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Ida Soldini

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## Plato's youth and old attic comedy

By Ida Soldini (*ida.soldini@gmail.com*)

**Abstract.** Who was Plato? He becomes more and more elusive as studies dig into his work. An important part of his life is unaccounted for: legends spread early about his beginnings. His position in the crucial time of the last quarter of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the time of the fall of classical Athens, seem inaccessible to us, even if we know lots about the political and cultural relevant facts, and even the biography of many of the protagonists. In this paper I propose to shift the understanding of Plato's youth from philosophy to drama as a viable and fruitful hypothesis<sup>1</sup>, able to catch the springboard of what remains the stream bed of rational thinking. At stake stands the right to read the *Phaedrus* as his first philosophical dialogue, a reading no longer possible now, since the scholarship of the 20<sup>th</sup> century placed this text in the time of old Plato, the author of the dialectical dialogues.

**Keywords:** ancient comedy, Plato, chronology, textual tradition

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### 1. The Athenians, the comic poets and the philosopher

According to Dio of Prusa, titled Chrisostomos "the golden-mouthed" (ca. 40 – ca.115 CE), the comic poets, Socrates and an unknown Philosopher have an identical function in the *Polis* and differ only in how they put it into action<sup>2</sup>:

«The Athenians, accustomed as they were to hearing bad things about them, and indeed by Zeus, going to the theatre just to be insulted, to the point of instituting competitions and prizes for those who did it better, listened to Aristophanes, Cratinus and Plato and they made them no harm. However, they did not so on their own initiative, but to conform to the God's will. However, they did not tolerate when Socrates, without a stage or an audience, without dancing or warbling, followed up the order of the God. The poets slavishly feared the people and coaxed them like a tyrant, they bit them making it laugh, like nurses when children have to drink a bitter medicine, they grease the rim of the cup with honey. Precisely for this reason they did not prevent the worst and did not favour the best, filling the city with arrogance, corruption and the scorn of laughter. The philosopher instead, refutes and makes one become aware.»

Their way was different not because of their communication's contents, but because it was staged in the theatre with songs and dances, or without any theatrical fiction. Dio recalls that refuting the blameworthy and making him conscious of his misdeed can be very dangerous, since Socrates lost his life because of this. Dio cites here a comic Plato, then Socrates and then an unnamed "Philosopher". I think that he had another Plato in mind. This article would like to substantiate this claim.

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<sup>1</sup> I presented parts of this paper during the 18th Conference of the International Society for Neoplatonic Studies (Athens, 10-14 June 2021) and the 18th Annual Conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions (Pisa, 30 August – 3 September 2021). I owe gratitude to Sebastiano Archetti, who appreciated the argument and reviewed my limping English. I owe also great gratitude to the experts in the difficult subjects of ancient comedy, Plato's thought and aesthetics who have encouraged me to publish my findings.

<sup>2</sup> Dio Chrysostomos or of Prusa, *Oratio* XXXIII.9

## 2. A link between Plato the philosopher and the homonymous comic poet

In any case, is there a link between a “philosopher” and Plato, the companion poet of Aristophanes and Cratinus? Thanks to Olympiodorus of Alexandria (middle-late 6<sup>th</sup> century CE), we learn that the philosopher Plato quoted Plato the comic poet in *Alcibiades I*, where he let Socrates say<sup>3</sup>:

«Then when [the king of Persia] becomes his first-born son, who owns the kingdom, all the king's people celebrate while, later, on the recurrence of this day, all Asia celebrates the birthday with sacrifices and feasts. But when we are born, o Alcibiades, not even the neighbours notice it, as the comic poet says.»

According to Olympiodorus, the quoted poet is the comic Plato<sup>4</sup>. This quotation is the central point of the architectural structure of the *Alcibiades I*: the text that precedes and follows it is in fact of identical length. One could wonder why Plato would have cited a comic poet with the same name as him exactly at this strategic point of a dialogue, the subject of which is *the nature of man*. In the *Definitions*, a scholar list published along with Plato's dialogues and belonging to the heritage of the old Academy<sup>5</sup> the definition of *man* runs as follows<sup>6</sup>: «*Man – wingless two-footed, flat-fingernailed animal; the only being capable of acquiring rational knowledge.*» The second part of this strange definition is soundly platonic; the first part is quoted as a pun by Diogenes Laertius and Sextus Empiricus<sup>7</sup> (3<sup>d</sup> century CE?). Diogenes Laertius relates<sup>8</sup>:

«Plato had defined Man as an animal, biped and featherless, and was applauded. Diogenes plucked a fowl and brought it into the lecture-room with the words, “Here is Plato's man.” In consequence of which there was added to the definition “having broad nails”».

Diogenes of Sinope, or the Cynic, was famous for the tub in which he lived and for the search of *man* with a lantern in full daylight – an anecdote clearly related to the pseudo-platonic *Definitions* – and for his answer «Yes, stand out of my sunlight.» to Alexander the Great, when, eager to compliment the philosopher, he asked him: «Is there any favor that I can do for you?»<sup>9</sup>. The meaning of *πλατυώνυχον* (*platuonychon*, with broad nails) could very well be: “the definition of *man* is what I, Plato, say in my *Alcibiades*”. In any case, Schleiermacher was not right by saying that no irony is to be found in this dialogue<sup>10</sup>. On the formal composition of Plato's dialogues, Holger Thesleff proposes a valuable insight<sup>11</sup>:

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<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Alcibiades I*, 121 c-d

<sup>4</sup> Olympiodorus, *In Alcibiadem I*, 157.21-22; F. Filippi, *Olimpiodoro d'Alessandria: Tutti i commentari a Platone*, 2 voll., Academia, Sankt Augustin 2017, 220-221

<sup>5</sup> H.G. Ingenkamp, *Untersuchungen zu den pseudoplatonischen Definitionen*, Otto Harassowitz, Wiesbaden 1967

<sup>6</sup> *Pseudo-platonic Definitions*, 415a11; J.M. COOPER – D.S. HUTCHINSON, *Plato. Complete Works*, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis/Cambridge 1997, 1684

<sup>7</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *IYPPONEION* 211-212; *Contra Mathematicos* VII.281.

<sup>8</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosopher*, IV.40

<sup>9</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosopher*, VI.22; 41;79

<sup>10</sup> F. Schleiermacher, *Platons Werke*, vol. Teil 2, Band 3, G. Reimer, Berlin 1861<sup>3</sup>, 204

<sup>11</sup> H. Thesleff, *Looking for clues: an interpretation of some literary aspects of Plato's two-level model*, in G.A. Press (ed.), *Plato's Dialogues: New Studies and Interpretations*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham (MA) 1993, 16-45; 19, n. 4

«By pedimentary, I mean an arrangement of things so as to put the most important or intrinsically interesting ones in the center, as the figures are arranged in the triangular pediment (tympanum) of a Greek temple.»

The central place of this quotation of the Poet by the Philosopher cannot be meaningless.

### 3. Transmission and reading of the platonic text in late antiquity

A text cannot be understood outside of its context. The transmission of the platonic *corpus* is no exception to this axiom. So, it is paramount to retrace the reading of Plato's oeuvre in order to point out the essential changes in its understanding. The edition that was transmitted to us is undoubtedly that of Thrasyllus of Mende<sup>12</sup> which is still used today in the edition of John Burnet. Diogenes Laertius identifies<sup>13</sup> the meaning of the Thrasyllian edition in the analogy between the development of philosophy and that of tragedy:

«But, just as long ago in tragedy the chorus was the only actor, and afterwards, in order to give the chorus breathing space, Thespis devised a single actor, Aeschylus a second, Sophocles a third, and thus tragedy was completed. So too with philosophy: in early times it discoursed on one subject only, namely physics, then Socrates added the second subject, ethics, and Plato the third, dialectics, and so brought philosophy to perfection. Thrasyllus says that he [Plato] published his dialogues in tetralogies, like those of the tragic poets. Thus, they contended with four plays at the Dionysia, the Lenaea, the Panathenaea and the festival of Chytri. Of the four plays the last was a satiric drama; and the four together were called a tetralogy.»

Unlike Olympiodorus, Diogenes was completely foreign to Neoplatonism: he never mentioned it in his work. It was Iamblichus (3<sup>d</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> CE) who formulated the Canon for reading the Platonic dialogues for all subsequent Neoplatonic schools. Bent Dalsgaard Larsen, who wrote an important book on the fragmentary work of Iamblichus, comments on his innovation with these words<sup>14</sup>:

«But what first and foremost disappeared from the canon of Iamblichus with respect to the classification of Thrasyllus, is the dramatic conception of Plato's work: it is no longer considered in analogy to the Greek drama.»

The dramatic structure is preserved by Iamblichus only between two poles: the human and the divine. Dialogical and political human drama is completely suppressed. This move, profoundly changing the reading of Plato, has a place in the contempt that traditionally targeted his work: Diogenes Laertius cites<sup>15</sup> a score of puns about Plato, all belonging to middle Greek comedy. From the 3<sup>d</sup> century BCE on, the target were the conclusions of Platonic philosophy. Dio Chrysostom's reading of Plato precedes the fundamental Neoplatonic shift and is contemporary to the Thrasyllian edition. The Neoplatonic School decided to

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<sup>12</sup> H. Tarrant, *Thrasyllan platonism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y. 1993

<sup>13</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, III.56

<sup>14</sup> B.D. Larsen, *Jamblique de Chalcis, exégète et philosophe*, 2 voll., Universitetsforlaget i Aarhus, Aarhus, Danemark 1972, 336 : «Mais ce qui d'abord et avant tout a disparu du canon de Jamblique par rapport à la classification de Thrasyllus est la conception dramatique de l'œuvre de Platon: elle n'est plus considérée par analogie avec le drame grec.»

<sup>15</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, III.26-36

severe Plato from all reference to drama and old comedy in order to rescue him: by making of him a divine being – ὁ θεῖος Πλάτων for the Greeks, *divinus Plato* from Cicero on.

Proclus for instance writes in his *Platonic Theology*<sup>16</sup>:

«How in your understanding will this theory consider respectable and excellent or take seriously the value of Plato's thought, since its completeness cannot be shown, nor its perfection, nor what comes first in it, and instead all this kind of things are abandoned to a violence alien to their nature, taken episodically and not according to their genre, in an order that resembles the theatrical drama?»

Proclus takes this argument from Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, but whereas in Proclus the *whole* is the thought of Plato, in Aristotle the *non episodic whole* is the *physis*<sup>17</sup>:

«But it does not appear, to judge from the observed facts, that the natural system lacks cohesion, like a poorly constructed drama.»

The neoplatonic exclusion of the dramatic perspective from Plato's work is reflected in a very cautious Olympiodorus<sup>18</sup>, where, at best, Plato is represented as a careful student of classical drama, but certainly not as an author<sup>19</sup>:

«After these [the grammarian Dionysus, the gymnast Ariston, the musician Dracon] he [Plato] went to the dithyrambic poets to learn their manner; as a matter of fact, his first work, the *Phaedrus*, is dithyrambic in character. He also sought the company of tragic poets, to steep himself in the grandeur of their style; and of comic poets too, to gain knowledge of their diction. Thus he became familiar with the manner of Aristophanes, who is superior to all other comic poets; that he [Plato] is an admirer of his style is shown by his epigram on Aristophanes, which runs as follows: "The Graces seeking for a sanctuary that would please them found the soul of Aristophanes".»

In antiquity, despite the violent political revolutions caused first by the rise and then by the fall of the Roman Empire, up to Justinian, the ancient Greek texts were never reduced to pure textuality and their reading always kept alive: the school tradition was preserved, as well as the theatrical tradition. The reading of the texts was embedded in personal experience and in friendly relationship, often of immediate kin. The oral transmission was never fully interrupted during nearly a thousand years. Only after the Gothic war and the normalization of the institutional teaching by Justinian, the golden chain of platonic transmission suffered a violent stop... and enjoyed a new beginning.

In this long period, information we now discuss as relating to comic Plato was collected. My hypothesis is that Plato's identity as both comic poet and philosopher – the winner of the Dionysia in 414 and the founder of the Athenian Academy after 390 BCE –, was in this long period a matter so obvious that it needed no further comment. In the meantime, this

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<sup>16</sup> Proclus, *Platonic Theology*, I.6 11-17; M. Abbate, *Proclo. Teologia platonica*, Bompiani, Milano 2019, 42

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* N, 1090 B 18-20: «οὐκ ἔοικε δ' ἡ φύσις ἐπεισοδιώδης οὕσα ἐκ τῶν φαινομένων, ὥσπερ μοχθηρὰ τραγῳδία»

<sup>18</sup> In her *Introduzione*, Francesca Filippi discusses Westerink's attribution of the *Prolegomena* to the circle of Olympiodoros. Her analysis is convincing: an anonymous pupil is materially the writer, but the content is Olympiodoros' own. (Filippi [2017]: XLI ff.)

<sup>19</sup> Olympiodorus, *Prolegomena*, 198, 3.1-12; translation: L.G. Westerink, *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy Edited with Translation* (Platonic Texts and Translations), vol. V, The Prometheus Trust, Westbury 2011<sup>2</sup>, 6-7

identity was embarrassing, because the political reality of democracy into which ancient comedy was born, was irremediably lost.

#### 4. Fragmentation of the platonic corpus by the Alexandrine grammarians

It was the Alexandrine grammarians who established the literary distinction between the poetic texts in metres and the prose tractates of the learned. According to Diogenes Laertius, the Alexandrine ἑλκουσι (*helkousi*, literally: *dismembered*) the Platonic text<sup>20</sup>:

«Some, including Aristophanes the grammarian, arrange the dialogues arbitrarily in trilogies.»

Rudolf Pfeiffer interprets the context of the laconic statement of Diogenes as follows<sup>21</sup>:

«It has been argued that Aristophanes also produced an edition of Plato. But Diogenes Laertius, after speaking of the arrangement of Plato's dialogues in tetralogies, gives us only the dry remark Ἔνιοι δέ, ὧν ἐστὶ καὶ Ἀριστοφάνης ὁ γραμματικός, εἰς τριλογίας ἑλκουσι τοὺς διαλόγους, and adds the list of fifteen dialogues grouped into trilogies; perhaps ἑλκουσι, “*they drag*”, implies a notion of force in this arrangement of Plato's philosophical work. [...] The most probable interpretation of the passage is that some scholars, including Aristophanes in his supplement of the *Pinakes*, criticized the tetralogies of an edition, perhaps of the Academy, and put forward the case for trilogies. Nothing in this sentence points to an edition made in Alexandria. On the other hand, a later chapter<sup>22</sup> deals with critical σημεῖα (*semeia*, signs) in what was possibly an Alexandrian edition; but this system of σημείωσις (*semeiosis*, indication) is totally different from that of Aristophanes. So, on our present evidence, there is no reason to regard Aristophanes as the first to have included a prose author in the series of his editions.»

The organizational interest of the Grammarians could be the source of the distinction between “Plato the philosopher” and “Plato the comic poet”, a distinction which labels some of the fragments transmitted down to us in the anthologies in which also many other fragments of old comedy may be found.

#### 5. Plato and comedy in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century

During the Renaissance and Humanism the Byzantines transmitted the fragments of comic Plato that we still possess today, about 300 in number, many of them only a few words long. These fragments are scattered either in encyclopaedic works such as the *Suda*, in which information is listed in alphabetical order, either in very peculiar literary works such as the *Deipnosophists* of Athenaeum of Naucratis (Egypt, 2<sup>d</sup>-3<sup>d</sup> CE?), where learned guests pile up poetic quotations following the order of the courses of a banquet.

The sayings and doings of Plato the comic poet and Plato the philosopher are listed together with no distinction between what belongs to whom, up to the encyclopaedic works

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<sup>20</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, III.61: «Ἔνιοι δέ, ὧν ἐστὶ καὶ Ἀριστοφάνης ὁ γραμματικός, εἰς τριλογίας ἑλκουσι τοὺς διαλόγους.»

<sup>21</sup> R. Pfeiffer, *History of classical Scholarship. From the Beginnings to the End of the Hellenistic Age*, Clarendon, Oxford 1968, 196

<sup>22</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, III.65-66

of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century. Laurentius Beyerlinck (1578-1627) lists in the *Indices* of his *Magnum Theatrum Humanae Vitae*<sup>23</sup> *Plato philosophus* and *Plato comicus* with all the sayings and doings that we now attribute just to the Philosopher.

Comic Plato was put in a chronological framework by August Meineke in his *Historia Critica*<sup>24</sup>. He also collected Plato comicus' fragments and numerated them<sup>25</sup>. They were approximately 260, only 180 of which referred to the title of a comedy.

The modern reception of Plato's fragmentary comedies and the very idea of a Comic poet distinct from the Philosopher is heavily indebted to Carel Gabriel Cobet's *Observationes criticae in Platonis comici reliquiis*<sup>26</sup>. Cobet's account of comic Plato focuses on plagiarism. The context is the refutation of the claim that old Greek philosophers like Pythagoras and Plato borrowed their philosophy from the wisdom of the Jews. Cobet's discussion focuses on Aristobulos of Alexandria, a Hebrew peripatetician (2<sup>nd</sup> century BC), whom he condemns with lots of heavy insulting *argumenta ad hominem*. It is worth noting that Aristobulos' thesis about the beginning of Greek philosophy is discussed at length by Clemens of Alexandria in his *Stromates*<sup>27</sup> along with an astonishing quantity of quotations from tragedies and comedies.

The fact is that some of Aristobulos' quotations of Plato cannot be found in the Platonic *corpus*. Cobet states<sup>28</sup>: «frustra in Platonis Dialogis quaesiveris». According to Cobet, the quoted text was «stolen» by Aristobulos from the *Commentaries* on old poetry authored by the Alexandrine grammarians, who knew very well, according to him, that there were two Platos, the philosopher and a comic poet<sup>29</sup>:

«In the meantime, the theft of the uncandid Jew becomes evident and it is absolutely assessed from which Greek source he extracted this text: the *Commentaries* on the epic, tragic and comic poets that the learned Alexandrine composed before him.»

Cobet ascribes to Aristobulos a manipulation of the Alexandrine text and rearranges thus the «stolen» quotation under the name of Plato, the comic poet. But Cobet's wrath didn't strike only Aristobulos. Jonathan Toup (1713-1785), the editor of the entire *Suda* (published 1760-1766) had also to suffer it<sup>30</sup>:

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<sup>23</sup> L. Beyerlinck, *Magnum Theatrum Humanae Vitae*, vol. VIII, Lugduni 1631, "Verborum & Exemplorum", 519

<sup>24</sup> A. Meineke, *Historia Critica*, in *Fragmenta comicorum Graecorum*, vol. 1, 2 voll., Typis et Impensis G. Reimeri, Berlin 1839, 100-197

<sup>25</sup> A. Meineke, *Plato comicus*, in *Fragmenta comicorum Graecorum*, vol. 2, 2 voll., Typis et Impensis G. Reimeri, Berlin 1840, 615-697

<sup>26</sup> C.G. Cobet, *Observationes criticae in Platonis comici reliquiis*, Müller, Amsterdam 1840

<sup>27</sup> L. LESYK, *Plato as Greeks' Moses in Clement's of Alexandria conceptualization*, «Littera Antiqua»/7 (2013) 66-80

<sup>28</sup> C.G. Cobet, *Observationes criticae in Platonis comici reliquiis*, 72

<sup>29</sup> *Ivi*, 76: «Itaque simul fraudulentum Iudaeum furti manifestum tenemus et compertum est ex quibus fontibus Graecorum locos congesserit: nempe ex commentariis, quos eruditi Alexandrini praesertim in poetas Epicos, Tragicos, Comicos conscripserant.»

<sup>30</sup> *Ivi*, 75: «Tum indocte Aristobulus nomini Πλάτωνος praemisit ὁ φιλόσοφος, quod inconsiderate arripuit Toupius, Emend. in Suid. III. pag. 54. «Platonis, si diis placet, versiculus non comici, sed philosophi est, quod me docuit Clemens Alex. lib. VI. » Nam in Platone nihil reperitur quo iste locus referri possit (vid. Meinek. in *Fragm. Com.* pag. 686.), et oratio ligata aurem exercitatum fallere non potest.»

«So, the unlearned Aristobulos inserted “the philosopher” before the name of Plato, what was taken up by an inconsiderate Toup in his *Emendationes in Suidam*, Vol. III p. 54, where he writes: “The intended author of this line, Plato, is not the Comic poet, but the Philosopher, as I learned from Clemens of Alexandria in his VI book.” But in Plato’s texts nothing can be found as reference for this quotation (cf. Meineke in *Fragmenta Comicoorum Graecorum*, pag. 686) and a trained ear cannot fail to detect the metric structure of the line.»

Cobet’s dismissive evaluation of Aristobulos is based on Lodewijk Caspar Valckenaer, *Diatribē de Aristobulo Iudaeo*<sup>31</sup>. But against this judgement Aristobulos’ accuracy in quotation is vindicated by a recent article by Sean A. Adams<sup>32</sup>, who assesses the quotation habits of Aristobulos both as trustworthy and transparent. When he changes something, he explains the reason why<sup>33</sup>, and when he quotes differently than a text we know, it is because he had access to another one, that we do not possess. So Aristobulos habitude to «steal» is not certain at all. His arguments (and those of Clement) could therefore hold water. On such a weak foundation, Cobet romanticized the relationship between Aristophanes and Plato the comic poet, the plot being concocted with rivalry and plagiarism.

## 6. Plato comicus in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

Apart from Cobet’s excesses, the patient work of one and a half century of learned philologists is summarized in Serena Pirrotta’s recent commentary<sup>34</sup> on the extant comedy fragments of Plato Comicus. She collected the scattered materials and commented what certainly belongs to Plato’s comedies, the text being quoted in relation to a correspondent title. Unfortunately, she utters no word on the Philosopher and expounds him even from her indices. Although the Philosopher is sometimes also quoted in this book, the *Stellenregister* begins with the statement that only authors discussed in her commentary are listed here. On the contrary, the authors used only to testify the use of a word or a material object, are not listed<sup>35</sup>. A legitimate but very unhappy limitation, especially because Konrad Gaiser opened up the problem with a very interesting article on the subject<sup>36</sup>.

Pirrotta assesses the contributions of scholars in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century on the chronology of Plato Comicus<sup>37</sup>. The *Chronology* of Eusebius of Caesarea (265?-340 CE?) inserted a reference to Plato and Cratinus as being famous poets in the 81<sup>st</sup> Olympiad. August Meineke corrected the date in his *Historia critica*: not Eusebius but Cyril of Alexandria provides the *floruit*, the maturity of Plato as comic poet: the 88<sup>th</sup> Olympiad<sup>38</sup>. The date of Plato’s *floruit* was corrected a third time<sup>39</sup> by Wolfgang Luppe (1930-2014), who intended

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<sup>31</sup> C. Valckenaer, *Diatribē de Aristobulo Iudaeo*, Luchtmanns, Leiden, Luchtmanns, Leiden 1806

<sup>32</sup> S.A. Adams, *Did Aristobulus Use the LXX for His Citations?*, «Journal for the Study of Judaism» 45 (2014) 1-14

<sup>33</sup> *Ivi*, 11

<sup>34</sup> S. Pirrotta, *Plato comicus. Die fragmentarischen Komödien*, Verlag Antike, Berlin 2009

<sup>35</sup> *Ivi*, 415

<sup>36</sup> K. GAISER, *Plato Comicus or Plato Philosophus? (Aristotle, «Ars Rhetorica» I 15, 1376 a 7-11)*, «Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies»/26 (1979) 51-61

<sup>37</sup> S. PIRROTTA, *Plato comicus. Die fragmentarischen Komödien*, 21-22

<sup>38</sup> A. Meineke, *Historia Critica*, 160

<sup>39</sup> W. Luppe, *ἀπεώσθη πάλιν εἰς τοὺς Ἀθηναίους*, «Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik» 46 (1982) 147-159

Cyril's text as providing the *debut* of Plato and not his *floruit*: the beginnings<sup>40</sup> of his activity as a dramatic poet. Cyril's text is the cornerstone also of Pirrotta's chronology of comic Plato, but she proposes another, more recent date for his beginnings, on the basis of a papyrus found in Oxyrhynchus<sup>41</sup>. Her proposal is that Plato would have initially written successful comedies presented by other comic poets until he won in his own name the first place at the Lenaia in 421/422 BC<sup>42</sup>.

I would like to underline that the attribution of Cyril's text to comic Plato is discussed for the first time by H.F. Clinton in his *Fasti Hellenici*<sup>43</sup>:

«Although the birth of Plato was sometimes ascribed to the 88<sup>th</sup> Olymp. he can hardly be supposed to be intended in this passage, because, in that case, the word γενέσθαι would be used in a double sense in the same sentence. But if we understand the comic Plato to be spoken of, the expression is clear and intelligible: The comic poet Aristophanes with Eupolis and Plato, flourished in Ol. 88<sup>th</sup>.»

Now, the common understanding today is that Cyril did not at all speak about the comic poet, because intended here is the birthdate of the philosopher. Nowadays, the very attribution to Plato Comicus of Cyril's text has been challenged by a number of scholars<sup>44</sup>.

In conclusion, only three dates can be ascertained for Plato's comedies being staged. Firstly, the inscription of the winners of the dramatic festival of Athens, namely *IG II<sup>2</sup>* 2318–2325: Plato is mentioned as winner in the Dionysia around 414 BC<sup>45</sup>.

Secondly, the hypothesis to Aristophanes' *Frogs* mentions Plato's *Cleophon* winning the third place at the Lenaia in 405 BC<sup>46</sup>. The third date is very probable: Plato staged a comedy bearing the title *The Ambassadors* (Πρέσβεις) and the relevant fragment quotes the names of Epikrates and Phormisios who went to the Persian king between 395 and 393 BC<sup>47</sup>.

Serena Pirrotta establishes some other hypothetical chronological facts, all between 420 and 390 BC. After 390, according to her, the traces of Plato the comic poet are lost<sup>48</sup>.

On the other hand, from Diogenes Laertius on, the chronology of the philosopher Plato remains unchanged: his birth is fixed in the 88<sup>th</sup> Olympiad. In this regard, Holger Thesleff in his first work on Platonic chronology was apodictic<sup>49</sup>: «It can now be regarded as certain that Plato was born about 427, give or take not more than one year.»

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<sup>40</sup> *Ivi*, 159, n. 28

<sup>41</sup> S. Pirrotta, *Plato comicus. Die fragmentarischen Komödien*, 22-26

<sup>42</sup> *Ivi*, 39

<sup>43</sup> H.F. Clinton, *Fasti hellenici: the civil and literary chronology of greece, from the earliest accounts to the LV<sup>th</sup> Olympiad*, vol. 2, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1834, 65, 4. Poets, 2<sup>nd</sup> row.

<sup>44</sup> G. Mancuso, *Pl. Com. T 6 K.-A. delendum?*, in P. Cipolla (ed.), *Studi sul teatro greco*, Adolf M. Hakkert, Amsterdam 2006, 69-78; N. Kyriakidi, *Aristophanes und Eupolis. Zur Geschichte einer dichterischen Rivalität*, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston 2007, 61; C. Riedweg, *Kyrill von Alexandria. Werke. Erster Band: Gegen Julian, Teil I.1-5*, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston 2016, 33; S.D. Olson, *Eupolis, Einleitung, Testimonia und Aiges-Demoi (Frr. 1–146)*, Verlag Antike, Heidelberg 2017, 47

<sup>45</sup> S. Pirrotta, *Plato comicus. Die fragmentarischen Komödien*, 22; R. Kassel – C. Austin, *Poetae Comici Graeci*, vol. VII, De Gruyter, Berlin 1989, 456

<sup>46</sup> S. Pirrotta, *Plato comicus. Die fragmentarischen Komödien*, 143

<sup>47</sup> *Ivi*, 259

<sup>48</sup> *Ivi*, 39-40

<sup>49</sup> H. Thesleff, *Studies in platonic chronology*, Societas Scientiarum Fennica, Helsinki 1982, 21

So the reason why Plato the philosopher and Plato the comic poet cannot be one and the same person is of chronological nature: being less than 10 years old, he couldn't have begun to write comedies around 420 and being less than 15 years old, he couldn't have won the Dionysia in 414 BC.

## 7. Weaknesses of the accepted Platonic chronology

Holger Thesleff never changed his mind about the birthdate of Plato. In an update<sup>50</sup> of his great work on platonic chronology, he focuses not on the biography of Plato but on the chronology of the dialogues and has only few lines to lament the way that *early* dialogues of Plato are not put in a satisfactory chronological frame of any kind:

«Yet the writings traditionally regarded as “early” are still provided with this label, whether they are supposed to be somehow “advanced” or not; in other words, whether a “development” in thought or expression is envisaged or not.»

It is worth noting that an important piece in the Platonic chronology fails to fit into the mosaic currently held as the best one. It is a statement by Aristoxenus of Tarentum (4<sup>th</sup> century BC), reported by Diogenes Laertius, according to which<sup>51</sup>:

«Aristoxenus says that he [Plato, Aristotle's teacher] took part three times in military campaigns, in Tanagra, Corinth, and Delion, where he obtained the prize of valor.»

We know from Thucydides that these battles took place in the mid-20<sup>s</sup> of the 5<sup>th</sup> Century, when Plato, according to Diogenes Laertius chronology, was less than ten years old. Yet Aristoxenus is undoubtedly talking about him, Aristotle's teacher, and Aristotle is also indubitably the source of the news. Today's scholars evaluate Aristoxenus' testimony as follows. Alice Swift-Riginos in 1976 was apodictic<sup>52</sup>:

«The source cited by Diogenes has no value, not only because Aristoxenus, a disciple of Aristotle, writes in the fourth century, but also because this is the only example in which Aristoxenus transmits favourable information on Plato.»

Holger Thesleff corrected her in 1982<sup>53</sup>:

«Riginos follows Cornford<sup>54</sup> p. 15 in assuming that Aristoxenos had fabricated his story from references in the *Theaetetus*. But it is hard to see why Aristoxenus with his strong anti-Platonic bias, would not have fabricated a somewhat less laudatory piece of information, if he did not operate with facts.»

Debra Nails supplies in the most recent study a more balanced opinion<sup>55</sup>:

«Those battles of the mid-420<sup>s</sup> play havoc with any reasonable chronology; and there is no mention elsewhere of any military service. Our three options are accept,

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<sup>50</sup> H. Thesleff, *Platonic chronology*, «Phronesis» 34/1 (1989) 1-26: 3

<sup>51</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, III.8

<sup>52</sup> A. Riginos-Swift, *Platonica. The Anecdotes concerning the Life and Writings of Plato*, Brill, Leiden 1976, 51

<sup>53</sup> H. Thesleff, *Studies in platonic chronology*, 27, n. 30

<sup>54</sup> F.M. Cornford, *Plato's theory of knowledge. The Theaetetus and the Sophist*, Routledge, London 1935

<sup>55</sup> D. Nails, *The people of Plato. A Prosopography of Plato and other Socratics*, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis (IN-USA) 2002, 245

deny, and withhold judgment. [...] I suggest option three, withhold judgment pending further evidence.»

How not to reject Aristoxenos' worthy and ancient testimony? There is a way and Debra Nails goes exactly this road: by taking Plato's short autobiography in his 7<sup>th</sup> Letter as a source of information. Plato himself recounts<sup>56</sup>:

«For when I originally arrived at Syracuse, being about forty years old (σχεδὸν ἔτη τετταράκοντα γεγονώς), Dion was of the age which Hipparinus has now reached, and the views which he had then come to hold he continued to hold unchanged; for he believed that the Syracusans ought to be free and dwell under the best laws.»

According to Holger Thesleff, *σχεδὸν ἔτη τετταράκοντα γεγονώς* can mean even 41 or 42 years old<sup>57</sup>. This statement of Plato talking about himself is of paramount importance in Platonic chronology. Plato's first trip to Syracuse certainly took place between the death of Socrates in 399 BC and the foundation of the Academy, sometimes after 390 BC, although we do not know whether closer to the first or second date. The chronology accepted today places his first trip to Sicily, following Thesleff as also Debra Nails does, at the end of this period, around 390 BC. But we cannot exclude that Plato went there immediately after the death of Socrates, and in this case, he could have been born at least about 40 years before 399, that is about 439, maybe even 441 BC. The latter possibility is even more likely, since Plato had overbalanced himself in court in favour of the master whom the polis had then condemned to death. It would certainly have been safer for him to be abroad than to remain in Athens.

## 8. The philosopher never ceased to be also a comic poet even if not in verse

Based on these reflections and findings, an integrated chronology of the comic poet and the philosopher can be proposed, which solves several intricate points and opens many other problems. The hypothesis on which I base this proposal is that the birth in the 88<sup>th</sup> Olympiad is not historically correct but calculated in retrospect from the date of the death: Plato, of apollinian descent, could have only died at 81 years of age, which is the perfect number, the square of nine which is the cube of three, the very number of the Muses<sup>58</sup>. Debra Nails also underlines that this date is supposed to link Plato's birth to Pericles' death<sup>59</sup>. The battles of Delion, Tanagra and Corinth would have been fought during the summer months by a teenage Plato, the same person who, during the winter, wrote his first comedies, won the first prize at the Leneae about 420 BC and was crowned in the Dionysia of 414.

To corroborate Aristoxenos' information, we may find from the pen of Plato himself no less than five times a mention of the episode of Delion involving Socrates and the participation to battle of a mounted teenage boy, and we could read them as autobiographical. Three times the city of Delion is mentioned: the fullest account is put in the mouth of Alcibiades in *Symposion*<sup>60</sup>; Socrates recalls the same fact in the *Apology* from his point of

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<sup>56</sup> Plato, 7<sup>th</sup> Letter, 324 a-b

<sup>57</sup> H. Thesleff, *Studies in platonic chronology*, 30, n. 41

<sup>58</sup> A. Riginos-Swift, *Platonica. The Anecdotes concerning the Life and Writings of Plato*, 25

<sup>59</sup> D. Nails, *The people of Plato. A Prosopography of Plato and other Socratics*, 243

<sup>60</sup> Plato, *Symposion*, 220 d-221 c

view<sup>61</sup>; Laches recalls what he saw at Delion in the dialogue which bears his name<sup>62</sup>. The fact of a teenager participating in war on a swift but tame horse is recalled twice in *Politeia* without naming the city of Delion<sup>63</sup> and a second time<sup>64</sup>, where, a few lines later, Socrates states that this kind of exercise should be implemented before the age of twenty. If Plato was so fond of recalling his adventure as a boy at Delion, he would have talked about it many times in the Academy during the years of Aristotle's attendance, and Aristotle is surely the source of Aristoxenus' statement: Plato and Socrates were together at Delion, a very young Plato on horseback and a very tough Socrates on foot, fleeing the enemy together.

The information about the birth of Plato is surrounded by myth and accounted for by friends and admirers. On the other hand, information about his death is due to the Peripatetic and the Isocratic traditions, i.e. concurrent inimical schools. The first source is interested to surround the beginnings of Plato with an apollinian atmosphere, whereas the second is a sober information. Riginos-Swift recalls the anecdote of Plato acknowledging his Apollinian nature by calling himself ὁμόδουλον τοῖς κύκνοις, “*fellow-servant of the swans*” Apollo's birds<sup>65</sup>. It is interesting, in my opinion, that Diogenes quotes the day and month for the birth of Plato and only the year for his death. But for sure, many more witnessed Plato's death than his birth<sup>66</sup>:

«Apollodorus in his Chronology fixes the date of Plato's birth in the 88<sup>th</sup> Olympiad, on the seventh day of the month Thargelion, the same day on which the Delians say that Apollo himself was born. He died, according to Hermippus, at a wedding feast, in the first year of the 108<sup>th</sup> Olympiad, in his eighty-first year. Neanthes, however, has him die at the age of eighty-four.»

I suspect that Plato himself could have concealed his beginnings, because exactly this is the meaning of the quotation of Plato the comic poet in *Alcibiades I*<sup>67</sup>.

## 9. Proposal of a revised platonic chronology

Please note that the revised chronology is proposed with question marks.

441-439 BC Birth of Plato?	Plato is
424 Battle of Delion	between 15 and 17 years old?
420? victory at the Lenaia	between 19 and 21 years old?
414 victory at the Dionysia	between 25 and 27 years old?
404 <i>Kleophon</i> , 3 <sup>rd</sup> place at the Lenaia	between 35 and 37 years old?
399 Death of Socrates and first trip to Sicily	between 40 and 42 years old?
393? Performance of the <i>Presbeis</i>	between 46 and 48 years old?
390 or later: Foundation of the Academy	between 49 and 51 years old?
367 Aristotle enters the Academy	between 72 and 74 years old?
348 Death of Plato	between 91 and 93 years old?

<sup>61</sup> Plato, *Socrates' Apology*, 28 c-29 a

<sup>62</sup> Plato, *Laches*, 181 a-b

<sup>63</sup> Plato, *Politeia*, 467 c-467 e

<sup>64</sup> Plato, *Politeia*, 537 a

<sup>65</sup> A. Riginos-Swift, *Platonica. The Anecdotes concerning the Life and Writings of Plato*, 25

<sup>66</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, III.2

<sup>67</sup> See above 2. **A link between Plato the philosopher and the homonymous comic poet**

It is worth noting that in this chronology, Plato's career as a comic author continues without noticeable break to the foundation of the Academy and ends in the aftermath. His political participation in the *Polis* during the end of the Peloponnesian War should be interpreted in analogy to that of Aristophanes, who speaks to the *Demos* from the theatrical scene. And so, Plato never ceased to speak to his *Polis*, only the method of this communication underwent the radical change we know as the platonic dialogue.

The reason for his changing the way of addressing the people of Athens could very well be linked to the exceedingly tight political-bureaucratic control of the dramatic agons and his wish to enjoy full freedom of speech.

## 10. Objections

I owe some answers to the swarm of objections that will rise to the proposed platonic chronology. I list here some of the obvious ones:

- A. There were very many people named Plato in 5th-4th century Athens.**
- B. According to Diogenes Laertius, Plato wrote dithyrambs, lyric and tragedies. He didn't mention comedy.**
- C. Diogenes Laertius' Platonic chronology is the only one that stands ground.**
- D. How to cope with the many quotations of Plato «not the Philosopher»?**
- E. Plato condemns all sort of poetry, and especially the dramatic genre.**

**To A. There were very many people named Plato in 5<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century Athens:** Indeed. The *Athenian Onomasticon*<sup>68</sup> lists inscriptions for 25 Athenian whose name was Πλάτων earlier than 400 BC and 12 of them, for which the *Deme* is known, are not of Kollytos, the *Deme* of the philosopher<sup>69</sup>. The only Plato of Athens older than the Philosopher, according to the *Athenian Onomasticon*, is the comic poet: «Πλάτων of Athens, c.450-388 BC: IG II<sup>2</sup> 2325, 63; + PA 11845; PCG 7 pp. 431 ff.».

Notwithstanding this multitude of persons named *Plato*, the only two we know through the tradition that comes down to us, i.e. the only two worth a mention, are the philosopher and the comic poet. Other Πλάτων, cited by Diogenes Laertius at the end of his third book or by Christian sources, are younger than this two.

What belongs to the name of Plato, Luciano Canfora has shown convincingly in his work *La crisi dell'utopia*<sup>70</sup> and against all contrary opinion<sup>71</sup>, that Plato's real name was *Aristocles*, inherited from his grandfather, and his surname was *Plato*, as Diogenes recalls<sup>72</sup>. A pet name for *Aristocles* is *Aristyllos*, an otherwise unknown person cited by Aristophanes in *Plutus* 314 and *Ecclesiazouse* 647. The ancient tradition of *Aristyllos* as pet name for *Aristocles* is reported in the *Etymologicum Magnum*, an encyclopedic work composed at Constantinople around 1150 CE<sup>73</sup>. Canfora's book discusses the presence of Plato and of his *Politeia* in the comedies of Aristophanes going through the whole material philologists have stored in more than a thousand years. But he firmly believes that in Athens there was

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<sup>68</sup> Published online and updated regularly at [seangb.org/P-U.html](http://seangb.org/P-U.html) ; information retrieved 26.6.2021

<sup>69</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, III.2

<sup>70</sup> L. Canfora, *La crisi dell'utopia. Aristofane contro Platone*, Laterza, Bari 2014, 120-129

<sup>71</sup> J.A. Notopoulos, *The Name of Plato*, «Classical Philology» 34 (1939) 135-145, 139; D. Nails, *The people of Plato. A Prosopography of Plato and other Socratics*, 243

<sup>72</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, III.4

<sup>73</sup> H. Thesleff, *Studies in platonic chronology*, 104, n. 11

also a Plato comicus<sup>74</sup>. In addition to this, the *Symposion*, where Aristophanes is one of the central *dramatis personae*, does not retain his interest.

**To B. According to Diogenes Laertius, Plato wrote dithyrambos, lyric and tragedies. He didn't mention comedy.** Diogenes Laertius was writing for a cultivated, noble woman, who was fond of Plato's philosophy<sup>75</sup>, perhaps Julia Domna (Emesa, 170 CE-Antiochia of Syria, 217), the wife of Septimius Severus<sup>76</sup>. After the golden age of Aristophanes, the art of comedy was praised no more, as if the life of Athens in the ending 5<sup>th</sup> Century was essential to its appreciation. Aristotle defines<sup>77</sup> comedy as an «imitation of what is of less value». This is the perception of comedy after the fall of Athens, the perception Aristotle won from watching theatre during his stay in Athens, well after the Archaia was so dead, that Athenians began to re-stage new venues of the old plays<sup>78</sup>.

We could imagine that Diogenes Laertius wouldn't offend his mistress by stating that her hero wrote such kind of mean and vulgar things. Contrary to Aristotle's definition, the magmatic character of Greek theatre makes it impossible to fix the meaning of a genre in abstract. What is real, particularly in comedy, is the Authors' dialogue with his audience. The subject of this dialogue is their appreciation or disapproval of what is going on in the *Polis*, and the reasons thereof. In his account of Plato's work to an enthusiastic Platonist, Diogenes seeks to make palatable to his noble reader the dramatic activity of young Plato. Diogenes tells the truth, i.e. that Plato wrote comedies, but he cloaks his information in an ancient, noble word laden with sanctity, like dithyrambos<sup>79</sup> so as not to offend the ears of his reader. It has to be noted that Diogenes takes this euphemism from Plato himself, where "dithyrambos" are placeholders for comedy<sup>80</sup>:

«So I must relate to you my wandering as I performed my Herculean labors, so to speak, in order that the oracle might be proved to be irrefutable. For after the public men I went to the poets, those of tragedies, and those of dithyrambos, and the rest, thinking that there I should prove by actual test that I was less learned than they.»

**To C. Diogenes Laertius' Platonic chronology is the only one that stands ground.**

Diogenes' chronology has multiple flaws, as already mentioned, and this is why Debra Nails proposes another one setting Plato's birth in 423/424<sup>81</sup>. In order to do this, she quotes the first paragraph of Plato's 7<sup>th</sup> *Letter*, really a biographic cornerstone.

**To D. How to cope with the many quotations of Plato «not the Philosopher»?** I would affirm that this kind of distinction is grounded on the scholarly work of the Alexandrine grammarians in the 3<sup>d</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BCE: Eratosthenes, Callimachus, Aristophanes of Byzantium and their pupils. All the quotations of Πλάτων, οὐχ ὁ φιλόσοφος, «Platon, not

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<sup>74</sup> L. Canfora, *La crisi dell'utopia. Aristofane contro Platone*, 124

<sup>75</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, III.46

<sup>76</sup> M. Gigante, *Biografia e dossografia in Diogene Laerzio*, «Elenchos. Rivista di studi sul pensiero antico» Anno VII-1986/1-2 (1986) 7-102, 23

<sup>77</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449 a

<sup>78</sup> A.H. Sommerstein, *Encyclopedia of Greek Comedy*, 3 voll., Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken (NJ-USA) 2019, 817

<sup>79</sup> B. Zimmermann, *Die griechische Komödie*, Verlag Antike, Berlin 2006, 172

<sup>80</sup> Plato, *Socrates' Apology*, 22a-b

<sup>81</sup> D. Nails, *The people of Plato. A Prosopography of Plato and other Socratics*, 247

the Philosopher» are made on the basis of quotations by people like Dionysus Thrax<sup>82</sup> or Athenaeus of Naucratis<sup>83</sup>, both belonging to the period between the 2<sup>nd</sup> BCE and the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE and working on the basis of the systematic work of the Alexandrine grammarians. Later scholars, like Diogenes Laertius, would repeat what they found in the lists of names taken from the *Pinakes* of Alexandria.

**To E. Plato condemns all sort of poetry, and especially the dramatic genre.** As for the poetic activity of young Plato, recalled also by Diogenes Laertius<sup>84</sup>, the political impact of theatre in classical Athens has to be taken into account. Plato comicus was politically on the side of the party of the *oligarchs*. He was the first to joke about the *demagogue* Cleon<sup>85</sup> and staged his *Cleophon* just before the rule of the Thirty was established by Sparta. And Cleophon himself, a follower of Cleon, was killed by the Thirty in a very unlawful way, as Xenophon recalls in his *Hellenica*<sup>86</sup>. Yet comic Plato was not, like Critias – the head of the Thirty and a relative of the Philosopher – an orthodox follower of his *hetairia*, his party, since he staged also a *Peisandros* against the person of the same name, and Peisandros was an *oligarch*, the very person responsible for overthrowing the Athenian democracy in 411, as Thucydides relates<sup>87</sup>. Critias, the head of the Thirty, wrote tragedies that were subsequently sometimes attributed to Euripides<sup>88</sup>. He could have very well introduced his younger, brilliant relative to the dramatic art. The politically friendly relationship between young Plato and Critias could also be documented in the hostility of both against Cleophon. Plato, as said, wrote a comedy against him, and Critias was accused in court by the same man of being «notorious for licentiousness», according to a notice by Aristotle<sup>89</sup>. Plato condemns in *Politeia* the «attic middle comedy», as moderns name it, contemporary to his teaching in the newly funded Academy, not the Archaia, whose maximal poet, Aristophanes, he praises in the *Symposion*.

## 11. Conclusion

Hopefully all the above mentioned arguments give me the right to read Plato's *Phaidros* as his first philosophical dialogue, at the same time this does not mean that the background and the moving force of that work is the enthusiasm of a young and immature author, as it was suggested by Diogenes Laertius and Olympiodorus. Plato was already well known at the time and exercised his authority in the Athenian *polis* as inspired poet. So in order to understand the *Phaedros* it would be imperative to take into account the works of Hermann Lind<sup>90</sup> and the archeological excavations by John Travolos in the Ilyssus valley<sup>91</sup>.

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<sup>82</sup> R. Kassel – C. Austin, *Poetae Comici Graeci*, VII, Plato fr. 16

<sup>83</sup> *Ivi*, Plato fr. 230

<sup>84</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, III.5-6

<sup>85</sup> S. Pirrotta, *Plato comicus. Die fragmentarischen Komödien*, 32

<sup>86</sup> Xenophon, *Hellenica*, I.7.35

<sup>87</sup> Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, VIII.53

<sup>88</sup> D. Nails, *The people of Plato. A Prosopography of Plato and other Socratics*, 110

<sup>89</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric* I,15.13; D. Nails, *The people of Plato. A Prosopography of Plato and other Socratics*, 109

<sup>90</sup> H. LIND, *Sokrates am Ilissos: IG P 1 257 und die Eingangsszene des Platonischen «Phaidros»*, «Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik» 69 (1987) 15-19; H. LIND, *Der Gerber Kleon in den «Rittern» des Aristophanes*, Peter Lang, Bern/Paris/New York 1990

<sup>91</sup> J. TRAVOLOS, *Bildlexikon zur Topographie des antiken Athens*, Wasmut, Tübingen 1971

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