POLITICAL REFORMS IN THE LIVES OF LYCURGUS AND NUMA: DIVINE REVELATION OR POLITICAL LIE?¹

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Abstract
This paper aims to analyze the political importance of divine inspiration for Spartan and Roman political reforms carried out by Lycurgus (c. 650 BC?) and by Numa Pompilius (715-673 BC). In the former case, the constitution is supposed to have been transmitted to Lycurgus by the Delphic oracle and consequently it was called Rheta, a "ceremonial utterance" or an "agreement" (Lyc. 6). Similarly, in the Life of the Roman counterpart, the goddess Egeria (Num. 4.2) inspires the second king of Rome to carry out a profound religious reform. In fact, this is not a specific feature of these Lives, since several other lawgivers were credited with divine assistance, such as Minos, Zaleucus or Zoroaster. The discussion of this issue is designed to reveal the argument that may lie behind these legends: divine inspiration or an artificial way of legitimating the lawgiver’s power? In fact, despite all the effort made in order to sacralise these ancient political institutions, Plutarch himself seems to accept the latter theory. This strategy can be seen as a kind of political lie which had previously been accepted by Plato as an instrument for legitimizing constitutional reforms (R. 389b).

In the synkrisis of Lycurgus and Numa, Plutarch stated four reasons to justify the placing of these two lives in parallel: “their wise moderation (σωφροσύνη), their piety (εὐσέβεια), their ability for governing (τὸ πολιτικόν) and educating (τὸ παιδευτικόν), and the fact that they both derive their laws from a divine source (τῶν θεῶν ... λαβεῖν)”. While these first three features are related to their characters, the fourth concerns their political activity: both reforms were credited with divine assistance. Both reforms were intended to resolve a stasis: in the former, people “felt that their kings were such in name and station merely” (4.5) and in the second, “it is indeed true that it was the pleasure of all to have a king, but they wrangled and quarreled”. Each lawgiver would establish eunomia for his community; nevertheless, while Spartan eunomia would last 500 years (Lyc. 29.6), the peace of Numa would last only until his death. However, such profound reforms would not have been accepted by people without divine sanction, even though they consist of positive laws, rules and institutions that are postulated by men among men, a matter of convention.

This paper focuses upon the Plutarchean argument that lies behind the legitimacy of the political reforms carried out by Lycurgus and Numa, the

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