

THESES OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

PHLEGON'S MARVELLOUS STORIES

DÓRA PATARICZA

SUPERVISOR: DR. GYÖRGY NÉMETH



**UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN
FACULTY OF ART AND HUMANITIES
DOCTORAL SCHOOL IN LINGUISTIC SCIENCES
DOCTORAL PROGRAMME IN CLASSICAL PHILOLOGY**

DEBRECEN 2010

I. Aims of the dissertation

The dissertation consists of three major chapters: in the first part a detailed biography of Phlegon and a short introduction of the genre of paradoxography can be read. The second part is made up of the translation of Phlegon's *Peri thaumasion* and Proclus' writing¹ which is closely connected to the former. The third part is a detailed commentary in which I tried to focus on every part of the text. Comprehensive studies precede each chapter of the commentary.

The structure of Phlegon's *Peri thaumasion*:

1–3: ghost stories

4–10: hermaphrodites, sex-changers

11–19: discoveries of giant bones

20–25: monstrous births

26–27: men giving birth

28–31: multiple births

32–33: abnormally rapid development

34–35: living hippocentaurs discovered

The first three stories in many respects form a separate part within the work. I discussed different readings of the text in the commentary, as well as trying to solve philological problems and those concerning interpretation. In addition, my aim was to summarize and include all results produced since the last edition of 2004. The commentary contains introductory and overall studies that were not or scarcely discussed yet (e.g. male pregnancy, ancient aspects of teratology etc.).

William Hansen's (Hansen, W. (ed.): *Phlegon of Tralles' Book of Marvels*. Exeter, 1996.), Kai Brodersen's (Brodersen, K. (ed.): *Phlegon von Tralleis – Das Buch der Wunder*. Darmstadt, 2002.) and Rein Ferwerda's (Ferwerda, R. (ed.): *Phlegon van Tralles. Wonderbaarlijke verschijnselen*. Budel, 1994.) editions of Phlegon's text were a basic help to me, and in addition I used the earlier and recent literature of each topic.

¹ Proclus, *Comm. In Plat. Rem Publ.* II.116.2-17.

II. Research methods

When examining Phlegon's work, the greatest difficulty is that the facts mingle with the author's fantasy, and they become not only distorted but are also blended into the products of the writer's imagination. In order to be able to use these sources as a basis for any scientific deduction, first it has to be decided if and how the certain writer reflects contemporary material and human reality.

One of the main characteristics of paradoxography is focusing on extraordinary features and often exaggeration is used in order to catch the audience's attention. According to scientific opinion, his works are so alien from contemporary reality that no substantive information can be drawn from them, thus Phlegon's works are inauthentic from a scientific point of view. When examining this problem, I followed Karl Popper's principle of falsification. I analysed in detail all of the 35 stories to find out if Phlegon's seemingly fantastic descriptions may have a basic collatable to scientifically proven data so that we can at least say that the individual wondrous stories can be given an explanation derived from the level of contemporary scientific knowledge as *baseis* of an existing event or discoveries.

It has to be emphasized that on the one hand these theories that might have formed a core of truth of the stories cannot be proved, on the other hand it has to be taken into consideration that the author exaggerated, but the extent of it cannot be known for sure. My aim was not to prove the veritableness of Phlegon's stories on the basis of Karl Popper's falsification theory but to take into consideration that it is not definite that they are not true. This way we can find an explanation for most of the stories, a real background that might have served as a basis for these strange descriptions.

III. Summary of novel scientific results

III.1. Study on the genre of paradoxography

Paradoxography is a genre which describes and collects strange, marvellous and abnormal natural or human phenomena (Greek: θαυμάσια or παράδοξα, Latin: *mirabilia*) which differ in certain aspects from the usual, thus they seem to be of interest to the author and the reader as well. The first occurrence of the word „paradoxography” can be found in Tzetzes' work (*Chil.* II.35.151.). It was Anton Westermann who first canonized authors of paradoxography in 1839 in his work entitled *ΠΑΡΑΔΟΞΟΓΡΑΦΟΙ: Scriptores rerum*

mirabilium Graeci. Writers who are considered as „serious” (*auctores seriores* – e.g. Aelianus or Pliny) often described certain events that could have been listed as paradoxographic works, nevertheless they are not regarded as paradoxographers.²

The antecedent of paradoxography can be found as early as in the works of Homer. Several places of the Iliad mention extraordinary rivers, strange peoples etc.³ Certain references in the Odyssey are in many respects similar to paradoxographic stories of later times.⁴ Herodotus was the first ancient author to depict consciously and in detail many wondrous events, fascinating folkloristic features and habits and outstanding artistic products.⁵ In Giannini’s point of view the roots of paradoxography can be traced back to the wide-eyed curiosity of the Ionic world.⁶

In the Hellenistic period, the Greek world’s horizon spectacularly opened up due to the conquests of Alexander the Great. Zoological, botanical phenomena appeared that had never been seen before. Out of the ordinary social customs became known. This could have contributed to the fact that paradoxography as an independent genre developed right in the 3rd century BC. The first significant representative of this new genre was Callimachus of Cyrene (ca. 305–240 BC), and it was he who first collected stories that seemed to him remarkable from a certain respect.

Roman paradoxographical writings – unlike the Greek – usually quoted these strange stories in a different way, including them in other, more serious works, such as descriptions of history, geography, travels etc. M. Terentius Varro’s *Logistorici: Gallus Fundanius de admirandis* and Cicero’s *Admiranda* (the latter is unfortunately lost but is supposed to be about similar topics) belonged to this category.⁷ Even in later times paradoxographical writings were still composed. The 4th century writer, Julius Obsequens collected fantastical stories of Livy in his work entitled *Liber prodigiorum*.

Paradoxography as a genre was unnoticed and despised, even in the 2nd half of the 20th century. It was considered as a symptom of decay, a degeneration of the original healthy

² Wenskus, O.: Paradoxographoi. In: *Der Neue Pauly* Vol. 9., Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2003, 309.

³ Homer, *Ilias* II.752 ff.; XXII.147 ff. and XIII.4.

⁴ Homéros *Odysseia* X.303. ff.; IV.85. ff. etc.

⁵ eg. customs: Book II of Herodotus; waters: IV.52. and 85., animals: IV.28. etc..

⁶ Giannini, A.: *Studi sulla paradossografia greca. I. Da Omero a Callimacco: motivi e forme del meraviglioso*. (Rend. Lett. 97), Milano: Istituto Lombardo di Scienze e Lettere, 1963, 255.

⁷ Delcroix, K.: Ancient Paradoxography: Origin, Evolution, Production and Reception. Part II. The Roman Period. In: Pecere, O., Stramaglia, A. (eds.): *La letteratura di consumo nel mondo greco-latino*. Cassino: Università degli studi di Cassino, 1996, 429.

spirit of curiosity.⁸ The main objection against it was that paradoxography is of lower quality than historiography and scientific literature, and the sole aim of it was entertainment. This view might be true but another sort of approach should be applied and its merits have to be acknowledged as well. These writings also reflect their time and they may shed some light on the audience.

It has to be emphasized that paradoxography is not a collection of historical and ethnographical writings of lower quality, but rather literature for entertainment which might have been used for education as well. It is a kind of popular literature which was probably easily accessible to many, which focuses on content rather than style, thus it is easier to understand for uneducated readers or audience. This kind of entertaining literature was mainly intended for *hoi polloi* but at the same time the reading of such works might be appealing and relaxing for the educated as well.⁹ A short story of Aulus Gellius (*Noctes Atticae* 9.4.), who lived shortly after Phlegon, makes it clear how important such paradoxographic texts were in antiquity, since an informed person had to be familiar with these too.

Phlegon's literary activity took place in the early period of the Roman Empire, when minor genres became more and more widespread and new genres attracted a broader range of audience. Novel types of literature developed: prose romance, picaresque novels, pornographic writings and stories of wondrous events. At this time the novel – as a narrative genre – lost of its traditionally high standard in Roman literature. People started paying attention to stories about individuals, and in addition the private sphere came to the fore, which made it possible that certain genres not appreciated until that time became widespread.¹⁰ Phlegon's work fits perfectly into this frame, since human beings were at the centre of his writing – unlike other paradoxographic authors.

We scarcely know anything about the addressees. We can only assume that a wide, socially complex group might have been interested in this genre. Certain writers of paradoxography who were connected to the imperial court, presumably wrote their works as commanded by the ruler. Others – e.g. Callimachos – probably collected the wonders for themselves, maybe as a basis for later works. The third kind of target audience must definitely have been common people, although there are no references in the works to this. The original

⁸ Schepens, G.: Ancient Paradoxography: Origin, Evolution, Production and Reception. Part I. The Hellenistic Period. In: Pecere, O., Stramaglia, A. (eds.): *La letteratura di consumo nel mondo greco-latino*. Cassino: Università degli studi di Cassino, 1996, 378.

⁹ Hansen, W. (ed.): *Phlegon of Tralles' Book of Marvels*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996, 9-10.

¹⁰ Von Albrecht, M.: *A római irodalom története*. [History of the Roman literature] Vol. 2. Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2004, 962. and 703.

multitude of paradoxographical works indicates that this genre was wanted.¹¹ However, it remains unclear which of the three above audiences decided the characteristics of the paradoxographic texts.

I imagine that Phlegon's work was read by a wide range of people. References to this include references the aim of which is authentication, the simple language, the theme itself, as well as the contemporary spirit of the age which developed innovation in literary genres. However, all of this remains theory since there are no direct ancient references to the reading of Phlegon's text.

III.2. Study on Phlegon's life and work

Not much is known of Phlegon (the meaning of his name is „burning” from the Greek word φλέγω). The Byzantine encyclopaedia, the Suda compiled in the 10th century AD gives only a short description of his life: „*Of Tralles, freedman of Augustus Caesar, who was also called Hadrian: historian. He wrote Olympiads in 16 books. Up to the 229th Olympiad they contain everything that was done anywhere and about the same in short in 8 books. He also wrote: A description of Sicily, On long-lived persons and marvels, On the feasts of the Romans in 3 books, On the places of Rome and by what names they are called, Epitome of Olympic victors in 2 books, and other things...*”¹²

Being a freedman of Hadrian, Phlegon probably held the names of the emperor after the liberation, according to Roman customs, thus he was called Publius Aelius Phlegon. It is not clear when and why he was freed, since his life can be reconstructed only fragmentally.¹³ Only three of the above mentioned works survived, bearing the Greek titles Περὶ μακροβίων καὶ θαυμασίων, which in reality must have been intended as two works (however based on the title mentioned in the Suda, it can be assumed that originally they were part of the same oeuvre). These two writings follow each other in the Codex Palatinus Graecus 398 of Heidelberg in the opposite sequence. He authored a third work about Olympiads, mentioned in the Suda under the title Ὀλυμπιάς containing 16 books which is left to us only in fragments.

¹¹ Schepens, G.: Ancient Paradoxography: Origin, Evolution, Production and Reception. Part I. The Hellenistic Period. In: Pecere, O., Stramaglia, A. (eds.): *La letteratura di consumo nel mondo greco-latino*. Cassino: Università degli studi di Cassino, 1996, 403-408.

¹² Suda, s.v. *Phi.527.1*. (transl. by Dóra Pataricza)

¹³ Fein, S.: *Die Beziehungen der Kaiser Trajan und Hadrian zu den litterati*. (Beiträge zur Altertumskunde 26) Stuttgart–Leipzig: Teubner, 1994, 193.

References to Hadrian allude to close connections, so it can be assumed that he was familiar in the emperor's court. At the same time, it was rumoured that Hadrian was the author of Phlegon's writings, whereas the *Historia Augusta* says in an other place that it was Phlegon who composed a book on Hadrian.¹⁴ At least, it seems to be probable that Hadrian's itinerary was authored by Phlegon,¹⁵ moreover he made use of his notes when writing the 15th-16th book of his *Olympiads*.¹⁶ Phlegon might have survived Hadrian, since he finished this latter book with the story of the 229th Olympics (137–140 AD), thus his work was probably published only after the death of Hadrian.¹⁷

All of his works survived in one single issue, the *Codex Palatinus Graecus 398* (composed in the 9th-10th century in Constantinople), which is currently held in the Universitätsbibliothek in Heidelberg. The codex is part of the so-called philosophical collection, in which presumably certain philosophical and scientific works of the Alexandrian collection were copied.¹⁸ Thus *Codex Palatinus Graecus* became a unique collection of the works of mythographers, paradoxographers, epistolographers and minor geographers.¹⁹

After the copy, which probably happened in the 10th century, Phlegon's oeuvre next appeared in the 16th century, in 1568. At the time similar books, collecting natural rarities and curiosities were very fashionable all over Europe. However, Hungary was not among these countries, thus until recently no one was ever engaged in Phlegon and his work (except the Philinnion-story which was translated in 1959 by József Révay).

Phlegon, alongside the genre of paradoxography, was given poor reviews by literary criticism until the 20th century. It has to be pointed out that the paradoxographical aspect of Phlegon's works differs from those of other authors since he was mainly interested in sensationalistic wonders. Phlegon and all the other writers of paradoxography made an effort to authenticate his writings, using more methods: he dated almost all of his stories and he

¹⁴ *Historia Augusta* I.16.1. and *Historia Augusta* XXIX.7.4.

¹⁵ Frank, E.: Phlegon. In: *Realencyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft* Vol. 20., Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1941, 263.

¹⁶ Birley, A. R.: Hadrian „de vita sua”. In: Reichel, M. (ed.): *Antike Autobiographien. Werke-Epochen-Gattungen*. Köln: Böhlau, 2005, 233-234. See also Birley, A. R.: *Hadrian: The restless Emperor*. London: Routledge, 2000, 151.

¹⁷ Fein, S.: *Die Beziehungen der Kaiser Trajan und Hadrian zu den litterati*. Stuttgart–Leipzig: Teubner, 1994, 197.

¹⁸ Cavallo, G.: Da Alessandria a Constantinopoli? Qualche riflessione sulla collezione filosofica. In: *Segno e Testo* 3 (2005), 253.

¹⁹ Stramaglia, A.: Sul peri thaumasion di Flegonte. In: *Studi classici e orientali* 45 (1995), 191-192.

tried to set his stories in his own age giving an illusory possibility for the reader to check the truth of his accounts. On the other hand, he tried to present the curiosities in fine details.²⁰

It is difficult to give a definite answer to the question of Phlegon's aim and why Phlegon was more interested in human phenomena than natural wonders. We can assume that just as nowadays people are concerned with bizarre, strange, unusual and sensational events, the same was true for the ancients. Phlegon might focused on the human nature in his writings with an intention to innovate.²¹

III.3. The core of truth

According to certain modern approaches, the short so-called *paradoxon* focusing on strange, unusual events can also be regarded as a way of discovery and inspection.²² Enthusiasm towards curiosities has been part of everyday life for a long time and many, seemingly unbelievable stories of ancient origin survived that are worth of examining from a scientific point of view. This kind of realistic attitude allows us to sift out data from the descriptions that are otherwise not available.²³

I tried to detect the core of truth in each of the stories (except the ghost stories 1-3.), i.e. a possible explanation that could have been a basis for these seemingly impossible stories. In this research I used medical books and handbooks on history of medicine and paleontology. Professionals in certain fields have cross-checked each of the statements of the dissertaion. A summary containing all possible basic theories for each story can be seen in the following table:

	story's title	Does the story possibly have a reality core?	if yes, how can it be explained?	If yes, is there any exaggeration	similar story
<i>ghosts</i>					
1	Philinnion	no			
2	Polykritos the Aitolarch	no			
3	Bouplagos and Publius	no (in the case of Buplagos: maybe - meaning of the word ΕΤΡΕΟ)			

²⁰ Delcroix, K.: Ancient Paradoxography: Origin, Evolution, Production and Reception. Part II. The Roman Period. In: Pecere, O., Stramaglia, A. (eds.): *La letteratura di consumo nel mondo greco-latino*. Cassino: Università degli studi di Cassino, 1996, 431-432.

²¹ Wenskus, O.: Paradoxographoi. In: *Der Neue Pauly* Vol. 9., Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 440.

²² Humphreys, S. C.: Fragments, fetishes, and philosophies: Towards a history of Greek historiography after Thucydides. In: Most, Glenn W. (ed.): *Collecting fragments–Fragmente sammeln (Aporemata* Vol. 1.). Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997, 220.

²³ Mayor, A.: *The first fossil hunters. Paleontology in Greek and Roman times*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, 148.

	story's title	Does the story possibly have a reality core?	if yes, how can it be explained?	If yes, is there any exaggeration	similar story
sex changers and hermaphrodites					
4	Teiresias	maybe	shamans - women's clothes, prediction		eg. Apollodorus <i>Bibliotheca</i> 3.6.7.; Ovid <i>Metamorphoses</i> 3.316-339; Hyginus <i>Fabulae</i> 75.
5	Kainis	maybe	metamorphosis with transvestite rituals		Diodorus Siculus 32.11.1-4.
6	an unnamed maiden	yes	pseudo-hermaphroditism or hypospadias (he seems to be feminine, but is in reality masculine)	yes (sudden change)	
7	Philotis	yes	pseudo-hermaphroditism or hypospadias (he seems to be feminine, but is in reality masculine)	yes (sudden change)	
8	Sympherosa	yes	pseudo-hermaphroditism or hypospadias (he seems to be feminine, but is in reality masculine)		Philodemus <i>De Signis</i> 4 de lacy
9	Aitete	yes	pseudo-hermaphroditism or hypospadias (he seems to be feminine, but is in reality masculine)		Pliny <i>NH</i> VII.4.36.
10	Sibylline oracles	yes (birth of an intersexual baby)			
finds of giant bones					
11	Idas	yes	1. skeleton of a person having suffered from acromegaly/gigantism; 2. remains of extinct species of the Pleistocene	yes (two sets of teeth)	eg. Pliny, Philostratus, Herodotos, Pausanias, Strabo, Augustinus
12	the cave of Artemis	yes	1. skeleton of a person having suffered from acromegaly/gigantism; 2. remains of extinct species of the Pleistocene	yes (size, no remains are known from the territory of Dalmatia)	eg. Pliny, Philostratus, Herodotos, Pausanias, Strabo, Augustinus
13	giant tooth 1.	yes			eg. Pliny <i>NH</i> VII.16.73.
14	giant tooth 2.	yes	remains of extinct species of the Pleistocene	yes (size of the tooth)	Augustinus <i>De civitate Dei</i> XV.9.
15	Nitriai	yes	remains of extinct species of the Pleistocene	yes (size)	
16	Rhodes	yes	remains of extinct species of the Pleistocene	yes (size, long life)	
17	the coffin of Makroseiris	yes	1. skeleton of a person having suffered from acromegaly/gigantism; 2. remains of extinct species of the Pleistocene	yes (size)	Herodotos 1.68.
18	Carthage	yes	1. skeleton of a person having suffered from acromegaly/gigantism; 2. remains of extinct species of the Pleistocene	yes (size)	
19	Bosporos	yes	remains of an extinct species of the Elephanidae or that of a rhinoceros	yes (size)	
monstrous births					
20	multiple features 1.	yes	Siamese twins	yes	Julius Obsequens <i>Liber prodigiorum</i> 12.
21	multiple features 2.	yes	Siamese twins, tumour, encephalocele	no	
22	child resembling a monkey	yes	microcephaly, premature baby, hairy baby (hypertrichosis)	yes	Pliny <i>NH</i> VII.3.34.
23	child having a head of Anubis	no			Julius Obsequens <i>Liber prodigiorum</i> 14.; Livy XXVII.11.
24	woman giving birth to snakes	yes	sirenomelia		Pliny <i>NH</i> VII.3.34., Appian <i>B. Civ.</i> 1.83.
25	two-headed baby	yes	Siamese twins	maybe (frequency?)	
men giving birth					
26	homosexual man giving birth	yes	pseudo-hermafroditismus femininus, Stein-Leventhal syndrome, masculine woman	yes (intersexual person is called a man)	
27	male slave giving birth	yes	pseudo-hermafroditismus femininus, Stein-Leventhal syndrome, masculine woman	yes (intersexual person is called a man)	
multiple births					
28	Alexandrian woman	yes	triplets, quadruplets etc.	probably (quadruplets, quintuplets could not have survived birth)	Antigonos <i>Hist. Mir.</i> 110.1.; Julius Obsequens <i>Liber prodigiorum</i> 14.; Pliny <i>NH</i> VII.3.33-34.; Ps.-Aristotle <i>Mir. Ausc.</i> 80.; Aulus Gellius <i>NA</i> X.2.1.
29	another Alexandrian woman	yes	quintuplets	probably (quintuplets could not have survived birth)	<i>Digesta</i> V.4.3.
30	Agyptos	no			mythology
31	Danaos	no			mythology
abnormally rapid development					
32	unnamed male	yes	pubertas praecox, fusarium-contamination	yes (producing children?)	
33	women in Pandaia	yes	pubertas praecox, fusarium-contamination	yes (producing children?)	Pliny <i>NH</i> VII.2.22-23, 29.; Arrian <i>Historia Indica</i> VIII.5-6
living hippocentaur discovered					
34	hippocentaur 1.	yes	fraud	yes (hippocentaur captured alive)	Lucian <i>Alexander</i> 7.; Plutarchos <i>Sulla</i> 27.; Pausanias IX.21.1.
35	hippocentaur 2.	yes	fraud	yes (more hippocentaurs)	

IV. The possible usefulness of the results

None of the paradoxographical works was translated into Hungarian until now, thus Phlegon's writing is the first one. Not only classical-philologists might be interested in Phlegon's work and the commentary, but also medical historians. His works should be included in studies of history of congenital disorders. His stories about teratological curiosities can be used as statistical data for medical historians. Similarly, topics of paleontological interest should be taken into account for the history of paleontology. Since Phlegon exclusively wrote about human curiosities, his writings can be of interest for the modern reader as well.

V. List of publications related to the dissertation

Studies

- [1.] PATARICZA DÓRA: *Palaiphatos: Földre szállt mítoszok*. [translation and commentary of Palaephatus' *Peri apiston*] In: BAJNOK DÁNIEL – PATARICZA DÓRA – NÉMETH GYÖRGY – RUZSA KATA: *Palaiphatos: Földre szállt mítoszok*. Szeged: Lectum Kiadó, 2008. (ISBN 978-963-964-018-4)
- [2.] PATARICZA DÓRA: *Palaiphatos élete*. [Life of Palaephatus] In: BAJNOK DÁNIEL – PATARICZA DÓRA – NÉMETH GYÖRGY – RUZSA KATA: *Palaiphatos: Földre szállt mítoszok*. Szeged: Lectum Kiadó, 2008, 111–115. (ISBN 978-963-964-018-4)
- [3.] PATARICZA DÓRA: *Hérakleitos, a paradoxográfus élete*. [Life of Heraclitus the paradoxographer] In: BAJNOK DÁNIEL – PATARICZA DÓRA – NÉMETH GYÖRGY – RUZSA KATA: *Palaiphatos: Földre szállt mítoszok*. Szeged: Lectum Kiadó, 2008, 115–117. (ISBN 978-963-964-018-4)
- [4.] DÓRA PATARICZA: Phlegon and the giants. In: *Kalendae. Studia sollemnia in memoriam Johannis Sarkady*. (Hungarian Polis Studies 16.) Budapest–Debrecen, 2008, 271–282. (ISBN 978-963-473-138-2)
- [5.] DÓRA PATARICZA: Father or mother? Stories of male pregnancies in Phlegon's *De mirabilibus*. In: *Acta Classica Debreceniensis* 45 (2009), 129–133. (ISSN 0418-453X)
- [6.] DÓRA PATARICZA: Ancient cases of congenital disorders and their social causes In: *Acta Classica Debreceniensis* 46 (2010) (accepted for publication) (ISSN 0418-453X)
- [7.] PATARICZA DÓRA: Phlegón szörnyszülöttei. [Phlegon's monsters] In: *Orvostörténeti Közlemények* 210–213 (2010) (accepted for publication) (ISSN 0010-3551)

Conference

- [1.] 8th Hungarian Conference on Ancient Studies (22-25 May, 2008., Szeged)
Poster, title: *Phlegón és a dinoszauruszok – fikció vagy valóság?*
[Phlegon and the dinosaurs – Fiction or truth]