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ΔΕΙΣΙΔΑΙΜΟΝΙΑ: THE HELLENISTIC CONCEPT OF SUPERSTITION

Abstract

This paper attempts to reexamine the notion of superstition in a concrete historical period: from the moment it first appeared in the early Hellenistic period (and named deisidemony, δεισιδαιμονία) till the Early Roman Empire, when this original meaning started to change radically. As will be shown below, the main characteristics of this unique concept of superstition were exaggerated fear and magical or ritual practices used to avert the supposed evil foreshown by a bad omen. The paper will particularly focus on the chapter *On the Superstitious Man* of Theophrastus' *Characters*, Plutarch's treatise *On Superstition* and Lucian's dialogue *Lover of Lies*.

Keywords: superstition · deisidemony · affection of fear · magic · ritual practices · truth, fallacy

“The use of the term superstition is inevitably pejorative rather than descriptive or analytical, for superstition is defined in opposition to a given culture's concept of true religion. Its specific meanings vary widely in different periods and contexts, so that a survey of its historical application rather than an abstract definition is the best approach to the concept of superstition.” (O'Neil, 2005: 8864) For the purpose of the present paper, this quotation from the entry on superstition in the voluminous *Encyclopedia of Religion* is perfect to start from. Namely, this paper attempts to reexamine and get a fresh look at the notion of superstition in a concrete historical period: from the moment it first appeared in the early Hellenistic period till the Early Empire, when this original meaning started to change radically. As will be shown below, the main characteristics of this unique concept of superstition were exaggerated fear and magical or ritual practices used to avert the supposed evil foreshown by a bad omen.

When the notion of superstition first emerged in the Early Hellenistic era, it was named δεισιδαιμονία. The notion was new, but the word itself wasn't, since in the surviving Greek texts it appears in the late 6th or the beginning of the 5th c. B.C. It was composed of the aorist stem δεισ- of the verb δειδω (epic perfect form of 1. singular) meaning "to fear, to be afraid", and the noun δαίμων, "demon" or "god". Therefore, the literal meaning of this compound noun is "fear of demons or gods," which means that in the beginning it designated a basic religious sentiment, perhaps similar to εὐσέβεια, "reverence towards the gods", and as such had a positive notion. With this meaning, the word deisidemony appears in all surviving texts from the Classical period and can also be sporadically found later in writings by various authors from Hellenistic, Roman and even Byzantine times. This original meaning, however, started losing ground during the Hellenistic era when the prevalent meaning became "superstition". This Hellenistic meaning of the word was reintroduced in Modern Greek during the Greek Enlightenment in the 18th century.

This change in the meaning of the word was clearly the result of the appearance of a new concept in early Hellenistic philosophy, pioneered by Theophrastus. On the other hand, the disappearance of this concept was gradual, taking place over the first two centuries of the Roman Empire. It is indicated by the fact that in plenty of sources of that time, first in pagan and later in Christian writings as well, the word δεισιδαιμονία changed its meaning once more, so that it should be translated as "fallacy, delusion". In this paper, I shall try to contribute to the already extensive discussion of the Hellenistic concept of deisidemony by: 1) re-examining of the chapter on the superstitious man (δεισιδαίμων) in Theophrastus' *Characters*; 2) exploring *deisidemony* as passion of fear (πάθος) in Stoic philosophy; 3) re-examining Plutarch's essay *On Superstition*, where the Hellenistic concept of deisidemony appears in its traditional form, presumably for the last time; 4) reading Lucian's dialog *The Liar* (Φιλοψεύδης), in which this conception is losing ground and the word deisidemony means "fallacy"; 5) looking at its usage in writings by early Christian authors.

In Theophrastus' *Characters*, there are fifteen examples describing the superstitious character (δεισιδαίμων) (Diggle, 2004: 110-113). All of them have the same two-part structure: in the first part, a "dangerous situation" in which the superstitious man might find himself is described, while the second part describes the action he undertakes in order to avert the threat. The common feature is that the situation described is considered by a superstitious man as a bad omen suggesting that one who witnessed it will be harmed by demons, and therefore that situation always terrifies him. On the other hand, reactions of the superstitious man considerably vary, and they may include: the performance of a primitive magical practice, invocation and prayer for divine help, offering sacrifice, or even establishing a new shrine. Theophrastus' descriptions have sometimes been understood as mere satire (Bowden, 2008), but I would argue that they should be taken more seriously.

Let us examine several examples. The example No. 3 from Theophrastus' *Characters* goes as follows:

“If a weasel runs across his path he will not proceed on his journey until someone else has covered the ground or he has thrown three stones over the road.”¹ (Diggle, 2004: 111)

Many are familiar with this example even today, especially if you substitute a black cat for the weasel. The superstitious person believes that in such a situation, he can react in two ways: 1) wait until someone else traverses the ground between him and where the animal passed, or 2) throw three stones over the road. The latter can be considered a magic practice since the superstitious believe that in this way they can drive away their bad luck. This is also suggested by the fact that the superstitious man throws stones three times because the number three was common in magic and ritual practices.

Second example from Theophrastus' book (No. 4):

“When he sees a snake in his house, he invokes Sabazios if it is the reddish-brown one, and if it is the holy one he sets up a hero-shrine there and then.”² (Diggle, 2004: 111)

An encounter with a snake in one's house is commonly taken as a prodigy in ancient sources. One could refer to authors such as Cicero and Livy (Cic. *Diu.* 2.62, Liv. 1.56.4), but also to the lemma in the 10th-century *Souda* Lexicon, which mentions an interpretation of the dream by the Platonist Xenocrates (Dillon, 2003):

Philosopher Xenocrates ... wrote based on the omen seen in the house. For example, if a weasel or snake appears in the house, this is what it means. (Adler, 1928: Xi 43).³

What is more important in this quotation is that a simple magic practice like the one from our first example is no longer sufficient to expel the demon, so the deisidemon must either invoke a god or even erect a shrine in his house, depending on which kind of snake appeared before him. Similar reactions are found elsewhere in Theophrastus' text: when the superstitious invokes the goddess Athena when he sees an owl (Theophrastus' example No. 8; Diggle, 2004: 110-111) or when he offers an apotropaic sacrifice if a mouse nibbles through the bag used for keeping cereal (No. 6; Diggle, 2004: 110-111).

1 και την ὁδὸν ἐὰν ὑπερδράμῃ γαλῆ, μὴ πρότερον πορευθῆναι ἕως <ἄν> διεξέλθῃ τις ἢ λίθους τρεῖς ὑπὲρ τῆς ὁδοῦ διαβάλλῃ. (Diggle, 2004: 110)

2 και ἐὰν ἴδῃ ὄφιν ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ, ἐὰν παρείαν, Σαβάζιον καλεῖν, ἐὰν δὲ ἱερόν, ἐνταῦθα ἥρωον εὐθὺς ιδρύσασθαι. (Diggle, 2004: 110)

3 Ξενοκράτης φιλόσοφος ... συνεγράψατο τὸ οἰκοσκοπικὸν οἰώνισμα· ὅτι οἶον, εἰ ἐν τῇ στέγῃ ἐφάνῃ γαλῆ ἢ ὄφις, τότε σημαίνει.

In some cases, the deisidemon might need help from a professional interpreter of the future, who were often treated as magicians (μάγοι) in the Greek tradition (Graf, 2019: 116; for example, Herodotus 1.120.1 – Astyages’ dream, or 7.19.1 – Xerxes’ dream). In the example we already referred to (No. 6), we read that if a mouse nibbles through a superstitious man’s bag, he will visit a professional interpreter to ask him what he should do. Similarly, in No. 11:

When he has a dream he visits not only dream-analysts but also seers and bird-watchers to ask which god or goddess he should pray to. (Diggle, 2004: 112-113)⁴

Here, we should point out that these repeated references to professional interpreters of the future confirm that superstition was interwoven with magic from the very beginning, not just in a later phase of its development. We shall return to this later.

I believe the cited quotations are sufficient to get a general picture of the character of the superstitious man as depicted by Theophrastus. Many people in antiquity probably shared similar beliefs and fears, and many were familiar with similar religious practices, but the behaviour of the superstitious was certainly not totally common. These two were observed and concisely described by James Diggle, the editor of Theophrastus’ text:

“The actions of the superstitious man and his attitudes, taken one by one, would probably not have seemed abnormal to the ordinary Athenian. What sets him apart is the obsessiveness and compulsiveness of his behaviour.” (Diggle, 2004: 350)

This characterization irresistibly reminds us of the definition of the mental illness known in modern psychiatry as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), which is suggested by the collocation *obsessive – compulsive behaviour*. A definition of OCD could be read elsewhere,⁵ but the question of whether and when superstition could be regarded as a mental disorder should be left to the specialists (if there is any interest on their part).

Be that as it may, it is a matter of fact that the Greek authors of the Hellenistic period always describe the superstitious person as someone who feels an exaggerated fear or is even possessed by it. In the first sentence of the chapter on the superstitious man, Theophrastus concisely gives the earliest known definition of superstition:

4 καὶ ὅταν ἐνύπνιον ἴδῃ, πορεύεσθαι πρὸς τοὺς ὄνειροκρίτας, πρὸς τοὺς μάντις, πρὸς τοὺς ὀρνιθοσκόπους, ἐρωτήσων, τίνι θεῶν—ἢ θεᾶ—προσεύχεσθαι δεῖ.

5 <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/obsessive-compulsive-disorder-ocd>. I shall point out that ancient Greek medical science often treated any kind of passion as a disease – of course, not a mental one but a physiological one. Namely, they believed that the cause of the passion of fear (φόβος) was identical to that of the inflammation of the brain (φρενίτις) or shivering (φρίκη) (Tieleman, 2003:192). The reason for making these interconnections seems to be obvious enough: these diseases may cause trembling of the body just as extreme fear can sometimes do.

Superstition would seem to be cowardice with regard to the divine. (Diggle, 2004: 110-111)⁶

This definition is considered commonplace since it can often be found in writings by Hellenistic authors. Many modern scholars think that it was simply deduced from the etymology of the Greek word δεισιδαιμονία, which we have already discussed. This definition, however, should be also understood in the context of Hellenistic ethical philosophy. Hellenistic philosophers normally regarded *deisidemony* as *pathos*, a word usually translated into English as “affection”, “passion” or “emotion” (Tieleman, 2003: 15-16). It should be noted that in the latter case, *pathos* always refers to excessive negative emotions.

This approach was common in Hellenistic philosophy in general but, above all, among the Stoics. They were particularly concerned with affections and developed a theory about them; in addition, many Greek and Latin sources have survived (Long, Sedley, 1987: vol. 1, 410-423, vol. 2, 404-418; Brad I., Donini P., 1999: 699-714). Let us take as an example Chrysippus of Soli, the head of the Athenian Stoic School, who lived in the 3rd century BC.

Chrysippus’ four-book treatise *On Passions* has survived only in fragments: large fragments come from the 1st and the 4th books; very small ones from the 2nd, and from the 3rd book hardly anything survived. According to Chrysippus (and other Stoics), there are four generic affections: pain (λύπη), pleasure (ἡδονή), fear (φόβος) and desire (ἐπιθυμία). They arrived at these four by taking a pair of affections directed to the present and a pair directed to the future, one of each pair involving apparent goods and the other apparent evils. This could be presented in the following manner (Tieleman, 2003: 114):

<i>Time</i>	Present	Future	<i>Object</i>
	Pleasure (ἡδονή)	Desire (ἐπιθυμία)	Apparent good
	Pain (λύπη)	Fear (φόβος)	Apparent evil

Some further clarifications are welcome: “Fear and desire are the primary types; they are concerned with the apparent good and the apparent bad in the future, as objects of striving or avoidance. The other two types also deal with the apparent good and bad, but in a reactive way. Desire is what we feel about what we believe to be good, do not have, and might be able to get; pleasure is what we feel about what we believe to be good and believe we have. Conversely for fear and pain. It is because people are wrong about these values that their reactions are excessive and inappropriate.” (Donini, Inwood, 1999: 700).

Consequently, fear would be what we feel about what we believe to be bad, do not have, and might get in the future. Saying that fear is an affection related to something that will or might happen in the future is in agreement with the definition of fear found already in Aristotle, who in his *Nicomachean*

6 Ἀμέλει ἡ δεισιδαιμονία δόξειεν ἂν εἶναι δειλία πρὸς τὸ δαιμόνιον.

Ethics says that fear is the expectation of evil (Bywater I. 1962: 1115a).⁷ This aspect of *deisidemonia* is not covered by the short definition given by Aristotle's pupil Theophrastus, but all his examples clearly demonstrate that evil is not present, but that it is expected once it is foreshown by a bad omen.

All other existing affections are subsumed under these four generic ones. Many Stoics proposed their own classification of affections, and although the number of affections in each class varies, the classifications do not differ from each other (Long, Sedley, 1987: vol. 1, 410-423, vol. 2, 404-418; Arnim, 1903). Some of the affections of fear in these lists are the following: hesitation (ὄκνος), agony (ἄγωνία), shock (ἐκπλῆξις), shame (αἰσχύνη), panic (θόρυβος), superstition (δαισιδαίμωνία), fright (δέος), and dread (δειῖμα). While some of the affectations listed here are expected and understandable to every modern reader, such as shock and fright, others, such as hesitation and shame, would probably be quite unexpected. In the latter case, a definition might be helpful. For example, hesitation is fear of future activity,⁸ while shame is fear of a bad reputation⁹. Superstition certainly belongs to the former group, namely to the affections expected to appear in the list.

For the pathos of *deisidemonia*, in most cases, one encounters definitions that are similar to that of Theophrastus, but sometimes with interesting additions. Thus, Ioannes Stobaeus defines superstition as “fear of gods and daemons” (Hense, Wachsmuth, 1958: fr. 2.7.10c).¹⁰ It is rare for a distinction between gods and daemons to be explicitly made. Chrysippus has a different kind of addition: “Superstition is fear of the divine or an exaggeration of the worship of gods.”¹¹ (Arnim, 1903: fr. 409.17) The second part of Chrysippus' definition, which is missing elsewhere, is noteworthy because it invokes the descriptions of compulsive reactions of the superstitious given by Theophrastus and confirms that they should by no means be understood as merely satiric and exaggerated, as some scholars do (Bowden, 2008: 58). Yet, it is true that the obsessive behaviour of a superstitious man provided rich material for comedy writers and dramatists, which is confirmed by the fact that Menander, a younger contemporary of Theophrastus, wrote a comedy called *The Superstitious Man* (Δαισιδαίμων), of which only several short fragments survived.

It is possible that the subsequent generations of Stoic philosophers further developed the theory of affections. This is perhaps indicated by the fact that Antipater of Tarsus, the head of the Stoic School in Athens in the second half of the 2nd century BC, wrote a treatise entitled *On Superstition* (Περὶ δαισιδαίμωνίας). It is also possible that this treatise represents this

7 ... τὸν φόβον ὀρίζονται προσδοκίαν κακοῦ.

8 ὄκνος δὲ φόβος μελλούσης ἐνεργείας.

9 αἰσχύνη δὲ φόβος ἀδοξίας.

10 δαισιδαίμωνία δὲ φόβος θεῶν ἢ δαιμόνων.

11 Δαισιδαίμωνία δὲ φόβος τοῦ δαιμονίου ἢ ὑπερέκπτωσις τῆς πρὸς θεοὺς τιμῆς.

author's general interest in religion, which is apparent from some of the titles of his writings now almost entirely lost (Long, Sedley, 1987: vol. 1, 501).

The only preserved ancient treatise on superstition was written by Plutarch of Chaeronea. Plutarch's attitude against superstitious beliefs and practices is so uncompromising that he might have produced this text as a representative of the temple of Apollo in Delphi, where he served as a priest for about three decades. Plutarch's main premise is that atheism and superstition are two vicious extremes in the middle of which the virtue of piety (εὐσέβεια) is positioned. This is a thesis that the Stoics had already developed, as witnessed, for example, by Seneca and the 5th-century anthologist John Stobaeus (e.g. Reynolds, 1965: 533, ep. 123.16; Hense, Wachsmuth, 1958: 147, fr. 2.7.25). But Plutarch argues that superstition is the worse of the two because, unlike atheism, it is accompanied by the passion of fear. Plutarch explained this premise in medias res, namely, in the very first sentence of the treatise:

“Ignorance and blindness in regard to the gods divides itself at the very beginning into two streams, of which the one produces atheism in hardened characters, as it were in stubborn soils, and the other in tender characters, as in moist soils, produces superstition. Every false judgement, and especially concerning these matters, is a mischievous thing; but where emotion [i.e. pathos] also enters, it is most mischievous. For every emotion is likely to be a delusion that rankles; and just as dislocations of the joints accompanied by wounds are hardest to deal with, so also is it with disorders of the soul accompanied by emotion.”¹² (Babbitt, 1962: 455)

Plutarch starts from the idea that theological ignorance produces both atheism and superstition, but which of the two will be produced depends on one's character. Consequently, the major factors that may cause the appearance of superstition are the absence of theological knowledge and a certain quality of human nature.

But what is the role of the *pathos* of fear in Plutarch's view? From the paragraph cited above, it seems that Plutarch claims that *pathos* is a mere addition (in Greek, καὶ πάθος πρόσεστι) that further complicates things. This is also suggested by the last cited sentence, which uses medical imagery: dislocation of the joints is the main problem, while the wounds are just an additional one; similarly, a disorder of the soul is one's main problem, while passion only accompanies it.

12 Τῆς περὶ θεῶν ἀμαθίας καὶ ἀγνοίας εὐθὺς ἐξ ἀρχῆς διχα ρυείσης τὸ μὲν ὥσπερ ἐν χωρίοις σκληροῖς τοῖς ἀντιτύποις ἦθεσι τὴν ἀθεότητα, τὸ δ' ὥσπερ ἐν ὑγροῖς καὶ ἀπαλοῖς τὴν δεισιδαιμονίαν ἐμπεποίηκεν. ἅπαντα μὲν οὖν κρίσις ψευδῆς, ἄλλως τε κὰν ἢ περὶ ταῦτα, μοχθηρόν· ἢ δὲ καὶ πάθος πρόσεστι, μοχθηρότατον. πᾶν γὰρ πάθος ἔοικε ἀπάτη φλεγμαίνουσα εἶναι· καὶ καθάπερ αἱ μετὰ τραύματος ἐκβολαὶ τῶν ἄρθρων, οὕτως αἱ μετὰ πάθους διαστροφαὶ τῆς ψυχῆς χαλεπώτεραι. (Paton, Wegehaupt, 1925: 338; Babbitt, 1962: 454)

However, if one reads the rest of the essay, it becomes clear how much things get worse when superstitious fear is involved. Throughout this work, obsessive superstitious fear occupies the central position; therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to say that it is the main subject of the treatise. Namely, out of 14 chapters, all chapters from the 2nd to the 13th are completely devoted to superstitious fear. In the 3rd chapter, Plutarch argues that all passions and disorders of the soul are “shameful”,¹³ which, in fact, means that they are opposed to virtue. Nevertheless, fear is the worst one, because “it alone”, to cite Plutarch himself, “lacking no less in boldness than in power to reason, keeps its irrationality impotent, helpless, and hopeless”, and “of all kinds of fear the most impotent and helpless is superstitious fear” (Babbitt, 1962: 459).¹⁴ This fear is obviously the most impotent and helpless because it makes the superstitious person completely unable to act.

All in all, it seems that Plutarch’s opinion was that superstition emerges from a false opinion but persists due to excessive fear. And that’s why the priest of Apollo so vehemently attacked superstitious fear in trying to set people free from it.

Some scholars think there is an unbridgeable gap between the superstitious depicted by Theophrastus and the one described by Plutarch. José Luis Calvo Martínez, for example, presented a good deal of data showing that many actions of the superstitious described by Plutarch have parallels in contemporary Egyptian magical papyri (on this see: Dieleman J., 2019), such as prostrations with the face on the ground, wallowing in mud, or the pronunciation of prayers with strange barbaric names and expressions. On the other hand, Martínez argues that such practices were allegedly totally strange to Theophrastus’ *deisidemon* (Martínez, 15?).

However, the aforementioned magical practices – prostrations and invocation of gods – can be found in Theophrastus’ *Characters* as well (Diggle, 2004: 110-111, Nos. 4, 5 and 8). As we have already seen, his superstitious people even invoked at least one barbarian god’s name if they saw a certain kind of snake in their house. Namely, Sabazios was a god of foreign origin whose cult existed in Athens already during the classical period (Diggle, 2004: 356, with references). The goddess Hecate, who was venerated already in the early Greek religion (Rudloff, 1999) but did not play a significant role in magic and theurgic rituals until the Roman period (Johnston, 1990), for which she is mostly known today, appears in writings by both authors. Superstitious men described by Theophrastus and Plutarch are equally disturbed by dreams and go to dream interpreters (Diggle, 2004: 110-111, Nos. 6 and 11; Babbitt, 1962: 461; Paton, Wegehaupt, 1925: 341).

Theophrastus’ and Plutarch’s superstitious characters have a lot in common, and I cannot detect a good reason to characterize the former as

13 Αἰσχρὰ μὲν δὴ πάντα τὰ τῆς ψυχῆς νοσήματα καὶ πάθη. (Paton, Wegehaupt, 1925: 339)

14 Φόβων δὲ πάντων ἀπρακτότατος καὶ ἀπορώτατος ὁ φόβος τῆς δεισιδαιμονίας (Paton, Wegehaupt, 1925: 340).

“light deisidemony” or a “soft version of superstition” and the latter as “vicious deisidemony that blinds reason, leads to the search for wizards and then to hateful practices that can induce atheism in those who suffer from it” (Martínez, 16). As I have shown above, Theophrastus’ superstitious man is always afraid and seriously obsessed and compulsive. He is also inevitably involved in a kind of magic, just as his counterpart described in Plutarch’s treatise. The most remarkable difference between them is, of course, the context in which they live, but it is certainly less important than the similarities that seem to be crucial.

I shall now turn to another piece of Greek literature: the dialog by Lucian of Samosata entitled Φιλοψεύδης ἢ ἀπιστῶν, translated into English as *Lover of Lies*. The word δεισιδαιμονία appears only twice in the dialog, in its closing chapters, but it is quite clear that superstition is its central topic. The dialog had three parts of unequal length. In the introduction (chapters 1–5), two friends, Philocles and Tychiades, are talking, trying to answer the question of why people believe so much in lies. In doing so, they refer to several stories well known through Herodotus, Ktesias, or Homer, as well as the popular and official legends of Greek cities such as Athens or Thebes. They agree that one could understand why poets and cities believe in lies: the former do so in order to adorn their literary compositions and make them more attractive to the reader, while the latter do so for prestige. For both interlocutors, however, the more important question is: why do learned people, namely philosophers, believe in lies as well?

In the central part of the dialog (chapters 6–39), Tychiades recounts how, earlier that day, he had visited a wise, old and ill man called Eucrates in his house, where he was involved in a discussion on strange beliefs. Besides Tychiades and Eucrates, there are five other participants: four are adherents of various philosophical schools (a peripatetic, a Platonist, a Stoic, and a Pythagorean), while the fifth is a doctor. This part of the dialog consists of a series of interesting, fantastic short stories about supernatural phenomena that each participant, except for Tychiades, witnessed more than once in his life. After listening to them for hours, Tychiades complained to his friend that he was feeling like those who drank too much wine and needed to vomit and that he would like to forget everything he had heard.

In fact, the dialog provides abundant evidence of religious syncretism of the 2nd century AD since a magician mentioned was a Babylonian, another a Hyperborean, another a Syrian from Palestine, another Arabian, and so on. We are told not only about magicians and wizards and the sacred or holy names and “barbarian expressions” they used and the “old books” they have in their possession but also about the in-person presence of the goddess Hecate in a session and the Moon that dropped from the sky by a magical ritual. A love magic session that took place under a fool moon and lasted from midnight till the break of dawn is described. There are also stories of inanimate walking

statues, and how the souls of the dead were invoked, or how a magician healed an ill person, in all probability an epileptic, while those who were present saw a black and grey spirit leaving the ailing person's body.

What Plutarch had just hinted at Lucian expressed quite clearly some half a century later: extremely developed religious syncretism and the omnipresence of magic. As such, the dialog is undoubtedly a valuable source for the historian of religion. Even though the participants and events are not real and the work is satirical, I believe that it is based on real social experience.

I already mentioned that Lucian used the word *deisidemony* only towards the end of the dialog, and then as a generic term: all previously described beliefs and magical practices are designated as ποικίλαι δεισιδαιμονίαι, "manifold deisidemonies". However, the central term used by Lucian is ψεῦδος, which literally means "lie" but should be understood as what is false or opposite to the truth, "fallacy, delusion". The terms ψεῦδος and δεισιδαιμονία are synonymous in this dialog, but Lucian prefers the term ψεῦδος, perhaps because, for him, superstition does not have as much to do with the emotion of fear (pathos) and the related reactions to it as with fallacious cause-and-effect relations and beliefs.

The shift detected here in Lucian's satire is very important for understanding the process of the gradual dissolution of the original Hellenistic concept of deisidemony. It should be noted, however, that this idea can be found in earlier authors. Cicero already in *On the Nature of the Gods* labeled popular perceptions of the Roman deities as "fictitious and imaginary", adding that they "have been the foundation of false opinions, pernicious errors, and wretched superstitions" (Plasberg, 1917: 77, 2.70)¹⁵. We have already seen above that Plutarch also thought that "ignorance and blindness in regard to the gods" can lead to superstition, but he, in line with the traditional Hellenistic approach, emphasized the role of fear. Cicero thought, like Plutarch, that the gods require from humans only pious adoration, not fear, adding that "all fear of the power and anger of the Gods should be banished, for we must understand that anger and affection are inconsistent with the nature of a happy and immortal being" (Mayor, Swainson, 2009: 93, 1.17)¹⁶. Seneca, as a Stoic, emphasized that superstition is the passion of fear (e.g. Reynolds, 1965: ep. 121; Martin, 2004: 127). These two examples illustrate how Roman thinkers of the late republican and early imperial era were strongly uninfluenced by the Hellenistic concept of δεισιδαιμονία. On

15 Videtisne igitur ut a physicis rebus bene atque utiliter inventis tracta ratio sit ad commenticios et fictos deos. Quae res genuit falsas opinionones erroresque turbulentos et superstitiones paene aniles.

16 Si nihil aliud quaereremus, nisi ut deos pie coleremus et ut superstitione liberaremur, satis erat dictum; nam et praestans deorum natura hominum pietate coleretur, cum et aeterna esset et beatissima (habet enim venerationem justam, quicquid excellit), et metus omnis a vi atque ira deorum pulsus esset; intellegitur enim a beata immortalique natura et iram et gratiam segregari.

the other hand, it seems that the gradual disappearance of the Hellenistic concept was significantly encouraged by the development of the meaning of the conception of superstition in the imperial period. As the Empire expanded, the epithet superstitious was often applied to various exotic non-Roman religious groups, regardless of whether they were Egyptians, Scythes, Jews, or Christians. In that way, its meaning became more collective, referring to the “religion of others” in pejorative terms rather than to an individual Roman’s inappropriate or exaggerated religious attitudes. (Martin, 2004: 125-139; O’Neil, 2005: 8864)

This new usage of the word δεισιδαιμονία in the sense of a “fallacious opinion or religious belief” found particularly fertile ground in the polemics between Christians and pagans from the 3rd century AD onward. For example, in his treatise *Against Celsus* (Frede, 1999: 131–155), Origen regularly labels the teachings of various philosophers and pagan beliefs and religious practices as superstitious (e.g. Borret, 1969: 5.35; Martin, 2004: 140-186). Although Celsus, for his part, does not describe Christians as superstitious (δεισιδαίμονες), he actually appropriates what had by his time become traditional philosophical critiques of aspects of Greek and “barbarian” religion, designated usually as deisidemony, and turns them against Christianity (Martin, 2004: 140).

Conclusion. Starting from the idea that the notion of superstition varied across different historical periods and contexts, in this paper I tried to re-examine the main characteristics of the earliest phase in the historical development of superstition, namely its Hellenistic concept. I designate this unique concept of deisidemony as Hellenistic and not Greek because the historical evidence plainly shows that this concept emerged only in the early Hellenistic era with Theophrastus, as well as that it gradually, but probably not so slowly, disappeared in the early imperial period to be replaced by various and not strictly defined conceptions. My research focused on several sources that, in my opinion, reveal the main characteristics of the concept of deisidemony. Firstly, I underlined that Theophrastus’ depiction of a *deisidemon* equally insists on both fear of demons/gods and a variety of magical and/or ritual practices that the superstitious usually perform in order to expel the threat foreshown by a bad omen. On the other hand, his definition of deisidemony completely overlooks this second component of superstition, revealing his definition as less reliable than his description of the character.

Similarly, later Hellenistic philosophers based their definitions of superstition exclusively on the passion of fear, almost entirely neglecting its magical and ritual component. Surprising as it may seem, their omission is also understandable because their intention was not to provide a precise definition of deisidemony. Namely, all preserved “definitions” were made for the purpose of classifying various kinds of the passion of fear, and deisidemony

was considered one of them. In Plutarch's treatise *On Superstition*, the only preserved ancient essay dealing with superstition, the passion of fear also occupies a central place, but the magical component is detected and criticized as well. Other ancient authors who disliked the widespread practice of magic included the satirist Lucian. It seems to me, however, that magic was not fully treated until later, by Christian authors, who uncompromisingly fought against it, albeit not always successfully.

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