking provision to worship the Delian god(s) in perpetuity and (c) his daily private sacrifice and divination at home in Athens. Taking into account the persistent emphasis on Nicias' fear of gods and men throughout the *Life*, I shall argue that these four episodes show that ritual offered Nicias an outlet for coping with his fear of men without abandoning his political ambitions.

Before discussing these key episodes, a clarification on my approach is here in order. As students of ritual point out, despite its conventional and stereotypical character, ritual acquires new contextual meaning at every re-performance and is subject to innovation over time.¹¹ The difficulties involved in studying fifth-century BC rituals through the lens of a second-century AD author are not negligible. The paucity of evidence, uncertainty about its reliability, and authorial bias and intervention are some of the major obstacles. To give just one example, the first of the four episodes discussed here is by and large at odds with what we know about fifth-century theatrical ritual and etiquette. Yet it preserves elements that allow us to reconstruct a plausible scenario. For this reason the study of Nicias' communication through ritual is worth the effort, despite the occasional obstacles and inconsistencies. Moreover, as a priest of Apollo himself Plutarch had an insider's experience of ritual and its communicative potential.

Plutarch prefaces his depiction of Nicias' *ethos* by comparing him with Pericles and Cleon. The comparison with Pericles is unfavorable to Nicias, who lacked the genuine virtues and eloquence that made Pericles a great leader, and therefore tried to win over the people by means of his great wealth. This wealth allowed him to outdo all his predecessors and contemporaries in the magnificence of the liturgies he undertook:

Περικλῆς μὲν οὖν ἀπὸ τε ἀρετῆς ἀληθινῆς καὶ λόγου δυνάμεως τὴν πόλιν ἄγων οὐδενὸς ἐδεῖτο σχηματισμοῦ πρὸς τὸν ὄχλον οὐδὲ πιθανότητος, Νικίας δὲ τούτοις μὲν λειπόμενος, οὐσίᾳ δὲ προέχων, ἀπ' αὐτῆς ἐδημαγώγει. [2] καὶ τῆ Κλέωνος εὐχερεῖα καὶ βωμολοχία πρὸς ἡδονὴν μεταχειριζομένη τοὺς Ἀθηναίους διὰ τῶν ὁμοίων ἀντιπαρεξάγειν ἀπίθανος ὢν, χορηγίας ἀνελάμβανε καὶ γυμνασιαρχίας ἐτέραις τε τοιαύταις φιλοτιμίαις τὸν δῆμον, ὑπερβαλλόμενος πολυτελείᾳ καὶ χάριτι τοὺς πρὸ ἑαυτοῦ καὶ καθ' ἑαυτὸν ἅπαντας.

(*Life of Nicias* 3.1-2)

Now Pericles led the city by virtue of his native excellence and powerful eloquence, and had no need to assume any persuasive mannerisms with the multitude; but Nicias, since he lacked such powers, but had excessive wealth, sought by means

the introduction and the essays in STAVRIANOPOULOU 2006; for ritual and theatricality in the *Lives of Demetrius and Antony* see PELLING 2016–17/2017–18 [2020]; for the theatricality in public life in the Hellenistic world see CHANIOTIS [ΧΑΝΙΩΤΗΣ] 2009.

¹¹ See STAVRIANOPOULOU 2006.

of this to win the leadership of the people. [2] And since he despaired of his ability to vie successfully with the versatile buffoonery by which Cleon catered to the pleasure of the Athenians, he tried to captivate the people by choral and gymnastic exhibitions, and other like prodigalities, outdoing in the costliness and elegance of these all his predecessors and contemporaries.

The skeptical reader would object that liturgies were not an option, but a duty, for wealthy citizens in democratic Athens. Plutarch, however, preempts this objection by asserting that the driving force behind Nicias' lavish expenditure was his love for honor (φιλοτιμία). The combination of Nicias' love for honor and his huge expenditure on his liturgies reveal his desire to outdo everyone else when performing them. Since Plutarch foregrounds *choregia* in the following chapters, I shall begin with Nicias' role as *choregos*, paying attention to his political aspirations and expectations. But first I wish to draw attention to the term σχηματισμός, which Pericles did not need to resort to but, by implication, Nicias did. Bernadotte Perrin translates the word as 'mannerism', but in this context it is worth keeping in mind its choral and dramatic connotations, which foreshadow Nicias' keenness for choral ritual.¹²

Choregia was an expensive and time-consuming undertaking, entailing the recruitment and funding of choruses who performed in dramatic competitions or other cultic occasions as part of ritual festival programs.¹³ The religious context and purpose of choral performance was evidently a congenial task for Nicias, who was well-known for his piety that bordered on superstition.¹⁴ Plutarch, who vacillates between seeing Nicias' behavior as piety and seeing it as superstition, attributes his lavish expenditure primarily to his eagerness to win the favor of the gods, and only secondarily to his political aspirations.¹⁵ I think Plutarch is right and I shall come back to his assessment in the conclusion of this paper.

Plutarch's assertion of Nicias' unrivalled superiority as *choregos* is followed by another important piece of information concerning not only the great number of *choregiae* he undertook but, in addition, their invariable success. After a brief account of Nicias' choregic dedications that one could still see in Plutarch's time, he relates a remarkable episode that took place in the theatre of Dionysus:

...λέγεται δ' ἔν τινι χορηγία παρελθεῖν οἰκίτης αὐτοῦ κεκοσμημένος εἰς σχῆμα Διονύσου, κάλλιστος ὄφθῆναι καὶ μέγιστος, οὕτω γενειῶν· ἡσθέντων δὲ τῶν Ἀθηναίων τῇ ὄψει καὶ κροτούντων ἐπὶ πολὺν χρόνον, ἀναστὰς ὁ Νικίας εἶπεν ὡς οὐχ ὄσιον ἡγοῖτο δουλεῖν καταπεφημισμένον θεῶν σῶμα, καὶ τὸν νεανίσκον ἀπηλευθέρωσε.

(*Life of Nicias* 3.3)

¹² For σχῆμα as figure in dancing see LSJ s.v. 7.

¹³ For *choregia* see WILSON 2000.

¹⁴ Thucydides *Histories* 7. 50. 4 and *infra*.

¹⁵ See TITCHENER 2008, who argues that Plutarch thought of Nicias as superstitious rather than pious.

A story is told how, in one of his *choregiae*, a house servant of his appeared in the costume of Dionysus, very fair to see, and very tall, the down of youth still upon his face. The Athenians were delighted at the sight, and applauded for a long time. At last Nicias rose and said he deemed it an unholy thing that one who had been acclaimed as a god should be a slave, and gave the youth his freedom.

The story is at odds with fifth-century theatrical practice in two important interrelated respects: If Nicias' slave did not wear a mask, as some scholars have thought, he must have danced in a dithyramb, but the dithyrambic choreuts were citizens, not slaves.¹⁶ It is of course possible that the expression οὐπω γενειῶν is simply used to denote the age of the slave, not his appearance during his performance. But even in such a case, the major problem is that of status, because the actors and choreuts in tragedy and comedy were also drawn from the citizen-body. The Plutarchan story is clearly compressed. It is possible that Plutarch's source was compressed too. In the light of the slave's impressive height, I wonder whether what is referred to is a κωφὸν πρόσωπον who played a statue.¹⁷ The most famous statue on the fifth-century Athenian stage was the colossal statue of Peace in Aristophanes' homonymous play. Recently Oliver Taplin put forth the attractive suggestion that the representation of a colossal bust of Dionysus on an early fourth-century crater now in Cleveland (Cleveland 1989.73), may actually depict the epiphany of the god in a now lost play.¹⁸ In addition to the scenarios already proposed, I add the suggestion of a scenario where the original plan to put a statue on stage miscarried, for whatever reason, and Nicias saved the day by proposing his impressive-looking slave as a substitute for the statue of Dionysus.

From our point of view, more important than the slave's precise role in the performance is his liberation in the theatre during one of Nicias' many *choregiae*. This story is our earliest testimony to the practice of freeing slaves during the Great Dionysia, but unfortunately Plutarch does not cite his source.¹⁹ About a century later we get another precious piece of evidence from Aeschines, who mentions a law forbidding unauthorized proclamations of honors given to citizens by their tribes or demes, or by other cities, and of freeing one's slaves in the Great Dionysia.²⁰

Aeschines' speech was delivered in 330 BC, whereas the law forbidding this unauthorized practice dates probably to the middle of fourth century.²¹ From our

¹⁶ I have profited from Titchener's discussion of the questions raised by this passage: TITCHENER forthcoming.

¹⁷ See also WILSON 2000, 138 and 354, n. 101 who suggests that Nicias might have dressed a slave as Dionysus as an extra in a satyr-play.

¹⁸ TAPLIN 2014. As Chris Pelling reminds me Euripides' *Hippolytus* featured the statues of Aphrodite and Artemis.

¹⁹ This ritual must be distinguished from the practice of freeing slaves in theatres in general, known from inscriptions: see MACTOUX 2008, 439 with the reference in n. 10 (thanks to Kostas Vlassopoulos for bringing this article to my attention). See also WILSON 2000, 138.

²⁰ Aeschines *Against Ctesiphon* 41–44.

²¹ MACTOUX 2008, 439.

point of view, what is most important is the disruptive effect of the introduction of the ritual of proclamations in the ritual program of the Great Dionysia and the motivation attributed to those who availed themselves of the opportunity. According to the speaker, citizens who were awarded lesser honors than those bestowed by the assembly thus enjoyed maximal publicity before the Panhellenic audience of the Great Dionysia.

Comparison of Aeschines' account with Plutarch's story of Nicias' initiative is instructive. According to Plutarch Nicias acted on the spur of the moment, when he saw his slave's success in the role of Dionysus. In this case Plutarch does not try to detect Nicias' motives, he only cites what he said, namely that it was unholy that somebody who has been acclaimed as a god to be a slave.²² In the light of our scant evidence it is impossible to know whether the ritual proclamation of the freedom of a slave by heralds was already practiced at the Great Dionysia or not. If not, then Nicias' initiative set a precedent. If it was an established practice, on the other hand, it is worth noting that Nicias did not follow it, but instead enhanced the Dionysiac ritual by announcing, either himself or through a herald, the freedom of a slave who proved a successful Dionysus. The venue, the timing and the reason Nicias gave for his decision guaranteed the most effective promotion of his piety before the Panhellenic audience of the Great Dionysia, but self-promotion is not the most remarkable feature of this extraordinary story.

Nicias' blurred perception of the boundaries between theatrical illusion and real life in this instance is far more remarkable in my view. In the story that Plutarch tells us Nicias seems to think that by enacting Dionysus successfully in the theatre the young slave acquired a different relation with the god and deserved a different status. We cannot, of course, exclude the possibility that Nicias was insincere and came up with a religious argument, when all he wanted was to show off. As we shall see, however, Nicias was constantly preoccupied with the divine will and plans. If there is a pun on Dionysus' Ἐλευθερέυς, Λύσιος, Λυαῖος, as Peter Wilson has suggested, this is an instance of Nicias' trying to read the god's will and act accordingly.²³ The fact that freeing his slave would showcase his piety and generosity was of course an important political consideration, but it cannot have been his primary motivation.

Nicias' legendary *architheoria* to Delos, following immediately after the incident in the theatre of Dionysus in Plutarch's narrative, is another example of Nicias' innovative take on ritual for his own ends. Plutarch's account begins with Nicias' costly ritual innovation that greatly enhanced the self-presentation of the Athenian *theoria*:

²² The participle καταπεφημισμένον is usually translated as 'acclaimed', but the verb καταφημίζω has also the meaning 'assign, dedicate to a god' (LSJ s.v. II). It is therefore possible that the audience of the performance indicated that Nicias should dedicate his slave to Dionysus, an interpretation compatible with Peter Wilson's suggestion (see also below with n. 23).

²³ WILSON 2000, 138 and 354, n. 101.

Μνημονεύεται δ' αὐτοῦ καὶ τὰ περὶ Δῆλον ὡς λαμπρὰ καὶ θεοπρεπῆ φιλοτιμήματα. τῶν γὰρ χορῶν, οὓς αἱ πόλεις ἔπεμπον ἄσομένους τῷ θεῷ, προσπλεόντων μὲν ὡς ἔτυχεν, εὐθύς δ' ὄχλου πρὸς τὴν ναῦν ἀπαντῶντος ἄδειν κελευομένων κατ' οὐδένα κόσμον, ἀλλ' ὑπὸ σπουδῆς ἀσυντάκτως ἀποβαινόντων ἅμα καὶ στεφανουμένων καὶ μεταμφιεννυμένων, [5] ἐκεῖνος, ὅτε τὴν θεωρίαν ἦγεν, αὐτὸς μὲν εἰς Ῥήνειαν ἀπέβη τὸν χορὸν ἔχων καὶ τὰ ἱερεῖα καὶ τὴν ἄλλην παρασκευὴν, ζευγμα δὲ πεπονημένον Ἀθήνησι πρὸς τὰ μέτρα καὶ κεκοσμημένον ἐκπρεπῶς χρυσώσεσι καὶ βαφαῖς καὶ στεφάνοις καὶ αὐλαίαις κομίζων, διὰ νυκτὸς ἐγεφύρωσε τὸν μεταξὺ Ῥηνείας καὶ Δήλου πόρον οὐκ ὄντα μέγαν· εἶθ' ἅμα ἡμέρα τὴν τε πομπὴν τῷ θεῷ καὶ τὸν χορὸν ἄγων κεκοσμημένον πολυτελῶς καὶ ἄδοντα διὰ τῆς γεφύρας ἀπεβίβαζε.

(*Life of Nicias* 3.4-5)

It is a matter of record also how splendid and worthy of the god his lavish outlays at Delos were. The choruses which cities used to send thither to sing the praises of the god were wont to put in at the island in haphazard fashion. The throng of worshippers would meet them at the ship and bid them sing, not with the decorum due, but as they were hastily and tumultuously disembarking, and while they were actually donning their chaplets and vestments. [5] But when Nicias conducted the festal embassy, he landed first on the neighboring island of Rheneia, with his chorus, sacrificial victims, and other equipment. Then, with the bridge of boats which he had brought along with him from Athens, where it had been made to measure and signally adorned with gildings and dyed stuffs and garlands and tapestries, he spanned during the night the strait between Rheneia and Delos, which is not wide. At break of day he led his festal procession in honor of the god, and his chorus arrayed in lavish splendor and singing as it marched, across the bridge to land.

The bridge that Nicias devised and had manufactured to measure in Athens was an impressive and luxurious display-space for the chorus and for himself in his capacity as *architheoros*. It was essentially a theatrical space, on which the chorus could be seen singing in procession by those who frequented the pier to meet the choruses from the various cities.²⁴ In this carefully staged audio-spectacle Nicias enjoyed maximal visibility at the head of the splendid Athenian chorus.

What was the message of the carefully staged choral procession? Plutarch draws attention to the most obvious message of the ostentatious spectacle: it was splendid and worthy of the god. But it was also advantageous for the *architheoros* too. By his innovative initiative Nicias seized the opportunity to display his piety and wealth to the Pan-Ionian audience of the *Delia*. Moreover, given that the chorus represented all Athenians on this occasion, the splendid procession conveyed a political message too. Nicias could claim credit not only for the Athenians' outstanding performance in cultic matters, but for the magnificent display of the *polis* on Delos, a display worthy of the leading state of the Delian league.²⁵ Last but not least, the lavishly decorated bridge that provided the walk-way for the procession

²⁴ Note the stage vocabulary μεταμφιεννυμένων, χρυσώσεσι καὶ βαφαῖς καὶ στεφάνοις καὶ αὐλαίαις.

²⁵ For 'the polis on display' see ΚΑΒΟΥΛΑΚΙ 2022 forthcoming (with emphasis on the Athenian procession to Eleusis led by Alcibiades).

offered an advantage which, as we shall see, was of paramount importance for Nicias: the theatrical passage-way created distance between the Athenian *theoria* and its audience. As we shall see, Plutarch narrates other episodes, where Nicias went out of his way to distance himself from the people, both because he was afraid of them and because he wanted to promote an image of himself as statesman totally dedicated to the affairs of the *polis*.

Before looking at Nicias' carefully cultivated image of himself as statesman, I wish to examine briefly the provisions he made in order to elicit divine favor, presumably in perpetuity.

μετὰ δὲ τὴν θυσίαν καὶ τὸν ἀγῶνα καὶ τὰς ἐστιάσεις τὸν τε φοῖνικα τὸν χαλκοῦν ἔστησεν ἀνάθημα τῷ θεῷ, καὶ χωρίον μυρίων δραχμῶν πριάμενος καθιέρωσεν, οὗ τὰς προσόδους ἔδει Δηλίους καταθύοντας ἐστιᾶσθαι, πολλὰ καὶ ἀγαθὰ Νικία παρὰ τῶν θεῶν αἰτουμένους· καὶ γὰρ τοῦτο τῇ στήλῃ ἐνέγραψεν, ἦν ὡσπερ φύλακα τῆς δωρεᾶς ἐν Δήλῳ κατέλιπεν. ὁ δὲ φοῖνιξ ἐκεῖνος ὑπὸ τῶν πνευμάτων ἀποκλασθεὶς ἐνέπεσε τῷ Ναξίων ἀνδριάντι τῷ μεγάλῳ καὶ ἀνέτρεψε.

(*Life of Nicias* 3.6)

After the sacrifices and the choral contests and the banquets were over, he erected the famous bronze palm-tree as a thank offering to the god, and consecrated to his service a tract of land which he bought at the price of ten thousand drachmas, the revenues from which the Delians were to expend in sacrificial banquets, at which many blessings should be invoked upon Nicias from the gods. This stipulation he actually had graven on the stone which he left in Delos to be as it were the sentry over his benefaction. The palm-tree, however, was torn away by the wind and fell against the colossal statue of the god which the Naxians erected, and overturned it.

Nicias' purchase of land and the use of its revenues for sacrifices on Delos indicate that he wished to worship the gods uninterruptedly even *in absentia* during his lifetime, and presumably posthumously as well. The inscription of his donation on a *stèle* was a constant reminder of the intended use of the land's revenues and yet another way to promote his piety on the international stage. This provision suited Nicias' purposes perfectly. The periodic sacrificial ritual on his behalf *in absentia* was expected to elicit divine favor during the times he could not go to Delos and to guarantee him perennial *kleos*. The possibility of honoring the gods as if he were present without having to come into contact with people was also a welcome alternative for somebody who was afraid of people.

Plutarch rounds off Nicias' comportment at festivals with the following assessment:

Τούτοις δ' ὅτι μὲν πολὺ τὸ πρὸς δόξαν καὶ φιλοτιμίαν πανηγυρικὸν καὶ ἀγοραῖον ἔνεστιν, οὐκ ἄδηλον, ἀλλὰ τῷ λοιπῷ τρόπῳ τοῦ ἀνδρὸς καὶ ἦθει πιστεύσειεν ἂν τις εὐσεβείας ἐπακολούθημα τὴν τοιαύτην χάριν καὶ δημαγωγίαν γενέσθαι. σφόδρα γὰρ ἦν τῶν ἐκπεπληγμένων τὰ δαιμόνια καὶ "θειασμῷ προσκείμενος," ὡς φησι Θουκυδίδης.

(*Life of Nicias* 4.1)

In this course it is clear that there was much ostentatious publicity, looking towards increase of reputation and gratification of ambition; and yet, to judge from the rest of the man's bent and character, one might feel sure that such means of winning the favour and control of the people were rather a corollary to his reverent piety. For he was one of those who are excessively terrified at heavenly portents, and was "given to religiosity," as Thucydides says.²⁶

Plutarch's assessment of Nicias' *modus operandi* at festivals, namely that his ostentatious productions were primarily the result of his piety and only secondarily served his political ambitions, is incisive. Fear can be an uncontrollable emotion – Thucydides' diagnosis of Nicias' obsession with the gods points precisely in this direction.²⁷

After quoting Thucydides, Plutarch proceeds to tell a story that he attributes to Pasiphon of Eretria, which elaborates on Nicias' obsession with divination:²⁸

ἐν δέ τινι τῶν Πασιφῶντος διαλόγων γέγραπται ὅτι καθ' ἡμέραν ἔθυε τοῖς θεοῖς, καὶ μάντιν ἔχων ἐπὶ τῆς οἰκίας προσεποιεῖτο μὲν αἰεὶ σκέπτεσθαι περὶ τῶν δημοσίων, τὰ δὲ πλεῖστα περὶ τῶν ἰδίων καὶ μάλιστα περὶ τῶν ἀργυρείων μεταλλῶν· ἐκέκτητο γὰρ ἐν τῇ Λαυρεωτικῇ πολλά, μεγάλα μὲν εἰς πρόσσodon, οὐκ ἀκινδύνους δὲ τὰς ἐργασίας ἔχοντα· καὶ πληθὸς ἀνδραπόδων ἔτρεφεν αὐτόθι, καὶ τῆς οὐσίας ἐν ἀργυρίῳ τὸ πλεῖστον εἶχεν.

(*Life of Nicias* 4.2)

And in one of the dialogues of Pasiphon it is recorded that he sacrificed every day to the gods, and that he kept a diviner at his house, ostensibly for the constant enquiries which he made about public affairs, whereas most of his enquiries were really made about his own private matters, and especially about his silver mines; for he had large interests in the mining district of Laurium, and they were exceedingly profitable, although worked at great risks. He maintained a multitude of slaves in these mines, and the most of his substance was in silver.

The account of Nicias's daily sacrifices in Athens – whatever its historical accuracy – is in keeping with his provision for periodic sacrifices on his behalf on Delos even *in absentia*, for which Plutarch cites inscriptional evidence. Pasiphon, however, charges Nicias with duplicity, for his daily sacrifices and divination were mostly about his private matters and finances and not about public affairs, as he pretended. This story definitely shows Nicias in a bad light, but as we shall see the driving force behind this misrepresentation of pious rituals was more his uncontrollable fear of people and not greed for personal gain.

²⁶ Thucydides 7. 50. 4. Perrin translates the word *θειασμῶ* as 'divination', whereas LSJ *s.v.* as 'superstition', but I prefer Pelling's translation, namely 'religiosity' or 'goddishness'. See PELLING 2022 forthcoming *ad* 7. 50 who notes that Thucydides' 'careful phrasing leaves it open for some degree of *θειασμῶς* to be acceptable and appropriate, just not as much as this'.

²⁷ *Nicias* 4. 1 is yet another instance where Plutarch overinterprets Thucydides. See PELLING 1992, section II and *passim*.

²⁸ On the material Plutarch drew from Pasiphon see PERRIN 1902.

Plutarch's quotation of Nicias' representation by the comic poets – comic hyperbole notwithstanding – offers invaluable testimony to how Nicias was perceived in Athens by his contemporaries. I quote here Plutarch's excerpt from Phrynichus along with Plutarch's assessment:

ὑποδηλοῖ δὲ καὶ Φρύνιχος τὸ ἀθαρσὲς αὐτοῦ καὶ καταπεπληγμένον ἐν τούτοις· Ἦν γὰρ πολίτης ἀγαθός, ὡς εὖ οἶδ' ἐγώ, κούχ ὑποταγείς ἐβάδιζεν, ὥσπερ Νικίας.

(*Life of Nicias* 4.6)

And Phrynichus plainly hints at his lack of courage and his panic-stricken air in these verses: “He was a right good citizen, and I know it well; He wouldn't cringe and creep as Nicias always does.”

Here Plutarch capitalizes on contemporary testimony concerning Nicias' subdued posture when he walked around Athens, which he attributes to his lack of courage and to the panic he could experience at the approach of informers. Nicias' strategy against informers was twofold: he gave people money, good and bad without discrimination, and tried to avoid their company altogether.

According to Plutarch, Nicias' precautions took an extreme and ritualized form that enabled him to avoid all private contact at all times. The rituals of isolation were master-minded by Nicias and his servant Hiero. Nicias himself appeared in public places only for work and only when he held public offices as general and councillor. When he had no public business he stayed at home under lock-and-key!

Οὕτω δὴ διακείμενος εὐλαβῶς πρὸς τοὺς συκοφάντας οὔτε συνεδείπνει τινὶ τῶν πολιτῶν οὔτε κοινολογίαις οὔτε συνδιημερεύσειν ἐνέβαλλεν ἑαυτόν, οὐδ' ἄλλως ἐσχόλαζε ταῖς τοιαύταις διατριβαῖς, ἀλλ' ἄρχων μὲν ἐν τῷ στρατηγίῳ διετέλει μέχρι νυκτός, ἐκ δὲ βουλῆς ὕστατος ἀπῆει πρῶτος ἀφικνούμενος. εἰ δὲ μηδὲν ἐν κοινῷ πράττειν ἔχοι, δυσπρόσοδος ἦν καὶ δυσέντευκτος οἰκουρῶν καὶ κατακεκλεισμένος.

(*Life of Nicias* 5.1)

Since he was disposed to be thus cautious of public informers, he would neither dine with a fellow citizen, nor indulge in general interchange of views or familiar social intercourse; indeed, he had no leisure for such pastimes, but when he was general, he remained at the War Department till night, and when he was councillor, he was first to reach and last to leave the council. And if he had no public business to transact, he was inaccessible and hard to come at, keeping close at home with his doors bolted.

Nicias' measures against informers were undoubtedly extreme. Yet he was not the only Athenian politician who was afraid of private social gatherings. According to Plutarch, Pericles avoided private gatherings out of fear of ostracism, when he was younger, and later in order to avoid unnecessary familiarity with people; Athenians could see him only on the road leading to the Agora and the Council.²⁹

²⁹ *Life of Pericles* 7.4–5.

Plutarch's account of Pericles indicates that such fear in fifth-century Athens was justifiable. What differentiates Nicias from Pericles is that in Plutarch's view Nicias was a coward, whereas Pericles was not. The Plutarchan diction in ch. 5.1 is carefully chosen to suggest that Nicias overreacted out of panic.³⁰

Evidently this ritual of isolation, performed by himself, was not thought adequate protection, and it was further enhanced by his team of servants who would stage a daily show at his house in order to keep away visitors. The team was led by Hiero who, raised in Nicias' house, was instrumental in cultivating and promoting his master's image:

οἱ δὲ φίλοι τοῖς ἐπὶ ταῖς θύραις φοιτῶσιν ἐνετύγχανον, καὶ παρητοῦντο συγγνώμην ἔχειν, ὡς καὶ τότε Νικίου πρὸς δημοσίας χρείας τινὰς καὶ ἀσχολίας ὄντος. Καὶ ὁ μάλιστα ταῦτα συντραγωδῶν καὶ συμπεριτιθεὶς ὄγκον αὐτῷ καὶ δόξαν Ἰέρων ἦν, ἀνὴρ τεθραμμένος ἐπὶ τῆς οἰκίας τοῦ Νικίου, περὶ τε γράμματα καὶ μουσικὴν ἐξησκημένος ὑπ' αὐτοῦ, προσποιούμενος δ' υἱὸς εἶναι Διονυσίου τοῦ Χαλκοῦ προσαγορευθέντος, οὗ καὶ ποιήματα σώζεται, καὶ τῆς εἰς Ἴταλίαν ἀποικίας ἡγεμῶν γενόμενος ἔκτισε Θουρίου. [3] οὗτος οὖν ὁ Ἰέρων τὰ τε πρὸς τοὺς μάντις ἀπόρρητα διεπράττετο τῷ Νικίᾳ, καὶ λόγους ἐξέφερον εἰς τὸν δῆμον ὡς ἐπίπονόν τινα καὶ ταλαίπωρον διὰ τὴν πόλιν ζῶντος αὐτοῦ βίον· ὃ γ' ἔφη καὶ περὶ λουτρῶν ὄντι καὶ περὶ δεῖπνον ἀεὶ τι προσπίπτειν δημόσιον· “ἀμελῶν δὲ τῶν ἰδίων ὑπὸ τοῦ τὰ κοινὰ φροντίζειν μόλις ἄρχεται καθεύδειν περὶ πρῶτον ὕπνον. [4] ὅθεν αὐτῷ καὶ τὸ σῶμα διάκειται κακῶς, καὶ τοῖς φίλοις οὐ προσηγῆς οὐδὲ ἡδύς ἐστιν, ἀλλὰ καὶ τούτους προσαποβέβληκε τοῖς χρήμασι πολιτευόμενος. οἱ δ' ἄλλοι καὶ φίλους κτώμενοι καὶ πλουτίζοντες αὐτοὺς ἀπὸ τοῦ βήματος εὐπαθοῦσι καὶ προσπαίζουσι τῇ πολιτείᾳ.” τῷ δ' ὄντι τοιοῦτος ἦν ὁ Νικίου βίος ὥστ' αὐτὸν εἰπεῖν τὰ τοῦ Ἀγαμέμνονος εἰς αὐτόν·

Προστάτην γε τοῦ βίου

τὸν ὄγκον ἔχομεν, τῷ τ' ὄχλῳ δουλεύομεν.

(*Life of Nicias* 5.2-4)

His friends used to accost those who were in waiting at his door and beg them to be indulgent with Nicias, for he was even then engaged upon sundry urgent matters of public business. The man who most aided him in playing this rôle, and helped him to assume his costume of pompous dignity, was Hiero. He had been reared in the household of Nicias, and thoroughly instructed by him in letters and literature. He pretended to be the son of Dionysius, surnamed Chalcus, whose poems are indeed extant, and who, as leader of the colonizing expedition to Italy, founded Thurii. [3] This Hiero it was who managed for Nicias his secret dealings with the seers, and who was forever putting forth among the people moving tales about the life of severe hardships which his patron led for the sake of the city. “Why!” said he, “even when he takes his bath and when he eats his dinner, some public business or other is sure to confront him; he neglects his private interests in his anxiety for the common good, and scarcely gets to sleep till others wake. [4] That's the reason why he is physically all run down, and is not affable or pleasant to his friends, nay, he

³⁰ Note especially the phrase *δυσπρόσοδος ἦν καὶ δυσέντευκτος οἰκουρῶν καὶ κατακεκλεισμένος*.

has actually lost these too, in addition to his substance, and all in the service of the city. Other public men not only win friends but enrich themselves through their influence as public speakers, and then fare sumptuously, and make a plaything of the service of the city." In point of fact, such was the life of Nicias that he could say of himself what Agamemnon did:

"Sooth, as master of my life
My pomp I have, and to the populace I'm a slave."

The theatrical diction and imagery is ubiquitous in this scene. Hiero, who was taught letters and music by Nicias himself, was crucial in helping his master stage his life as a tragedy (συντραγωδῶν) and don the mantle of pomp and glory.³¹ Plutarch does not tell us if Hiero played a role in Nicias' choregic activities, but he informs us that he was the one who set up Nicias' secret dealings with the seers and broadcast how Nicias' obligations to the city had invaded his private space and kept him busy day and night; it was because of these obligations, Hiero kept telling people, that Nicias neglected his friends and his private business with the result of losing money. In this drama Hiero played the role of a messenger, but unlike tragic messengers his task was not so much to enlighten, but to mislead his audience about events to which they had no access. Plutarch brings this episode to a conclusion by a quotation from tragedy: Nicias could recite Agamemnon's words (*Iphigenia in Aulis*, 449–50), Plutarch tells us, thus drawing attention to the daily drama staged by Nicias, Hiero and the team of servants.³²

Plutarch had little use for Nicias' histrionic manners, but he wished to be fair to him. The stories he chose to depict Nicias' *ethos* demonstrate how carefully staged his public and private life was, but they also show that it was fear and panic that motivated the rituals of distance and isolation. Except for his family and servants his house hosted only seers, thus offering Nicias isolation from all others. The daily sacrifices and divination indicate that in private Nicias was keen on communicating only with the gods – mainly about his private matters, whereas communication with the people was left to the able hands of Hiero.

Festivals on the other hand were communal activities, occasions where even Nicias would find it difficult to keep his distance from people. Yet the description of his *architheoria* on Delos shows that thanks to his wealth Nicias devised a bridge that offered him and the Athenian delegation maximal visibility, while minimizing contact with the audience. The advantages of the bridge for securing distance from the other pilgrims were of course limited, but from the point of view of Nicias' characterization it is very important to note that Nicias' solution to the dignity of Athenian self-presentation was one that favored distance even for a short time. A gregarious individual could easily have come up with a different plan that encouraged interaction between the Athenian *theoria* and the assembled pilgrims.

³¹ For Hieron's role see also MOSSMAN 2014, 442.

³² For the theatricality of this scene see MOSSMAN 2014, 442–43.

Nicias' provision to honor the Delian gods even *in absentia* is another initiative showing how much he valued his communication with the divine and his distance from people. His addiction to divination in combination with his systematic efforts to avoid the company of men suggests that the only communication he sought was communication with the divine. Festivals offered precisely this opportunity, which in turn explains Nicias' readiness to undertake *choregiae* and *theoriae* without sparing money, time, and effort. From this vantage point his daily divination about private matters and finances acquires another dimension: the more his private finances prospered, the more he could spend on festivals. In this sense the story that Hiero spread in Athens about Nicias' huge expenditure on public matters, a habit differentiating him from others who held public offices, may have been colored in order to show Nicias in a good light, but was not unfounded. Nicias needed money first and foremost in order to win the favor of gods.

As Plutarch states, Nicias' wish to win the favor of people was a consequence of his eagerness to please the gods by magnificent shows of piety and lavish expenditure. Fear of men was a serious problem for somebody with political aspirations. Yet thanks to his great wealth and remarkable ability to see the potential of ritual Nicias found a solution that allowed him to avoid men as much as possible without offending them. He adopted a highly ritualized *modus vivendi*, both in public and in private, that afforded him maximal visibility and *kleos*, necessary for a politician, while allowing him to keep his distance from those he so feared. Until the tragic reversal of his fortunes in Sicily, Nicias had found a way to please men by worshipping the gods. In Plutarch's eyes Nicias' proximity to the gods and distance from men clouded his judgment and made him an inadequate general who was largely responsible for the Athenians' defeat in Sicily.³³ Yet in a gesture of fairness to the Athenian general, and bowing to Thucydides' authority, Plutarch attributed Nicias' political inadequacy to his fear, which he put into relief by vividly depicting the rituals Nicias devised or enhanced in order to cope with his fear of men and his eagerness to communicate with the gods.

In the 2017 colloquium I had contrasted Plutarch's representation of Nicias' studied manipulation of ritual in order to disguise his distaste for human contact by the pretense of total immersion in state affairs with Cimon's smooth communication with people on ritual occasions. I hope to develop my discussion of Cimon's attitude to ritual in a separate paper in the near future. For the moment I wish to draw attention to Athena Kavoulaki's take on ritual procession as a means of gaining space control.³⁴ Kavoulaki's paper focuses on the Athenian procession to Eleusis led by Alcibiades in Plutarch's homonymous *Life*, but her conclusions take account of the Athenian *theoria* to Delos led by Nicias. Kavoulaki and I have developed an interesting dialogue which goes back to the 2017 research seminar in

³³ On the consequences of Nicias' religiosity on his judgement see also NIKOLAIDIS 2014, 353; TICHENER and DAMEN 2018, 19–20; PELLING 2022 forthcoming [cited above n. 26].

³⁴ See also above p. 132 with n. 4.

which, as I have already mentioned, she also participated. According to Kavoulaki, the Athenian procession represents Nicias' initiative to put the 'polis on display', whereas I argue that Nicias arranges the procession in such a way so as to distance himself in it from the people he so feared. To put it differently, Kavoulaki's reading highlights Nicias' policy to put Athens on display and therefore increase the city's political capital before the Panionian audience of Delos, whereas my reading shows the other side of the coin, Nicias' manipulation of the magnificent procession in order to earn maximal glory as the leader of the procession. Our readings are clearly complementary and show the centrality of ritual in Plutarch's thought and writing which merits further study.

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**Ritual and Politics, Individual and Community in Plutarch's Works:
The *Life of Nicias* as a test-case**

Lucia Athanassaki

Abstract

THE FIRST part of this report offers a selective update on research involving both a research seminar and an international colloquium that I co-organized with Frances B. Titchener at Rethymnon in 2017, whereas the second offers a sample of my own research on the subject.

The purpose of the 2017 colloquium (27–30 April) and the graduate seminar that Frances Titchener and I team-taught along with other faculty members at Rethymnon during the spring-term of that year was to explore ritual in Plutarch's works by asking a series of questions, specifically: how Plutarchan representations of rituals contribute to the characterization of individuals and/or communities? What do they tell us about the way individuals relate to their peers or to their community at large and/or the ways cities or other forms of community relate to one another? How do rituals interact with politics (personal and communal, local and inter-state)? How do they affect individual and communal identities?

The second part explores Plutarch's representation of Nicias' exploitation of the performative and communicative nature of ritual as it emerges from four key episodes: (a) his decision to free one of his servants in the theatre of Dionysus on the spur of the moment; (b) his innovative improvement on the Athenian *theoria* to Delos as *architheoros*; (c) his striking provision to worship the Delian god(s) in perpetuity and (d) his daily private sacrifice and divination at home in Athens. Taking into account the persistent emphasis on Nicias' fear of gods and men throughout the *Life*, it is argued that these four episodes show that ritual offered Nicias an outlet for coping with his fear of men without abandoning his political ambitions.