

**ON THE MEANING
OF THE TERM *SYMBOL* IN THE WRITINGS OF
PLUTARCH OF CHAERONEA**

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ABSTRACT. Plutarch of Chaeronea was a prominent Middle Platonist, influential both in early Christian Platonism and in pagan Neoplatonic schools. One of the significant markers of this succession is an increasing interest in symbolism and terminological usage of the word *symbol*. As Plutarch provided almost no explicit theory of symbolism, this research focuses on the contextual word usage in his writings, its analysis and reconstruction of Plutarchian symbolism in the philosophical milieu of his time. Plutarch understands symbol as a two-level entity, which combines an ordinary object or object-related action with a signification of some other entity that is absent, invisible or otherwise imperceptible, so a symbol points to it or acts instead of it. Unlike signs, symbols are ambiguous and may have multiple meanings. Moreover, the polysemanticism of a symbol is considered as its strong advantage that reveals the ontological profundity of the symbolized entity. Symbols may appear odd and amazing, thus provoking philosophical inspiration in a person trying to decipher them. Along with single symbols, Plutarch provides examples of integral symbolic systems, among which he mentions human languages. Finally, symbols may be not only passive pointers or reminders but also actors, which influence human decisions and deeds. Plutarch provides a detailed description of the way daemons use symbols as a means to induce mortals to make correct choices. The general pattern of Plutarchian symbolism can be compared with similar conceptions of Clement of Alexandria, Porphyry of Tyre, and Iamblichus of Chalcis.

KEYWORDS: Plutarch of Chaeronea, symbol, sign, history, metaphysics, philosophy of language, Middle Platonism.

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In the 2nd and 3rd centuries C.E., both Christian and pagan Platonists displayed increased interest in symbols and symbolism. Clement of Alexandria dedicated the larger part of the fifth book of the *Stromata* to different types of symbolism in pagan cultures and in the Old Testament.¹ Obviously, his investigation of symbols is not accidental; moreover, it appears that he has a certain *theory* of symbolism. Similarly, the works of Porphyry of Tyre contain dozens of passages with thorough usage of the term *symbol*. Especially often he uses it in the treatises *On the Cave of the Nymphs* and *On Statues*.² However, the very emergence of philosophical symbolism is quite problematic. Despite the long history of symbolism in Ancient Greek culture, there are no known direct sources of the *theoretical* approach to symbol before Clement in the Christian tradition and before Porphyry in the pagan one.

Thus, below I am going to focus on one important indirect source, the symbolism of Plutarch. Modern studies of Plutarch himself and his influence on late Ancient allegory and symbolism devote him relatively little attention when compared to later authors, especially Neoplatonists.³ However, his usage of the term *symbol* (Greek σύμβολον) is as frequent as that of Porphyry and Iamblichus,⁴ while the diversity of meanings of the term is comparable to that of Proclus.⁵

For the purpose of this research, the TLG collection of Plutarch's text was searched for mentions of the word σύμβολον and its cognates; 92 occurrences were found. The corresponding passages were analyzed and classified according to the main semantic 'functions' of the term symbol in the context of Plutarch's writings. The following discussion represents this classification.

¹ See important notes on Clement's symbolism in Havrda 2010; cf. also: Herrman, van den Hoek 2005. On Plutarch's influence on Clement, see: Avdokhin 2019: 107–110; Morlet 2019: 119–124; Afonasin 2012: 21–25. Some notes on common exegetical patterns in Plutarch and Philo: Schwarz 1973.

² Porphyry uses σύμβολον and its cognates 27 times in the *De antro nympharum* and more 27 times in the *Περὶ ἀγαλμάτων*. On the symbolism of Porphyry in these treatises, see: Miles 2015; more general discussion: Struck 2004: 198–201. On Plutarch's influence on Porphyry: Simonetti 2019: 137–143.

³ Compare the sections dedicated to Plutarch and to Neoplatonists in: Struck 2004.

⁴ The term σύμβολον and its cognates occur 92 times in the extant writings of Plutarch, vs 82 times in the extant writings of Porphyry and 64 occurrences in the extant writings of Iamblichus.

⁵ Compare the conclusions below with the respective conclusions on Proclus in: Kurdybaylo 2019: 482–483.

1. The twofold nature of symbol

Both etymology (σύμβολον < συμ-βάλλω) and the oldest meaning of the term ‘symbol’ suggest that it relates to a connection of two entities. Initially, ‘symbol’ was a name for some small object broken into two parts, which were used by two contracting parties as tokens of identity for any person who acts on behalf of that party,⁶ for instance, by a treaty of mutual hospitality.⁷ Later, a symbol was treated more generally as a token, sign or indication of something that is not visible at the current moment or is invisible by its nature. Plutarch gives plenty of examples using the same term σύμβολον when speaking of god, daemons, nature and people, as they all produce their respective symbols.

1.1. Divine symbols

Daemons use symbols to communicate with people, and people seek divine symbols to know their will.⁸ Plutarch describes the auspice ceremony, when “the chief of the augurs ... turned his eyes in all directions to observe whatever birds or other symbols might be sent from the gods.”⁹ The dramatic context implies that any omen from gods was appreciated to presage the fate of Numa, and any kind of omen in that situation will be a symbol. Similarly, the daemon of Socrates is said to communicate with Socrates via ‘usual symbols,’ for instance, when making it clear that a planned sea expedition is about to fail and will cause the city of Athens to ruin.¹⁰

Daemons use objects available to human senses in order to provide knowledge of invisible things such as future events or unexpected consequences of current actions. The majority of Plutarch’s evidence does not mention symbols of gods or daemons, but symbolic messages from the divine realm to humans.

⁶ Liddell, Scott, Jones 1996: 1676, s. v. σύμβολον.

⁷ Liddell, Scott, Jones 1996: 1189, s. v. ξένος.

⁸ Despite Plutarch mentions many names of Greek and barbarian gods, here and below I follow John Dillon’s understanding of Plutarch’s theology and demonology with plenty of daemons mediating between the single god and the material world (Dillon 1996: 214–221).

⁹ Plu. *Num.* 7.2.4–7.3.1; English translation: Perrin 1967: 1.329. Here and below all translations are given with my minor corrections aimed at the most accurate rendering of discussed Greek terms. Greek text of Plutarch’s *Lives* is quoted from Ziegler’s edition (Ziegler 1994–98), the *Moralia* from the Loeb edition (Babbitt 1961–1999; de Lacy, Einarson 1959; Clement, Hoffleit 1969; Minar, Sandbach, Helmbold 1961; Fowler 1969; Sandbach 1987).

¹⁰ Plu. *Nic.* 13.9.1–2: ... οἷς εἰώθει συμβόλοις.

It appears that Plutarch makes almost no difference between the usage of symbols made by gods and human beings. The *Life of Pericles* provides a very important argument: Plutarch tells the story of a one-horned ram, whose appearance was explained as a divine sign of political success. At the same time, Anaxagoras, one of the story characters, dissected the ram's skull and revealed the cause of its unusual appearance, which was a rare anatomical anomaly. Then Plutarch concludes:

Now there was nothing, in my opinion, to prevent both of them, the naturalist and the seer, from being in the right of the matter; the one correctly divined the cause, the other the object or purpose. It was the proper province of the one to observe why anything happens, and how it comes to be what it is; of the other to declare for what purpose anything happens, and what it means. And those who declare that the discovery of the cause, in any phenomenon, does away with the meaning, do not perceive that they are doing away not only with divine portents, but also with artificial symbols, such as the ringing of gongs, the language of fire-signals, and the shadows of the pointers on sundials. Each of these has been made, through some causal adaptation, to have some meaning.¹¹

This clarifies how Plutarch understands the origin of divine symbols: these are usual natural objects (including objects of human everyday life) in the natural causal relationships. However, over this natural way of being, there is the level of purposes set by gods, who introduce the sense and meaning to natural events. These are two independent levels, one of objects, and another of their meanings, thus making up a semantic system. Apparently, symbols become the basic elements of such a system, and they function quite similarly to letters in written text or gestures of deaf people. Noteworthy, Plutarch mentions no significant difference between the symbols used by gods and human-made symbols — both types emerge, exist, and function in similar ways.

1.2. Artificial symbols made by humans

People make and use ordinary objects which also carry some additional meaning that can be understood by other people if they are aware of some convention that underlies this particular signification. For instance, a state governor or a high-ranking military commander possesses certain insignia of their power. Plutarch mentions the 'insignia of royal dignity'¹² and 'insignia of a military commander',¹³ where 'insignia' stands for Greek σύμβολα.

¹¹ Plu. *Per.* 6.4–5; English translation: Perrin 1932: 3.17.

¹² Plu. *Comp. Cim. et Luc.* 3.3.2: τὰ σύμβολα τῆς βασιλείας.

¹³ Plu. *Marc.* 7.1.2: ἀπὸ τῶν συμβόλων ἄρχοντα.

Similarly, “a staff and a cloak” are “the symbols of the majesty of Sparta,”¹⁴ and “just as the law places diadem and crown upon the head, so nature puts grey hair upon it as an honorable symbol of the high dignity of leadership” of a senior man.¹⁵ Following the ancient custom of using symbols as proof of mutual hospitality treaties, Plutarch tells the story of Clearchus, who “gave Ctesias his ring as a token of friendship which he might show to his kindred and friends in Sparta.”¹⁶

Below, we will read about various objects and gestures used as signals to start some action such as a military attack.

All these cases treat a symbol as a manifestation of a certain kind of relationship between humans, either as a long-lasting status or a short-term arrangement. In any case, a symbol still reveals an invisible connection through material means. However, these invisible matters are arbitrary and time-limited.

1.3. Natural symbols

Both human and divine symbols require some knowledge or skill to ‘read’ them and understand their message about the facts that are unobvious or concern invisible things. But observation of natural phenomena also can give a skilled person some knowledge of invisible regularities. In this case, Plutarch also uses the term *σύμβολον* regarding chiefly the acts and behavior of people and other animated beings. In most cases, this behavior is not intentional from the standpoint of making it a sign of anything else. On the contrary, it is the observer’s task to reveal its meaning.

For instance, “the cawing of the rook” is a symbol of winter,¹⁷ and disorders in an army are a symbol of the approaching mutiny.¹⁸ In the underworld, the souls of the dead can be distinguished by a certain symbol: they “neither cast a shadow nor blink their eyes.”¹⁹ Plutarch also mentions several symbols that can be classified as psychological: by certain actions, words, or gestures one can judge the traits of a

¹⁴ Plu. *Nic.* 19.6.2–3: ἐν γὰρ τῇ βακτηρίᾳ καὶ τῷ τρίβωνι τὸ σύμβολον καὶ τὸ ἀξίωμα τῆς Σπάρτης... English translation: Perrin 1932: 3.275.

¹⁵ Plu. *An seni* 789e12–f1: ...ἡγεμονικοῦ σύμβολον ἀξιώματος ἐπιτίθησι. English translation: Fowler 1969: 113.

¹⁶ Plu. *Art.* 18.2.1–4: σύμβολον φιλίας πρὸς τοὺς ἐν Λακεδαίμονι συγγενεῖς καὶ οἰκείους. English translation: Perrin 1954: 11.167–169.

¹⁷ Plu. *fragm.* 94.4: ὁ γὰρ κρωγμὸς τῆς κορώνης χειμῶνος σύμβολον (Sandbach 1967: 198–199).

¹⁸ Plu. *Luc.* 32.3.5: σύμβολον ἀποστατικῶς.

¹⁹ Plu. *De sera num.* 564c7–9; English translation: de Lacy, Einarson 1959: 277.

human's character, attitude or family relationships.²⁰ Thus, speaking here about natural symbols, we are about to imply human nature first of all. What makes the difference with artificial symbols, is that this type has unintentional, spontaneous origin.

Hence, either symbols are artificial signs made by humans, sent by gods, or are just a manifestation of one's natural qualities, in any case, they remain two-level structures. At the lower level, they are particular objects (or actions with them) similar to all others of their kind. At the higher level, a symbolic object (or action) can be distinguished from others by a special placement, temporal relation to other events, presence of accidental marks, special configuration, form, pattern of behavior, etc. At this higher level, these distinctive peculiarities do not pertain to an object's nature, they are extraneous and contingent. This allows them to carry any arbitrary semantics irrelevant to the nature and substantial properties of the object. Therefore, a symbol appears as an independent material entity with a secondary 'semantic layer,' which together form the 'twofold' nature of a symbol.

However, to this extent, a symbol can hardly be discerned from a sign in its most general understanding. Below, we have to specify the difference between a symbol and other means of signification.

2. Ambiguity of a symbol

Plutarch emphasizes the inaccurate and ambiguous nature of a symbol. Besides, human language can be considered a symbolic system. As opposed to mortals, daemons "have no need of verbs or nouns, which men use as symbols in their communication, and thereby behold mere likenesses and images of what is present in thought, but are unaware of the originals."²¹ As long as Plutarch understands the 'language of fire-signals' as a symbolic system, there is no surprise that the language proper consists of symbols either. What is less expected, the symbolic language appears to be uncertain and unreliable when it is used to express thoughts. It makes a sensible difference with usual systems of signals. For instance, lighting an alarm fire-signal or blowing a trumpet as a signal for assault is unambiguous due to certain conventions on the meaning of such signs. Divine symbols, however, are not as unambiguous, and their interpretation may be a complicated task:

²⁰ Cf.: *Pel.* 20.3.6, symbols of one's devotion to freedom; *Pel.* 30.8.2 et *Pyrrh.* 20.3.1: giving and accepting gifts as symbols of kindness, goodwill, friendship, and hospitality; *De ad. et am.* 59b5 — a flatterer uses signs and symbols proper to a friend. See also: *Phoc.* 4.4.3; *Con. praec.* 139c9; *Quaest. Rom.* 265d6.

²¹ Plu. *De genio Socr.* 589b9–c2: ... οἷς χρώμενοι πρὸς ἀλλήλους οἱ ἄνθρωποι συμβόλοις εἶδωλα τῶν νοουμένων καὶ εἰκόνας ὀρώσιν... English translation: de Lacy, Einarson 1959: 455.

Just as the man who designed Apollo with the cock in his hand meant to suggest (ὑπεδῆλωσεν) the early morning hour when dawn is coming, so here the frogs may be taken for a symbol of the spring season when the sun begins to have power over the air and to break up winter; always supposing that, with you, we are to reckon Apollo and the sun one God, not two.²²

Hence, both cock and frogs are related to the sun and Apollo as one and the same god. Reversing this relation, we come to the fact that one god,—or more generally, a sensually imperceptible being—can be referenced to by many different material symbols. Moreover, each particular symbol itself may have a number of different interpretations. When speaking about divine omens, they can have even directly opposite meanings. Plutarch writes: when Corinthian troops met a caravan with asses carrying celery, it was considered a symbol of approaching misfortune. However, quick-witted Timoleon found an argument to treat celery as a good omen, and thus he could ‘restore the spirits of his men.’²³

Hence, we can expect two levels of symbolic polysemanticism: at the higher level, multiple symbols can be bound to a single sensually imperceptible being, while at the lower level, multiple meanings are derived from every single material symbol. This regularity applies to almost all divine and natural symbols.

Divine symbols are opposed to plain signs. The way daemons take care of and bring up human souls is similar to how a horseman trains a horse. Noteworthy, Plutarch speaks about symbols (σύμβολα) that daemons use to guide a human, but he uses the word ‘sign’ (σημείον) for “a whistle or clucking of the tongue” that a hunter uses to give orders to a hound.²⁴ Symbols here are similar to actions of Socrates’ daemon, subtle and ambiguous, their meaning requires some effort for interpretation.²⁵ On the contrary, signs are distinct and unambiguous, and their meaning is plain and straightforward.

Nonetheless, artificial symbols are conventional; and thus, they require a person who receives a symbolic message to be acquainted with the corresponding convention on the meaning of symbols. For instance, words of any human language as particular symbols can be understood only after proper learning that very language. To this extent, the arbitrariness of artificial symbols also supports their polysemanticism, however, it can be reduced within a dedicated convention.

At the same time, there are contexts, when Plutarch makes almost no difference between an artificial symbol and a sign (σημείον), placing them nearby as if they

²² Plu. *De Pyth. or.* 400c4–d1. English translation: Babbitt 1999: 293.

²³ Plu. *Quaest. conv.* 676d2–11. English translation: Clement, Hoffleit 1969: 395.

²⁴ Plu. *De genio Socr.* 593a10–c1. English translation: de Lacy, Einarson 1959: 479.

²⁵ Cf.: *ibid.* 592b5–c6.

were synonyms. Moreover, in these cases, a symbol is not just a *sign*, but a *signal* for some people to start an appointed action. For instance, the *Life of Romulus* reads as follows:

Now when this altar was discovered, Romulus appointed by proclamation a splendid sacrifice upon it, with games, and a spectacle open to all people. And many were the people who came together, while he himself sat in front, among his chief men, clad in purple. The signal (σύμβολον) that the time had come for the onslaught was to be his rising and folding his cloak and then throwing it round him again. Armed with swords, then, many of his followers kept their eyes intently upon him, and when the signal was given (σημείου γενομένου), drew their swords, rushed in with shouts...²⁶

Similarly, Plutarch mentions a purple tunic hung in front of the commander's tent as a symbol of impending battle.²⁷ For naval battles, Plutarch knows another symbol: "to hoist a brazen shield at the prow [is] a signal (σύμβολον) for the onset."²⁸ More subtle symbols were used to start an assault by conspirators, usually against the higher governors or military leaders. That could be certain words²⁹ or gestures,³⁰ which meaning was known only to the plotters. Here, symbols have plain and unambiguous meaning, and according to the previous evidence, they should have been called signs, not symbols.³¹ Probably, Plutarch's word usage was influenced by the fact that here we deal not with plain indications or references (proper to signs), but signals that forego a rapid violent action. And despite the action is undertaken by certain people following their knowledge of the signal's meaning, there is always a standpoint from which such a signal acts on its own. Probably, this 'efficacy' of a signal could be the cause for Plutarch to prefer σύμβολον instead of σημεῖον. Additional evidence to verify this assumption will be provided below (see Section 6).

Now let us return to the ambiguity of a symbol. Plutarch emphasizes that this ambiguity is not always a disadvantage.³² Moreover, there are contexts, where

²⁶ Plu. *Rom.* 14.5–6. English translation: Perrin 1967: 1.129.

²⁷ Plu. *Marc.* 26.1.2; *Pomp.* 68.5.1; *Brut.* 40.5.2. See also *Ant.* 39.3.4, where Plutarch mentions 'displaying the symbol of battle.'

²⁸ Plu. *Lys.* 11.1–2; English translation: Perrin 1959: 4.259.

²⁹ Plu. *Alex.* 51.6.3–5 (to call the guard in Macedonian speech); *Galb.* 24.3.3–7 (to say "that the builders were come and were waiting for him at his house," Perrin 1954: 11.261).

³⁰ Plu. *Mar.* 43.6.3; *Sert.* 26.11.1.

³¹ Cf.: Plu. *Galb.* 24.2.4–5: οὐ δι' αἰνιγμάτων, ἀλλ' ἀντικρυς ἔφη σημεία μεγάλης ταραχῆς (not a riddle but a direct indication of a great commotion).

³² When discussing Plato's writings, Plutarch definitely prefers clear and distinct explanations to enigmatic and symbolic ones (*De Is. et Os.* 370f1–2: οὐ δι' αἰνιγμάτων οὐδὲ συμβολικῶς).

vagueness is required by the very matter of things. Primarily, these are myths, rites and sacrifices devoted to gods and daemons, and in which sacred ‘traces and symbols’ are preserved and protected.³³ As different peoples use different words to name the same objects (such as the sun, the moon, etc.), so each culture has its own consecrated symbols, some of which are more obscure and others are clearer “guiding the intelligence toward things divine, though not without a certain hazard.”³⁴ The symbolic mode of speech is usual “in stories and mythology.”³⁵ In rites and mysteries, “what is spoken is less clear to the masses than what is unsaid, and what is unsaid gives cause for more speculation than what is said,” because these ritual acts are performed “with symbolical intent (συμβολικῶς).”³⁶

Plutarch was a preacher for dozens of years, and obviously he was aware of different cults, rites, and mysteries. He seems to prefer those with more clear symbols and more understandable rites to those under the command of ‘sensible and irrational.’³⁷ In other words, Plutarch pays much attention to *what* exactly is symbolized in certain sacrifices. If the symbolized matters are related to the intelligible realm and manifest some philosophical truth, then such mysteries guide one to the common good. Otherwise, a sacrifice may contain symbols of irrational and material objects, and in such case, one should not follow such tradition. There is an obvious conclusion, which Plutarch, however, did not utter explicitly: religions as a whole can be discerned by the meaning of their mysteries and, more precisely, by their symbolism. Following Plato’s reasoning in the *Republic* about the banished and praiseworthy types of poetry,³⁸ Plutarch could have a similar philosophical criterion to discriminate between different ritual traditions and corresponding religions.³⁹

3. Exegetical symbol

Most symbols that Plutarch describes are objects of our everyday life, or actions related to such objects. It is possible to consider them as they are, i.e. without any

³³ Plu. *De def. or.* 417b7–9: ...ὧν ἕχνη καὶ σύμβολα πολλαχοῦ θυσίαι καὶ τελεταὶ καὶ μυθολογίαι σώζουσι καὶ διαφυλάττουσιν ἐνδiesπαρμένα.

³⁴ Plu. *De Is. et Os.* 378a1–5; English translation: Babbitt 1999: 157.

³⁵ Plu. fragm. 157.41–42: τὸ συμβολικὸν εἶδος ἐν τοῖς λόγοις καὶ τοῖς μύθοις μάλλόν ἐστιν (Sandbach 1987: 286–288).

³⁶ Ibid. 157.16–25. English translation: Sandbach 1987: 287.

³⁷ Cf.: *De def. or.* 417b5.

³⁸ Plat. *R.P.* X, 595a–608d.

³⁹ Plutarch develops this logic by declaring Isis a Greek name and, consequently, the superiority of Greek religion over the Egyptian one. For a detailed discussion see: Richter 2001.

symbolic meaning. But sometimes, even if we face an artificial symbol created in a semantic context which we are unaware of, nevertheless, it is obvious that an object means something, although we cannot tell exactly what. For instance, it happens with some text written in a language we don't know. Similarly, particular material objects can be obviously enigmatic even if we have no idea of their origin and possible meaning. Such a situation induces us to start a hermeneutic procedure. Noteworthy, when we are interpreting such a symbolic object, it makes no difference, whether we face a real object or just its textual description. In any case, the exegesis of a symbol goes almost the same way.

Probably, the most obvious illustration here is the 'E' in Delphi which became the subject of the entire Plutarch's treatise. As the letter itself has no evident meaning, it should be a symbol "for something else of serious importance."⁴⁰ Plutarch discusses that a letter has a name, a graphical appearance and a sound of pronunciation, and each of them could have some meaning, but only its name became the symbol.⁴¹ Several pages below, the numerical symbolism of the enigmatic letter is mentioned also.⁴² In any case, the letter 'E' is not taken here as an alphabetic entity, a part of a word, or an individual number. First of all, Plutarch removes the 'E' from any everyday usage and posits it as something strange, obscure and demanding an interpretation.

A possible reason to search for a symbolic meaning is the strangeness, oddity or inner inconsistency of an object or its description. Plutarch writes:

In the store-house of the Corinthians we were looking at the golden palm tree, the only remnant of their offerings, when the frogs and water-snakes embossed round the roots caused much surprise to Diogenianus, and for the matter of that, to us. For the palm tree is not, like many others, a marshy or water-loving plant, nor have frogs anything specially to do with the Corinthians. Thus they must be a symbolical (σύμβολον) or significative (παράσημον) device of that city...⁴³

Similarly, if the descriptions and imagery of gods, sacral ceremonies and domestic rituals contain odd or illogical elements, then, according to Plutarch, they may be symbols of some moral precept or metaphysical teaching. Here Plutarch shows his talent to wonder at things that seem almost habitual at first glance. For instance,

⁴⁰ Plu. *De E* 385a3–5: περιττήν ἢ συμβόλω χρωμένους πρὸς ἕτερόν τι.

⁴¹ Ibid. 386b8–10: οὔτε τὴν ὄψιν ἀξιοῦντες οὔτε τὸν φθόγγον ἀλλὰ τοῦνομα μόνον τοῦ γράμματος ἔχειν τι σύμβολον.

⁴² Ibid. 391c7–8: σύμβολον τοῦ ἀριθμοῦ τῶν πάντων.

⁴³ Plu. *De Pyth. or.* 399e8–f3. The word παράσημον here may have a large variety of meanings, see Liddell, Scott, Jones 1996: 1323 s. v. παρασημαίνομαι. English translation: Babbitt 1999: 288.

such are the imagery of Aphrodite standing with one foot on a tortoise,⁴⁴ Harpocrates keeping his finger on his lips,⁴⁵ the prohibition for augurs “that had any sore upon their bodies to sit and watch for birds of omen,”⁴⁶ the precept to cloth the deceased votaries of Isis with ritual garments,⁴⁷ to pour out a great quantity of wine on the festival of Aphrodite,⁴⁸ or “to part the hair of brides with the point of a spear.”⁴⁹

Except for the last example, all others have pure moral explanations giving certain rules of behavior for priests, participants of festivals and even for married couples. The *Roman and Greek Questions* are entirely composed of questions and answers concerning different state and religious traditions, which comprise 172 entries altogether. The vast majority have almost identical structure but only fourteen of them are explicitly called symbolic or regarding symbols.⁵⁰ Naturally, most of Plutarch’s answers are based on some historical precedent (sometimes also a myth or fictitious anecdote) which had some remarkable detail that later became the kernel of questioned custom, tradition, or popular locution. However, for one exception,⁵¹ this pattern does not fit the answers containing the word σύμβολον. These outstanding answers are based not on a historical event but on a universal regularity that stays immutable at any time, besides history. Obviously, universal and immutable regularities pertain to the realm either of metaphysics or ethics—besides all various Plutarch’s interests, he is a Platonist.

However, this group of history-irrelevant symbols also includes the symbols of natural connections between different objects, people, or their activities. For example, Plutarch calls famous buildings in Athens (such as the Parthenon) “the statues and symbols” of the city,⁵² and the requisites and instruments of certain artists

⁴⁴ Plu. *Con. praec.* 142d6–8, as a symbol of “womankind keeping at home and keeping silence” (Babbitt 1962a: 323).

⁴⁵ Plu. *De Is. et Os.* 378c4, as a symbol of “restrained speech or silence” (Babbitt 1999: 159).

⁴⁶ Plu. *Quaest. Rom.* 281c1–2. English translation: Babbitt 1962b: 111.

⁴⁷ Plu. *De Is. et Os.* 352b9–c1.

⁴⁸ Plu. *Quaest. Rom.* 275e. Here, Plutarch refers to the Roman festival of Veneralia but mentions the Greek goddess’ name Aphrodite — such mixing of Greek and Roman vocabulary is quite often in Plutarch’s works (cf.: Russell, Mossman 2001: 54–55, 130).

⁴⁹ Plu. *Quaest. Rom.* 285b11–12. English translation: Babbitt 1962b: 133.

⁵⁰ In addition to those mentioned above: *Quaest. Rom.* 271d6, 271e12, 274f5, 282a3, 283e3, 287b8, et 288b6.

⁵¹ Namely, the cause of parting a bride’s hair with a spear, *Quaest. Rom.* 285b12, cf. also *Rom.* 15.7.2.

⁵² Plu. *De gloria Ath.* 349d2–3: ὧν ἀγάλματα καὶ σύμβολα... On the symbolism of statues in Plutarch see: Bussels 2012.

are called ‘symbols and signs’ of their works.⁵³

At any rate, from the exegetical standpoint, a symbol as a means to manifest some immaterial substance through a material object or action also implies its time-irrelevance. It means that its basic immaterial regularity should be unchangeable during long time spans and be independent of historical affairs. Platonic conception of the intelligible realm fits this requirement best, but there is also a large variety of ‘lower’ objects and regularities.

4. Symbol and synecdoche

As far as a symbol manifests some universal regularity being itself a particular object, this object may be a singular occurrence of that regularity. In other words, a particular action may be a symbol of a common rule it falls within, and a sample object may be a symbol of its entire species. From the exegetical standpoint, such usage of a symbol provides us with naming a certain object or action instead of the whole class of objects or actions. As a literary trope, this device is called synecdoche and, more precisely, it is specified as *pars pro toto* (as synecdoche also implies an inverted relation, *totum pro parte*). Plutarch does not use these exact terms, but he refers to the Pythagoreans, who “made small matters symbols of great” ones.⁵⁴ Naturally, this is not only a Pythagorean feature, moreover, these words could be a seminal form of the entire Plutarchian symbolism.

Plutarch gives quite an unexpected example:

just as some of the Egyptians worship and honour the whole race of dogs, others that of wolves or crocodiles, but feed only a single one (some a dog, some a crocodile, and some a wolf), because it is not possible to feed them all—so in Rome the care and preservation of that particular fire is symbolic of a reverent attitude to all fire.⁵⁵

Similarly, Plutarch speaks about the custom that forbids “slave-women to set foot in the shrine of Matuta” and prescribes “the women to bring in one slave-woman only and slap her on the head and beat her.” Besides, the beating of the slave is “a symbol of the prohibition,” so “they prevent the others from entering.”⁵⁶ In both cases, a singular occurrence becomes a symbol of a general rule of behavior in certain circumstances. Moreover, a symbol may act as *pars pro toto* in a more object way: sandals and a sword are called the symbols of Aegeus, his owner (at least, they were considered as symbols by his son, Theseus, who found these belongings of his

⁵³ Ibid. 348d8–9: τὰ σύμβολα καὶ τὰ παράσημα τῶν ἔργων.

⁵⁴ Plu. *Quaest. Rom.* 281a9: οἱ Πυθαγορικοὶ μικρὰ μεγάλων ἐποιοῦντο σύμβολα.

⁵⁵ Plu. *Quaest. conv.* 703a1–6; English translation: Minar, Sandbach, Helmbold 1961: 35.

⁵⁶ Plu. *Quaest. Rom.* 267d1–5. English translation: Babbitt 1962b: 29.

father, absent for many years).⁵⁷

Here, a symbolic object is a part of the whole, a single instance of the general regularity, or a tiny resemblance of a universal archetype.⁵⁸ This finding helps us to explain why the reminders of historical events usually do not become symbols: as long as the historical precedent is not an origin for some universal rule or a manifestation of some global entity, so the representations of such event being also ‘a small matter’ in relation to a great one, however, are not treated as symbols.

Therefore, to further define the symbolism of Plutarch, we should conclude that “small matters are symbols of great ones,” but only if these ‘great matters’ are some universal entities, or if they represent some ideal mode of unity, as opposed to particular nature of the ‘smaller matter,’ i.e. a symbol.

5. Pythagorean symbols

Short maxims with rather odd prohibitions (or prescripts) of plain everyday actions are well-known as Pythagorean *acousmata* which are also regarded as *symbols*. Moreover, a Stobaeus’ fragment that can be attributed to Plutarch marks the use of symbols as the most characteristic feature of Pythagorean philosophy.⁵⁹ Authentic Plutarch’s writings contain numerous remarks on the necessity of proper interpretation of Pythagorean locutions, and anyway, they should not be understood in their literal form. The Etruscans are described as “the only people who in fact carefully observe and abide” the Pythagorean precepts in the most straightforward manner, while others seek their figurative meaning. Plutarch appreciably sympathizes with the latter, who treat symbols in the proper way.

The origin of Pythagorean symbolism, according to Plutarch, lies in the ancient Egyptian tradition with its “symbolism and occult teachings,” which incorporated certain “doctrines in enigmas.”⁶⁰ Though, Plutarch ties almost any priesthood with symbols and enigmas, not only Egyptian.⁶¹ Despite the pronounced note of esotericism, Plutarch’s interpretations of certain Pythagorean symbols do

⁵⁷ Plu. *Thes.* 6.2.1–3.1.

⁵⁸ Cf. crescents on shoes as a symbol of the moon (*Quaest. Rom.* 282a3) or a symbolic representation of “the twofold form of the lawgiver” (*ibid.* 274f5).

⁵⁹ Plu. fragm. 202.1–3 = Stob. 3.1.199, Sandbach 1987: 374–376.

⁶⁰ Plu. *De Is. et Os.* 354e5–8: ἀπεμιμήσατο τὸ συμβολικὸν αὐτῶν καὶ μυστηριώδες ἀναμίξας αἰνίγμασι τὰ δόγματα.

⁶¹ Cf. the “mystic formulas of Dionysiac rites” (*Cons. ad ux.* 611d9–10) and “the divinity, which presents itself to priests not in dreams only or by means of symbols” (*De facie* 941e10–f3).

not go beyond the plain moral reading as is shown in detail in the seventh *Quaestio convivialis*, Book Eight.⁶² Noticeably, the mode of interpreting Pythagorean symbols is used as a reference point to explain Roman and Greek customs,⁶³ thus suggesting that Pythagorean symbolism follows all the major patterns discussed above.

What distinguishes Pythagorean symbols from others is their aggregation in a single group, which consequently implies the common mode of their interpretation. If Plutarch himself did not provide a systematic analysis of the whole set of Pythagorean symbols, it was done later by Iamblichus in the *De vita Pythagorica* and the *Protrepticus*,⁶⁴ and, probably, by other authors of lost works.⁶⁵ The idea of a system of symbols was also popular thanks to the hieroglyphic script of Egyptians, which became an illustration of great wisdom concealed by simple symbolic characters. Plutarch describes it along with several explanations of certain hieroglyphic inscriptions.⁶⁶

As stated above, artificial symbols with the meaning of signals (see Section 2 above) are used according to certain situations and on a personal choice, arbitrary to their nature. On the contrary, if symbols are structured as a system similar to the Pythagorean one, they are organized in a way to communicate not a single message, but a composite doctrine. From this standpoint, Pythagorean symbols are an integral system to teach their philosophy; and moreover, the Pythagorean philosophy may be qualified as the philosophy translatable into a symbolic form.

But if a philosophical doctrine can be organized and communicated via a symbolic system, is it possible for gods and nature to be also comprehended via symbols built in a harmonious system? Actually, many middle Platonists approached this conclusion, and it was Plotinus who proclaimed: “Everything is full of signs, and the one who understands one thing on the basis of another is a wise man of

⁶² Plu. *Quaest. conv.* 727a7–728c10. Multiple instances of σύμβολον mark several interpretational approaches in the *Question* (727a8, d1; 728b4, c2). Cf. also fragm. 93* (Sandbach 1987: 198); *Quaest. Rom.* 281a5–b11.

⁶³ Plu. *Quaest. Rom.* 290e1–291b2.

⁶⁴ See: O’Meara 1990: 86–106; O’Meara 2014; Thom 2013.

⁶⁵ Iamblichus refers to a writing by Androcides *On Pythagorean symbols*, which probably contained some biographical narrations about famous Pythagoreans along with the discussion of symbols themselves, see: *De vita Pyth.* 28.145.3–4: ... τὰ ὑπὸ Ἀνδροκίδου ἐν τῷ περὶ Πυθαγορικῶν συμβόλων ἱστορούμενα. In the *Theol. arithm.* 52.9–10 the same person is mentioned as an author of the “Περὶ τῶν συμβόλων.”

⁶⁶ Plu. *De Is. et Os.* 363f4–364a1; *De Pyth. or.* 400a9–10.

sorts.”⁶⁷ In other words, the Pythagorean concept of a symbolic system anticipated the common idea of the universal presence of symbols in the world—a thesis of great importance for the entire Neoplatonic tradition.

6. Symbol in action

Above we noticed that Plutarch avoids calling symbols the objects, which act or appear as mere reminders of remarkable historical events. However, sometimes he does so. One of such exceptional cases describes the origins of some Roman customs:

And to the seven Persians who killed the magi the privilege was granted that they and their descendants should wear their headdress tilted forward over the forehead; for they made this, so it appears, their symbol when they undertook their act. And there is something that indicates public spirit, too, about the honour received by Pittacus; for, when he was told to take as much as he wished of the land which he had gained for the citizens, he took only as much as he could throw a javelin over. And the Roman Cocles received as much as he — and he was lame — could plough around in one day. For the honour should not be payment for the action, but a symbol, that it may last for a long time, as those just mentioned have lasted.⁶⁸

This passage provides three particular examples and a generalizing conclusion: the symbol appears as a long-lasting reminder of great former deeds and the honor that accompanied them. The ‘tilted hairdress’ is a good example of what such a symbolic reminder can be: obviously, it is not the recalled event itself, but just one of its minor details, which, however, played (or is thought to have played) some important role.

Here, an event in a people’s history or the life of some person is converted into a symbolic structure, which can be detached from certain material, spatial and temporal circumstances and thus is available to be reproduced at arbitrary times and places with minor material efforts—exactly following the formula “small matters are symbols of great ones.” However, as we have seen, this formula provides a necessary condition but is not sufficient in itself.

There are other instances of history-related symbols in Plutarch. Among them is the above-mentioned “custom of parting the bride’s hair with the head of a spear” as a “symbol [which reminds us that] the first marriage was attended with war and fighting.”⁶⁹ Similarly, as the reminder of the story of little Remus and Romulus, “the

⁶⁷ Plot. *Enn.* 2.3.7.12–13: Μεστὰ δὲ πάντα σημείων καὶ σοφός τις ὁ μαθῶν ἐξ ἄλλου ἄλλο. English translation: Gerson 2018: 152.

⁶⁸ Plu. *Praec. ger. reip.* 820d10–e9; English translation: Fowler 1969: 273.

⁶⁹ Plu. *Rom.* 15.7.1–5; English translation: Perrin 1967: 1.135. Cf.: *Quaest. Rom.* 285b11–12.

bloody sword is applied to foreheads as a symbol of the peril and slaughter of that day, while the cleansing of foreheads with milk is the symbol of the nourishment which the babes received.”⁷⁰

The main difference between these instances and other numerous history-related customs discussed in the *Roman and Greek questions*, which are not qualified as symbols, is that symbols are deliberately established forms of historical memory—in contrast to plain customs that emerged without a particular goal and not as a means of perpetuation the history or maintaining one’s honor to ‘last for a long time.’

Despite the artificial and purposeful nature of such symbols, as long as they become a custom of a whole nation, a city’s inhabitants, or some social group, they acquire the capability to influence the everyday life of humans. Symbol appears as an entity with its own efficacy. Probably, for Plutarch, this efficacy appeared rather figurative than substantial. However, he never denies the power of history, custom and symbol in a society as well.

In addition to artificial symbols established in memory of some historical event, Plutarch mentions another genus of symbols with another dimension of historicity. These are marks on one’s body as symbols of events that happened in the personal history, i.e. during life. Within Plutarch’s favorite ethical framework, he speaks about the scars and wounds on the body as symbols of courage⁷¹ or “of an opposing Fortune.”⁷² Of course, such symbols are not the ones that are instituted to preserve certain memories, but they also influence a person’s life; they do not only preserve memory but also manifest it to the surrounding people.

Finally, the greatest efficacy can be expected of the symbols sent from daemons to mortals. Plutarch explains in detail how such symbols operate:

“You suppose, then, Theocritus,” replied Galaxidorus, “that Socrates’ daemon had some peculiar and extraordinary power, and that he did not, upon verifying from experience some rule of ordinary divination, let it turn the scale in matters dark and beyond the reach of reason? For just as a single drachm does not by itself tip the beam, but when joined to a weight in equilibrium with another inclines the whole mass in the direction of its own pull, so too a sneeze or chance remark or any such symbol cannot, being trivial and light, incline a weighty mind to action; but when it is joined to one of two

⁷⁰ Plu. *Rom.* 21.9.1–4; Perrin 1967: 1.159.

⁷¹ Plu. *Cor.* 14.3.1.

⁷² Plu. *De Al. magn. fort.* 327a2–3: τοῦμόν δὲ σῶμα πολλὰ σύμβολα φέρει Τύχης ἀνταγωνιζομένης οὐ συμμαχούσης.

opposing reasons, it solves the dilemma by destroying the balance, and thus allows a movement and propulsion to arise.⁷³

A symbol as a light disturbance that resolves the indeterminateness of large powers brought into equilibrium returns us to the idea of “small matters as the symbols of great ones.” However, now the smallness of a symbol is taken not from the standpoint of its size, weight, complexity or meaning, but from the standpoint of its power. Symbol is said to be able to directly influence a human being, although this influence is very subtle and thus requires much attention and skill to notice it. Naturally, Plutarch depicts Socrates as a person with extraordinary talents and virtues and, of course, the one who can discern divine symbols perfectly well.⁷⁴ Probably, this Socrates’ gift is juxtaposed to a priest’s skill to discern divine messages through augury and divination—the very art, which Plutarch mastered during his own life.

Symbols sent by daemons may be thought of as active on their own or as instruments of daemonic will—therefore, the symbol’s efficacy will appear either substantial or just instrumental. However, from the outer point of view, in any case, symbols cause certain changes in the order of mundane things.

Conclusion

Now we can summarize the general properties of Plutarch’s symbolism. Firstly, a symbol has all the formal properties of a sign: it is an object (or an object-related action) that points to or manifests some other entity, which is definitely discerned from the symbol itself. It is always possible to distinguish the symbol from what it symbolizes. Therefore, every symbol has two layers: the lower is its self-identity as a standalone object, and the higher is its significative property, a reference to another entity.

Secondly, a symbol signifies an entity that is ‘more substantial’ than the symbol as an individual object. A symbolized entity may be an intelligible substance, some general regularity, metaphysical or ethical proposition, etc. As a rule, the symbolized entity is immaterial, while the symbol itself is a sensually perceptible object (or an action with such object). Symbol can be described by Plutarch’s formula: a small matter is a symbol of a great one.

Thirdly, as opposed to signs, symbols are polysemantic and do not form strict one-to-one correspondence. A sensually imperceptible entity may be symbolized

⁷³ Plu. *De genio Socr.* 58of8–a6; English translation: de Lacy, Einarson 1959: 407–409.

⁷⁴ A complication here arises from Plato’s words about Socrates’ daemon to prohibit certain actions but never to impel doing anything (Plat. *Apol. Socr.* 31d2–4; *Theag.* 128d1–5; *Phaedr.* 242b8–c1). On the contrary, Plutarch here describes rather a positive activity of a daemon.

by many material objects. Each of these objects, in turn, being regarded as a symbol, may have multiple interpretations. The more interpretations can be derived from a symbol, the more valuable and perfect it is considered. The transition from unity to multiplicity and from simple and united forms to complex and particular ones is a common Platonic law of descending down the ontological hierarchy. Symbols are located at the lower ontological steps as compared to what is symbolized.

In addition, symbols may appear strange, odd and inconsistent, thus provoking amazement and requiring sophisticated interpretation. Also, the possibility for different symbols to originate from the same source allows them to be arranged into integral symbolic systems. Symbolical systems together with corresponding systems of interpretation are thought to emerge in ancient Egypt and Pythagoreanism, and their further development is strongly connected with late Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy.

Finally, symbols differ from signs due to their efficacy. While signs are passive and just point to certain objects, symbols can act on their own—this is especially true for symbols sent by daemons to particular humans. Artificial symbols established to preserve the historical memory of some nation or social group are also active as they reactualize the events of the past in present regardless of spatial, temporal or material circumstances. In the shortest timespan, such artificial symbols act as signals for people prepared and waiting to start some group activity. Thus, to be a signal is also an active manifestation of a symbol, not a sign, as Plutarch's word usage suggests.

It is no surprise that Plutarch's concept of symbols influences the teachings of Porphyry and Iamblichus. Despite the large part of their writings being lost, even the extant texts reveal their proximity to Plutarch when they collect evidence on Pythagoras and Pythagoreanism, fortune-telling and divination, and the history of Ancient Rome and Greece. The concept of active symbols as it was described above appears rather coherent with Iamblichus' doctrine of theurgy and theurgic symbols particularly.⁷⁵

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⁷⁵ Domaradzki 2021; Struck 2004: 204–226; Clarke, Dillon, Hershbell 2003: xli–xlii; Shaw 1995: 129–228.

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