

This paper wants to illustrate Plutarch's views on the donkey. The first part shortly discusses the role donkeys play in modern societies, literally and metaphorically. The second part presents the contrasting attitudes held by Jewish and Egyptians in considering donkeys. The third part describes the meanings Greek people gave to this animals. The fourth part is dedicated to Plutarch's own reports. The aim of these studies is to show that Plutarch's views on donkeys are, according to his eclectic tendency, a mixture from different traditions.

From the beginning of History onwards donkeys have been exploited in Europe and in Western Asia for transporting loads and people or for drawing carts. Although they are not as speedy as horses, donkeys are sturdier, their maintenance is cheaper, they have a good resistance and can move easily on rough grounds. Donkeys play till now a very important role in some developing countries, but despite their utility, "donkey" has long been a symbol of ignorance. Examples can be found in Aesop's *Fables*, Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

There are numerous references to donkeys in the Old Testament. They mostly appear reflecting the natural environment of Israel and as an aspect of the agricultural economy. They were adored animal. Unlike the Jewish and in contrast to them, Egyptians hated donkeys because they connected them with the cruel God Typhon. Aelianus, *nat. anim.* x. 28 tells that the habitants of Busiris disliked the blare of a trumpet because of its resemblance to the braying of a donkey; this hate was also the reason why they nicknamed "Donkey" the detested King of Persians, Artaxerxes III.

The Greeks associated the donkey not only with Typhon under Egyptians' influence, but also with Dionysus, particularly in relationship to his companion, Silenus. Although this connection is due to the phallic strength of the donkey, Greeks also put out donkeys' infertility. They considered them as gross and unmelodious animals. According to the followers of Pythagoras the donkey is the only animal not born in tune and therewith completely deaf to the sound of the lyre. Greek mythology also includes the story of King Midas who judged against Apollo in favor of Pan during a musical contest, and had his ears changed to those of a donkey as punishment.

A donkey is something small, insignificant: Epictetus, *Diatribai* iv. 1. 79–80 says that we have to think of our body as of a loaded donkey.

Plutarch also reports that donkeys were put in relation with Typhon. He enumerates the reasons of this resemblance: red hair, stupidity, lasciviousness, obstructing power (*De Iside et Osiride* 30, 362F; 31, 363 C; 50, 371C). In Fr. 107 Sandbach it is said that the donkey belongs to the earth, as being dear to Typhon and given to copulation. In *De Iside et Osiride* 31, 363C he defines the records about Typhon's flight from the battle on the back of a donkey and about his two sons, Hierosolymus and Judaeus, as Jewish legends. For, the Jews prized the donkey highly and abstained from hares too because of its resemblance to a donkey (*Quaest. Conv.* iv. 5. 3, 670 E).

Plutarch also knows that donkeys were considered as unmelodious, but he refers to the practice to make flutes from donkeys' bones (*Sept. sap. conv.* 5, 150 F).

A donkey is often a bearer of omens, e. g. *Life of Caius Marius*, xxxviii. 6; *Life of Alexander* lxxiii. 3 (a tame donkey kills a magnificent lion); fr. 182 Sandbach (Tiberius receives a prediction of his future throne from a donkey which emits many large sparks while being groomed), but it is a pack animal with a very hard life (*Aet. Rom.* 48, 276 C; *De cupidit. divit.* 5, 525 E). To be assimilated to a donkey is, however, not a compliment (*De lib. educ.* 14, 10 C).

By comparing different traditions about donkeys, it is possible to observe that Plutarch mixes in his own accounts on donkeys any of them.