UDC 1(38)

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ARISTIPPUS, ISCHOMACHUS AND SOCRATES

ABSTRACT: During his lifetime, Socrates gained considerable fame among young people in Athens, but also throughout the Greek World. One fairly neglected account that illustrates this is preserved by Plutarch (*De curiositate* 2.516c). It tells a story of a young Aristippus of Cyrene, a member of the wealthy local elite, who travelled from North Africa to Greece with the specific intention of meeting Socrates. While direct corroboration of this episode is lacking, many details of the account, as well as one indirect testimony from a papyrus fragment, strongly suggest its authenticity.
KEY WORDS: Aristippus, Socrates, Plutarch, Isomachus, Cyrene, Athens.

These pages are devoted to an often neglected story that has much to tell us about Socrates' celebrity among young adults, independently even of the innovative school that he appears to have established in Athens (as Aristophanes' *Clouds* suggests, at least in my view).

We owe to Plutarch the story of a wealthy young man, Aristippus, who was still living in Cyrene, in North Africa. This Aristippus had heard reports about Socrates, and they were so compelling that he resolved to sail to Olympia (possibly together with those travelling there to attend the four-yearly games), though not for the sake of the games themselves. It is at least likely that he did so with the support of his family and in order to reach Socrates, whom he supposed to be quite an extraordinary man.[1]

[1] One might ask why Aristippus did not travel directly to Athens. It is enough to observe that, for a promising young man, it may well have been difficult to find a ship sailing precisely where he wished to go, especially if he was travelling alone. As to the possibility of encountering intellectuals in Olympia, this point is supported by a felicitous intuition of the late Thomas M. Robinson, to which I returned in Rossetti 2023 (at the end of my paper). According to

Once in Olympia—Plutarch continues—Aristippus looked for someone who knew Socrates well and had the good fortune to meet the right person, a certain Ischomachus. He asked him about the conversations through which Socrates seemed to exert such remarkable influence on young people: ἠρώτα τί Σωκράτης διαλεγόμενος οὕτω τοὺς νέους διατίθησι.[2] Clearly, only someone who had already heard highly admiring reports about Socrates could have approached another person – Ischomachus – with a question of this kind.

Ischomachus, in turn, considered it appropriate to satisfy his curiosity by improvising μικρ'ἄττα τῶν λόγων αὐτοῦ σπέρματα καὶ δείγματα, that is, by outlining a few 'seeds and samples' of what Socrates used to say. His response[3] – far from proving inadequate – convincingly confirmed what Aristippus had already learned through hearsay. As a result, we are told, Aristippus was 'so moved by these examples that his body failed him and he became completely pale and weak until, after sailing to Athens, thirsty and parched, he drank from the spring (etc.)' (details provided by Plutarch).

A point worthy of attention is the phenomenon of somatisation. It is clearly evoked by Aristippus' becoming pale and weak, albeit without the least awareness of the dynamics causing his unease, and this constitutes a powerful mark of authenticity: who could have imagined anything of the sort? We therefore have strong grounds for believing that what Plutarch recounts really happened to Aristippus. If so, someone must indeed have travelled to Cyrene and conveyed to some of its inhabitants an enthusiastic and vivid portrait of Socrates, for otherwise nothing of the sort could have occurred.

As for the unknown individual who spoke about Socrates in Cyrene, he must have been capable of conveying a particularly vivid sense of Socrates' 'magic', otherwise Aristippus would neither have found sufficient reason to leave Cyrene nor, after listening to Ischomachus, to sail for Athens while somatising Socrates' physical absence. Socrates, in turn, must already have become a highly unusual figure, discussed even in distant Cyrene. Therefore, all this presupposes a Socrates who was already famous – and not only in Athens.

Should we perhaps suppose that Plutarch, or someone else before him, simply invented the story without relying on any specific information?

Robinson 2017, the journey to Olympia provided an excellent opportunity for intellectuals (sophoi as well as poets) to meet, become acquainted with one another, and make their writings known.

[2] The relevant passage – Plutarch, *De curiositate* 2.516c (= *SSR* IV A 2 = t. 132 Pentassuglio) – is provided in the appendix below.

[3] A further, minor detail is provided by Philodemus (*PHerc.* 1008, col. XXII 34-35 = t. 90 Pentassuglio): 'Socrates took pleasure in attributing his wisdom to others, such as Aspasia and Ischomachus'.

Whoever transmitted this account must have known not merely a few details, but rather a great deal about (a) Socrates as a person who was dialegomenos in Athens and capable of making a profound impression on young people; (b) the arrival in Cyrene of concrete and detailed reports concerning this man; and (c) the deep emotions experienced by Aristippus as a consequence of what he later learned from Ischomachus. Indeed, Aristippus himself is likely to have been the ultimate source of the entire story. Unless he had access to first-hand information about Socrates, it is difficult to see how he could have crossed the Mediterranean in the hope of meeting him in person.

Furthermore, the story of Aristippus at Olympia and its broader context[4] corroborate the idea that conversation with young people was both a passion and a defining characteristic of Socrates. The fact that Aristippus undertook the journey to Olympia as a deliberate step towards reaching Socrates, and that, once there, began asking whether anyone knew him, eventually having the good fortune to encounter Ischomachus, is therefore neither impossible nor implausible, even if no independent evidence for these events has come down to us. A fortiori, the fact that Socrates was already known as far away as Cyrene during his own lifetime leaves little room for doubting that he had achieved a considerable degree of fame beyond Athens.

But this is not enough. Fortunately, in a papyrus fragment published in 1986, we read of people who

> left their homeland and undertook a long sea voyage, not for trade, but to explore Greece and seek out someone among the Greeks who was esteemed for his wisdom, so that they might learn as much as possible from him. I replied that I would not be surprised if such men wished to associate with the wisest of the Greeks of today in educating man. (*POxy* 2890 recto = t. 122 Pentassuglio).[5]

These memorable lines, which unfortunately survive without their original context, very probably belong to Aeschines' *Miltiades* and seem to allude precisely to Aristippus' journey. Diogenes Laertius reinforces this conjecture when he writes (in II 65) that, according to Aeschines, Aristippus arrived in Athens (from Cyrene) *kata kleos Sōkratous*, 'because of the celebrity of Socrates'. This combines perfectly with Plutarch's account. It follows that, in all likelihood, Plutarch derived this information from Aeschines' *Miltiades*, Aeschines himself being a friend of Aristippus. Moreover, the distinguished man 'esteemed for his wisdom', indeed 'the wisest of the Greeks of today' (to use the papyrus fragment's

[4] See especially Pentassuglio 2017, 350 and 531 ff.
[5] The text of the papyrus is provided in the appendix below.

own words), corresponds so closely to Socrates – and to nobody else, for who else could be intended? – that the identification is difficult to resist.

The evidence for Socrates' widespread prestige accords well with what we learn from Plato about his high standing among young people. A few passages may suffice. In Plato's *Laches* (180e-181a), the fathers of certain meirakia observe that many young people frequently mention Socrates and speak of him very positively (kai sphodra epainousin). In the same dialogue (180c), Laches explicitly describes Socrates as an expert in education.

In Lysis 211e Socrates is portrayed as finding nothing more attractive than friendship. In the

Apology, Plato mentions οἱ νέοι μοι ἐπακολουθοῦντες ... αὐτόματοι ('the young men who follow me around of their own accord', 23c). Later, at 33b9-c1, Socrates asks: διὰ τί δή ποτε μετ' ἐμοῦ χαίρουσί τινες πολὺν χρόνον διατρίβοντες; 'Why, then, do some people enjoy spending considerable time in my company?'. Also relevant are the opening lines of Euthydemus (271a), where Socrates and his interlocutors are surrounded by a crowd of onlookers.[6] To this evidence we may add the story of Aristippus' voyage to Olympia after Socrates' fame had reached even distant Cyrene.

These sources corroborate one another. Together, they convey a vivid picture of Socrates in his adult years, and this evidence cannot lightly be dismissed as unfounded. They independently provide a context within which the story reported by Aeschines in his Miltiades (and ultimately, we may presume, by Aristippus himself) becomes entirely intelligible. In conclusion, this is no mere anecdote. Thanks to Plutarch's account, we are able to know something significant about Socrates as he was known during his lifetime. Indeed, what Aristippus – then Aeschines, then Plutarch, then Diogenes Laertius – reports offers an extremely rare windows onto a Socrates who was known and spoken of while he was still alive and, very likely, before the collapse of Athens in 405.

[6] The gadfly and the stingray, also evoked by Plato in celebrated passages, probably deserve mention.

Appendix

Plutarch, *De curiositate* 2.516c (= *SSR* VI A 91 & IV A 2 = t. 132 Pentassuglio):

καὶ Ἀρίστιππος Ὀλυμπίασιν Ἰσχομάχῳ συμβαλὼν ἠρώτα τί Σωκράτης διαλεγόμενος οὕτω τοὺς νέους διατίθησι, καὶ μίκρ'ἄττα τῶν λόγων αὐτοῦ σπέρματα καὶ δείγματα λαβὼν οὕτως ἐμπαθῶς ἔσχεν ὥστε τῷ σώματι συμπεσεῖν καὶ γενέσθαι παντάπασιν ὠχρὸς καὶ ἰσχνός· ἄχρις οὗ πλεύσας Ἀθήναζε διψῶν καὶ διακεκαυμένος ἠρύσατο τῆς πηγῆς καὶ τὸν ἄνδρα καὶ τοὺς λόγους αὐτοῦ καὶ τὴν φιλοσοφίαν ἱστόρησεν ἧς ἦν τέλος ἐπιγνῶναι τὰ ἑαυτοῦ κακὰ καὶ ἀπαλλαγῆναι.

***POxy* 2890** recto (= *SSR* VI A 79 = t. 122 Pentassuglio)
[. . ὡρμημένοι . .]
οἴκοθέν εἰσίν τε [καὶ πλοῦν μέγαν πε-]
πλεύκασιν οὐκ [ἐμπορίας ἕνεκεν, ἀλλ']
ἵνα τήν τε Ἑλλάδ[α ἐρευνῶσι καὶ]
εἴ τίς ἐστιν ἀνὴρ [ἐπὶ σοφίαι τετιμη-]
μένος ἐν τοῖς Ἕλλ[ησιν, ὡς ὅτι]
μάλιστα τὸ ἐκείνῳ[ι δοκοῦν πυνθάνων-]
ται. ἀπεκρινάμη[ν οὖν αὐτῶι . .]
ὅτι οὐ θαυμάζοιμι [ἄν, εἰ ἄνδρες τοιοῦτοι]
τῶι σοφωτάτωι τῶν Ἑλ[λήνων τῶν νῦν]
παιδεῦσαι ἄνθρωπον [ἐπιθυμοῖεν]
συγγενέσθαι. ἀλλὰ καὶ [αὐτὸς ἂν ἐφα-]
μην, ὅτι καὶ πλοῦν τοσοῦ[τον
[. .] [. . ιον τηλικ[οῦτος

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АРИСТИП, ИСОМАХ И СОКРАТ

Резиме

У току свог живота Сократ је стекао изузетну славу међу младим људима, пре свега у Атини али и широм грчког света. Једна доста занемарена епизода која то потврђује долази од Плутарха (*De curiositate* 2, 516c). У питању је прича о младом Аристипу из Кирене, припаднику богате локалне елите, који је путовао из Северне Африке у Грчку да би се срео са Сократом. Мада директних потврда ове епизоде у другим изворима нема, многи детаљи Плутарховог текста, као и једно посредно сведочанство нађено у папирусном фрагменту, снажно говоре у прилог њене аутентичности.

Кључне речи: Аристип, Сократ, Плутарх, Исомах, Кирена, Атина.