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PLUTARCH'S PERCEPTION OF PLATO'S POLITICAL ACTIVITIES IN SYRACUSE

In this paper I want to discuss Plutarch's perception of Plato's political activities in Syracuse in 366 and in 361 BC. Plutarch's view of Plato's actions is contrasted with relevant passages in the Seventh and Eighth Platonic Epistles[1], the *Bibliothèkè* of Diodorus Siculus, Nepos' Dion biography, and contemporary second century AD opinions on the attitude that wise men should display toward tyrants and monarchs.

In his *bios* of Dion Plutarch elaborates upon a famous Platonic statement: only if philosophers will become rulers of cities or rulers philosophers, and political power will be united with wisdom, political misery may come to an end and a good state structure may come into being[2]. In *Dion* 1.3 Plutarch says, significantly omitting *en tais polesin* from his abbreviated version of this Platonic statement:

> "And we need not wonder that, in the performance of actions that were often kindred and alike, they (*i.e.* Dion and Brutus) bore witness to the doctrine of their teacher in virtue, that wisdom and justice must be united with power and good fortune if public careers are to take on beauty as well as grandeur (*kallos hama kai megethos*)".

In an anachronistic way Plutarch does not speak of constitutions of *poleis*, but of public careers in a stabilized imperial situation.

In his *Dion* Plutarch tells us that Plato visited Syracuse three times, first in 388, during the tyranny of Dionysius I, then in 367-366, after the old tyrant's death, and at last in 361-360[3]. In 388 Plato may have come to Syracuse by sheer coincidence,

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1 In my opinion the Seventh and Eighth Epistles are authentic. See G.J.D. AALDERS, "The Authenticity of the Eighth Platonic Epistle Reconsidered", *Mnemosyne,* IV 22 (1969), pp. 233-257; L.DE BLOIS, "Some Notes on Plato's Seventh Epistle", *Mnemosyne,* IV 32 (1979), pp. 268-283.

2 See Plutarch, *Dion* 1.3; *cf.* Plato, *Resp.* V 473D and *Ep.* VII, 326AB.

3 On Plato's visits to Syracuse see Plato, *Ep.* VII, 327A-330B; 338A-340A; 345C-350B; Nepos, *Dion,* 2.2 f.; 3.1-5.1; Plutarch, *Dion* 4-5, 10-14, 16, 18-20. See K.VON FRITZ, *Platon in Sizilien und das Problem der Philosophenherrschaft*, Berlin, 1968, pp. 5-62 and S.N. CONSOLO LANGHER, *Un imperialismo tra democrazia e tirannide. Siracusa nei secoli V e IV a.C.*, Rome, 1997, pp. 143 ff.

A. PÉREZ JIMÉNEZ, J. GARCÍA LÓPEZ & R. Mª AGUILAR (Eds.), ***Plutarco, Platón y Aristóteles. Actas del V Congreso Internacional de la I.P.S. (Madrid-Cuenca, 4-7 de mayo de 1999)*, Madrid, 1999.**

after having visited some philosophical and political friends in Southern Italy (Nepos, *Dion* 2.2). Plato met Dion, who was one of the tyrant's relatives, improved Dion's character and behaviour, and annoyed the tyrant by his free speech about tyranny, justice, and happiness. Apparently the only lasting result of this visit was Plato's lifelong friendship with Dion. Like Plato Dion started to speak freely and to behave moderately, although he spent his days in the service of the tyranny and lived the life of a *grand seigneur*. Plutarch implies that he acted in a more independent way than the flattering courtiers of Dionysius I did.

In 367-366, after the old tyrant's death and the enthronement of his son Dionysius II, which Dion had vainly tried to stave off, Plato came to Syracuse again. Dionysius II tried to mitigate the régime and to give it a broader base than the loyalty of the mercenaries alone[4]. After his succesion to the throne, for which he had the mercenaries to thank (Iustinus, 21.1), he convened the popular assembly and solicited the people's favour, their *eunoia* (Diod., 15.74.5). Apparently he strove after a monarchy based on goodwill, not on fear and terror. Iustinus 21.1 also indicates that he pardoned 3000 prisoners and remitted taxes for three years. Exiles were invited to return to Syracuse; among them was a former commander of Dionysius I, Philistus (Plutarch, *Dion* 11.3-12.1). Having lost a battle at sea (Diod., 15.73.3 f.) Dionysius II soon concluded an armistice or peace with Carthage[5], but he waged war, though not very energetically, in Southern Italy and resettled Rhegium and Caulonia there[6]. He cannot have earned much booty in this way.

On Dion's instigation the new tyrant invited Plato to come to Syracuse, no doubt to improve the image of the tyranny and to enhance the splendour of his court. According to Plutarch, *Dion* 13.1 ff., Plato's presence at the Syracusan court was quite an event: philosophy and geometry became widespread, the tyrant changed his loose habits and he even began to relativize his tyrannical position. His courtiers, fearing for their comfortable positions, counteracted by calumniating Dion and supporting Philistus, who tried to maintain the system of the old tyrant (Plutarch, *Dion* 14; *cf.* Plato, *Ep.* VII 329C). They suggested that Dion was planning to usurp the throne for his branch of the family. According to Plutarch, *Dion* 14 some of the tyrant's assistants complained that the Athenians, who in former times had sailed to

4 On the reign of Dionysius II see L. DE BLOIS, "Dionysius II, Dion and Timoleon", *MNIR* 40, Rome, 1978, p. 121; CONSOLO LANGHER, 1997, *op.cit.*, pp. 141 ff.

5 See K.F.STROHEKER, *Dionysios I. Gestalt und Geschichte des Tyrannen von Syrakus,* Wiesbaden, 1958, p. 127.

6 Diod., 16.5.2 ff.; Strabo, 6.1.6. See STROHEKER, 1958, *op.cit.*, pp. 127 ff.; CONSOLO LANGHER, 1997, *op.cit.*, p. 142 gives more evidence.

Sicily with large land and sea forces, but had perished utterly without taking Syracuse, should now, by means of one sophist (*i.e.* Plato) overthrow the tyranny of Dionysius by persuading him to dismiss his 10,000 bodyguards, and abandon his 400 triremes and his 10,000 horsemen and his many times that number of men-at-arms, in order to seek in Academic philosophy for a mysterious good, and make geometry his guide to happiness, surrendering the happiness that was based on dominion and wealth and luxury to Dion and Dion's nephews and nieces. Persistently slandering Dion and Plato they were successful in the end. Dionysius II sent Dion to Greece, but kept Plato with him, trying to oust Dion from his friendship and become Plato's favourite pupil (Plato, *Ep.* VII 329D-330B; Plutarch, *Dion* 16). In vain, of course. Then a war broke out and Dionysius let Plato go.

In 361, after the fighting had come to an end, the tyrant invited Plato to return to Sicily. Dion, still a virtual exile, and the Tarentine tyrant Archytas, one of Plato's Pythagorean friends, who through Plato had become an ally of Dionysius II, urged Plato to accept the invitation and go. Plato complied[7]. After a good start Plato fell out with Dionysius because of Dion's interests. The tyrant became angry, stopped sending to Dion the revenues of his properties, which he sold off. He may have needed the money, after he had remitted taxes (see above) and had not been successful in gaining much booty (see above), nor in lowering the pay of his mercenaries (Plato, *Ep.* VII 348A). Dionysius lodged Plato among his worst enemies, the mercenaries, who had long hated the philosopher and sought to kill him, on the ground that he was persuading Dionysius to renounce the tyranny and live without a bodyguard (Plutarch, *Dion* 19). They had been in a bad mood anyway since Dionysius had tried to lower their pay and had relaxed military discipline[8]. The Tarentine ruler Archytas saved Plato by sending a trireme to collect him (Plato, *Ep.* VII 350AB; Plutarch, *Dion* 20.1-3). Plato never went back to Sicily, but Dion did, in 357, inaugurating fifteen years of civil strife and desultory warfare in the island.

In his description of Plato's Sicilian adventures, in *Dion* 4-20, Plutarch keeps suggesting four things:

1. Plato's activities were an important event in Syracusan politics and court life. See ch. 14: one sophist could indeed overthrow the tyranny, replacing it by a monarchy based on the people's goodwill.

2. Military leaders like Philistus, their mercenaries, and flattering courtiers were Plato's outspoken enemies.

7 On Plato's third visit to Syracuse see Plato, *Ep. VII* 338CD and 345C-350B; Plutarch, *Dion* 18-20.

8 See Diod., 16.5.4. Dionysius may have offered them an easy life instead of sufficient pay.

3. The main effects of Plato's presence were an improvement of free speech and independent, morally sound behaviour among those who listened to him, rather than the development of a branch of the Academy or Platonic philosophy in Syracuse.

4. The empire of the Dionysii is taken for granted as a more or less stable structure. Plutarch does not problematize its permanence and survival, although he knows of its financial weakness[9]. He focuses on the change of a tyranny into a lawful kingship within an apparently continuous empire.

In his perception of Plato's political activities in Syracuse Plutarch neglects Plato's main target, *polis*-government. Plutarch leaves aside that Plato's advice to Dionysius II, Dion, and Dion's friends focused on the abolishment of the despotic territorial empire of the Dionysii, the dismissal of its expensive mercenary forces, and the establishment of a league of reinstated Greek *poleis* in Sicily, each of which would have to contribute to the citizen armies of the league. Those *poleis* were to be governed by good laws, not by irresponsible politicians, and they should receive good, stable constitutions that would be acceptable to all groups, so that quarreling parties could be reconciled. The league of *poleis* would be welded together by a network of good, philosophically trained, morally sound friends[10]. The expensive mercenary forces of the tyrant would be replaced by a citizen army composed of contingents of the *poleis*. In this way the financial problems that had bedevilled the reign of Dionysius II could be avoided and a requisite precondition for Platonic reforms, the reinstatement of *poleis* and *polis*-government, would be met[11]. Sound advice indeed. After 357 the financial problems became acute. Dion had to lay up the fleet (Plutarch, *Dion* 50.1) and probably disbanded most of the mercenary cavalry, in this way economizing on the two most expensive military units[12]. Military leaders like Philistus, their mercenary forces and flattering courtiers who only relied on the soldiery may have surmised what Plato and Dion were after. Plutarch must have found something to that effect in his sources, but in his passages about military hatred toward Plato he does not elaborate the real issue.

9 See DE BLOIS, 1978, *op.cit.*, pp. 121 f.

10 See Plato, *Resp.* V 473D: *...hoi philosophoi basileusosin en tais polesin ...*; *Ep.* VII 331DE; 332E; *Ep.* VIII 355B-356E. Plato may have been inspired by the example of the Pythagoreans in Greek *poleis* in Southern Italy.

11 See M. SORDI, "Dione e la symmachia Siciliana", *Kokalos*, 13 (1967), pp. 143 ff.; DE BLOIS, 1978, *op.cit.*, pp. 121 f.; 126 f.; 130 f.; DE BLOIS, 1979, *op.cit.*, pp. 270-278, esp. pp. 275 f.; ID., "Political Concepts in Plutarch's Dion and Timoleon", *Ancient Society*, 28 (1997), pp. 219 ff.

12 See L. DE BLOIS, "Traditional Commonplaces in Plutarch's Image of Timoleon", forthcoming in the *Acta* of the Fourth International Conference of the International Plutarch Society, Louvain, July, 1996.

Plutarch exaggerates the importance of Plato's actions. In a passage in his Seventh Letter in which he describes the slander Dion was exposed to at the court of Dionysius II Plato himself observes that he was not able to do anything against it (329C). In his own view he did not have any power at all in Syracuse. Most of the time he lived isolatedly in Dionysius' palace gardens and he did not have much contact with Syracusan people. Diodorus Siculus not even mentions Plato's political activities in Syracuse. In 15.76.4 he ranks Plato among the men that he esteemed memorable for their culture, in one line with Isocrates, Aristotle, and Anaximenes of Lampsacus, but he never hints at Plato's actions in Syracuse. Admittedly Diodorus summarized ten years of Sicilian history (367-357) in one short chapter, but nonetheless he could have chosen to mention Plato's Syracusan adventures briefly. Perhaps his main sources, the works of Philistus and Timaeus, did not focus very much on Plato's presence in Syracuse[13]. Iustinus does not pay attention to Plato's adventures either. Pompeius Trogus, whose work Iustinus abridged, may have used the same sources.

In his very short Dion *Vita* Nepos pays some attention to Plato's first two visits to Syracuse, his friendship with Dion, his growing influence on Dionysius II, and the counter-offensive of Philistus and his supporters, but unlike Plutarch he does not describe Plato as the wise man who could bring down tyranny by the power of his mind[14].

Why did Plutarch enhance the importance of Plato's political actions in Syracuse? Throughout his Dion *Vita* Plutarch sets philosophy against tyranny and wise men against militarily based despotic power. In his *Dion* Plutarch used the evidence he had found in his sources to describe Plato as if he were a first or second century AD wise man who was opposing tyrannical rulers and giving advice to good monarchs, like a philosophical tutor of princes, a role that was very popular among sophists and philosophers of the Second and Third Centuries AD. A few examples. In his fourth oration on kingship Plutarch's coeval Dio Chrysostom opposes Diogenes, one of the founding fathers of Cynicism, to Alexander the Great, the paradigm of military and political power, giving the role of adviser to Diogenes and the position of an attentive listener to Alexander[15]. The heroes of the so-called 'Stoic opposition' against Nero and the Flavian emperors, Paetus Thrasea and Helvidius Priscus, were lumped together with Dion, Brutus (the murderer of Caesar),

13 Philistus' work is mentioned in Diod., 15.89.3.

14 See Nepos, *Dion* 2.2-4.1.

15 *Cf.* C.P. JONES, *The Roman World of Dio Chrysostom*, London/ Cambridge, Mass., 1978, p. 40; pp. 116 f.; on Dio's third and fourth orations on kingship see P. DESIDERI, *Dione di Prusa*, Florence, 1978, pp. 287-304.

and Cato Minor as canonical models of wise men opposing tyrants in one short sentence in the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius[16]. Apollonius of Tyana was, in his own days, a traveling magician and philosopher of minor, regional significance, but his biographer Philostratus transformed him into a neopythagorean wise man gifted with a superhuman nature who was a hero of Greek *paideia* and could speak with princes as if they were his equals[17]. In his *Vita Plotini* 12 Porphyry has the emperor Gallienus and his wife Salonina *venerate* Plotinus. In a text also ascribed to Porphyry, a *scholion* to Homer, *Iliad* A 340, sages and kings are described in neopythagorean terminology as beings that stand midway between gods and men. Sages rank higher[18].

The aim of those Greek Second Sophistic writers was not to convert rulers to philosophy and better *polis*-government, but to improve the behaviour of monarchs in a settled imperial context. Likewise Plutarch has Plato change the attitude and behaviour of Dion and Dionysius. The heroes of the Second Sophistic mentioned above spoke freely to monarchs and tyrants. Plutarch has Plato and Dion do likewise.

To sum up: In his *Dion* Plutarch sets Plato and Dion against tyranny in an anachronistic way that reminds us of Second Sophistic cultural chauvinism, exaggerating the influence of Plato's teaching at the Syracusan court, as if Plato were a famous First, Second or Third Century AD tutor of monarchs, on a par with generals and politicians; a Second Sophistic ideal which was utterly impossible in contemporary practical Roman politics, but even more so at the court of the Dionysii.

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16 See *Meditations* 1.14. On Paetus Thrasea see Tacitus, *Ann.* 14.12.2; 14.49.1 ff.; 16.33-34; Suetonius, *Nero* 37.1; Id., *Domit.* 10..3; Cassius Dio, 61.15.1 f.; 61.20.4; 62.26.1 ff. On Helvidius Priscus see Tac., *Ann.* 16.33-34; Suet., *Vesp.* 15; Id., *Domit.* 10.3; Cassius Dio, 64.7.2; 65.12.1 (*cf.* 65.13.2 f. and 67.13.2). The Dion mentioned here must be Plato's friend, not Dio Chrysostom. See L.DE BLOIS, 1997, *op. cit.*, note 1.

17 See Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii* 5.28; 8.1-6. See J.J. FLINTERMAN, *Power, paideia and Pythagoreanism. Greek Identity, Conceptions of the Relationship between Philosophers and Monarchs and Political Ideas in Philostratus' Life of Apollonius of Tyana,* Amsterdam, 1995, pp. 29-51; 60-66; 88-106; 230.

18 See Porphyry, *Ad Iliadem* A 340 (SCHRADER). See FLINTERMAN, 1995, *op. cit.*, pp. 178 f.

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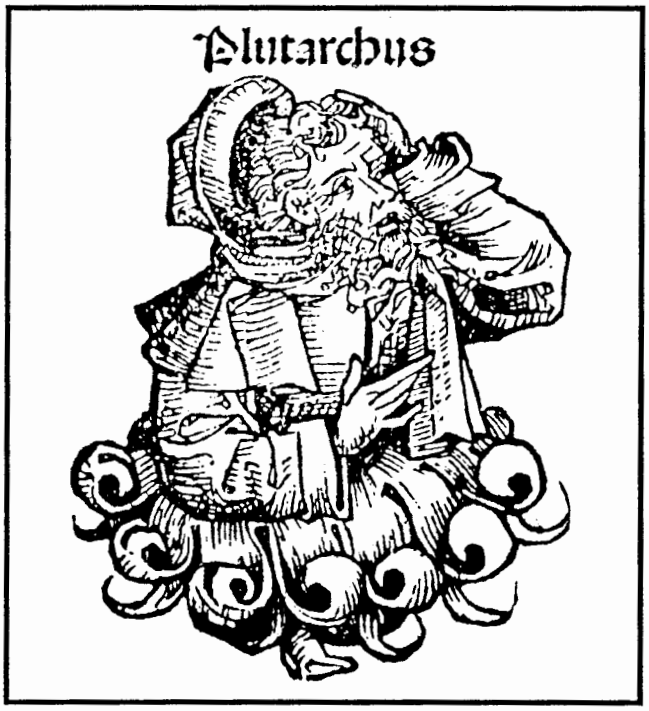

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