

## Plato's Letters – Evidence for the History of the Academy?

Thanks Prol. Paul Kalligas, and Chloe Balla etc.

When we are talking about the history of the Platonic Academy it seems most natural to turn towards the 13 letters, which are transmitted under his name and which form last item in the Platonic corpus in its tetralogical order. It would be the natural thing to do, if we understand ‚Academy‘ somewhat pointedly as the Academy of Plato, the pupil of Socrates and citizen of Classical Athens. It is there where the earlier part of his intellectual career is referred to (*Ep.* 7)? It is there where his teaching-method and the consequences of this method for his writings and writing in general are (as the Plato of *Ep.* 7 tells us) amongst the most severe points of dissent in his conflict with Dionysius II (*Ep.* 7). And last but not least: The major part of the collection is about his Sicilian affairs, and – to bring things even closer to the Academy – it is (as you remember) Dion of Syracuse, to whom *Ep.* 4 and to whose friends and companions *Epp.* 7 and 8 are written, this Dion of Syracuse whom the ancient tradition makes the money-giver for the acquisition of the garden near the gymnasium, i.e. the place where Plato founded his school after his return from his stay with the Pythagoreans in Southern Italy.<sup>1</sup> (Of course we do have letters to Pythagoreans, e.g. *Epp.* 9. 12. *To Archytas*). Reading the letters like that we would be in good company because this is what was done throughout antiquity and down the centuries to Early modern Times by no less a figure than a Cicero, a Marsilio Ficino (who only exempted the first and the last) or even a Richard Bentley.

### *1. 19th century and beyond: Struggling with authenticity*

But our confidence in taking these letters as immediate, authentic testimony of the historical Plato has been shaken profoundly not only since modern theorists of literature have tried to convince us that every autobiographical text follows – consciously or unconsciously – the rules of autofictionality.<sup>2</sup> It has been shaken foremost by 18th and 19th century scholarship with its investigations into the compatibility of the letters with what is said in the dialogues, its detailed reconstruction of the historical backgrounds, and especially its painstaking analysis of vocabulary and style. It was then when sober and highly learned men like Meiners (1783), Ast (1816) or Karsten (1864) condemned *all* 13 letters of our collection as fraud, or, in less derogative tone as pseudepigrapha, i.e. as not written by the historical Plato. This verdict was repeated in the twentieth century by e.g. Zeller in his *History of Philosophy* and saw a final revival in the midst of the 20th century in the works of Boas (1948) and Maddalena (1948). The former even went so far that he not only claimed *all* letters to be spurious but also denied any truth to the historical and biographical background which is evoked by those of the *Plat.Epp.* which are dealing with Plato's Sicilian affairs: Plato, so Boas, never travelled to Sicily (probably not even to the Pythagoreans); the traveling sage, the sage and the tyrant are too common features in the legends spun around famous men to merit any trust (Boas 1948, 453). Since these days of harsh repudiation of the collection as a whole the pendulum has swung back a little bit to a less rigid view: The *communis opinio* still denies the authenticity of most of our letters, but shows a slight tendency to hold especially the *Seventh letter*, sometimes the *Seventh* and *Eighth*, and very rarely the *Seventh*, *Eighth letter*

and other members of the collection for written by the historical Plato (cf. e.g. Erler/Ueberweg 2007). Partly this may be due to the fact that we have a more refined concept of what we call fictionality than 19<sup>th</sup> cent. philology: Perhaps we are more aware now that a text which uses fictive elements or construes a fictional situation ('Fiktionalitätspakt') to make its statement cannot be dismissed as a whole as evidence for historical questions just because of its fictionality.

But perhaps we should refrain from feeling so much wiser than our predecessors. For if one follows the discussion about the so-called 'authenticity' of the letters through the decades, it is nothing astounding that it is mainly *Ep. 7* which was recaptured from the territories of pseudepigraphy. It is not only the largest but also (one of?) the most rich letters concerning both, biographical data (Plato's youth, Plato and politics) and philosophical content ('Philosophical digression'). But if one takes a look how it was recaptured, solutions quite often end up in a kind of methodological circle: Where style and historical content of the letter is concerned neither computer-based stylometry nor repeated careful re-evaluation of the historical data really were able to give final judgement about the question of authenticity (scholars are arguing with equal vigor pro and contra the question of authenticity). Thus people turned towards the philosophical bits, and not seldomly decided about Platonic authorship on the basis of how compatible the words of – in the case of *Ep. 7* – the philosophical digression were with their preconceived view on Plato as a whole, the Plato of the dialogues, of course. This is an approach which is questionable for *Ep. 7* (digression as later addition) and, even worse, made drop out of any scholarly interest all those letters which do not display more than popularized reflections of Plato's or Platonic philosophy. With the exception of perhaps the *Second letter* with its „three kings“ and their enormous career in Neoplatonic thought all letters which have been shown spurious, have dropped out of the mainstream of Platonic scholarship (exceptions, e.g. Glucker).<sup>3</sup> Looking at this one is almost tempted to presume that we simply *want Ep. 7* to be genuine, because we feel not able to use it any longer if not so. For (or rather:) from the rest of the collection most people do not want anything at all, so they may well be spurious.

Well, this was a little bit polemic, and of course I do not have the final solution for all these troubles. What I am proposing in the following is that we just put aside the question of authenticity, as far as it is the question "Was this written by Plato, the author of the dialogues" for a moment and try to contextualize our letters from another perspective. What has been done for the (despite the name of the great philosopher in the prescript: not quite numerous) *sensu stricto* philosophical passages of our texts, i.e. to fit them into the broader frame of Plato's and Platonic thought, has to be done for the other important features of our texts, the historio-biographical content and – inseparably connected to this – the question of literary form and genre. We thus should listen carefully to the speaker(s) of our texts and ask ourselves questions like: What kind of information is given by the speaker about himself? What kind of presentation of the persons in question (the speaker, the addressee of the letter, other persons) is aimed at? Is there a broader audience intended by the letter than the one given in the prescript? And if yes: What kind of audience? And why did the author of the text choose the form of a (then) open letter? By doing so one gets a reference framework which may supplement and guide the interpretation of the philosophical passages. One also assigns

our texts a more defined place within not only the history of literature but also within the history of – in the widest sense – the social position of the intellectual within society.

I have gone through this szenario for the whole collection in my habilitation thesis and can give you an impression of the results at the end of this paper. For this talk I have restricted myself to a sketchy outline for two members of the collection and within this outline to single features of the texts which contribute to the question about the history of the Academy, as you will see especially the history of the Academy as an institution in social interaction. I have chosen – of course – the *Seventh letter* and, for reasons of contrast, the *Thirteenth*.

Before we start let me shortly remind you of the content of the *Seventh letter*.

### 1. *Plat.Ep. 7* before the background of Classical (auto-)biographical writing

#### 1a. *Plat.Ep. 7* content

*Ep. 7* is addressed to the “associates and friends of Dio” (οἱ Δίωνος οἰκεῖοί τε καὶ ἐπαῖργοι). The letter is spoken into the situation after Dio’s death (June 354 A.D.)<sup>4</sup> and finds the friends in Syracuse „for the present“ in a situation of permanent *stasis*: „Every day brings anew constant quarrels of every kind“ (αἱ τῶν στάσεων πολλαὶ καὶ παντοδαπαὶ φούμεναι ἐκάστης ἡμέρας διαφοραὶ 336d7f.). In addition the letter is, as has already been seen by WILAMOWITZ,<sup>5</sup> an „open letter“, i.e. in addition to the friends of Dio named in the prescript it also aims at an implicit recipient, in our case: a wider public (I will come back to this latter point soon).<sup>6</sup>

The prescript is followed by a short introduction (323d7–24b6). Plato not only refers to the friends’ demand „to support them by deed and word“ (ἔργῳ καὶ λόγῳ 324a1) but also assets the horizon for the whole letter: It is the dead Dio, his political ambitions (ἐπιθυμία 324a1. a3), his *διάνοια* (323d7. 324a3), i.e. his political views and aims which will guide also Plato’s reactions towards the friends’ demands. Dio wanted freedom and the best laws for Syracuse (*Ep. 7*: 324b1/2: Συρακοσίους ... δεῖν ἐλευθέρους εἶναι, κατὰ νόμους τοὺς ἀρίστους οἰκοῦντας), Plato knows this for sure (εἰδὼς σαφῶς 324a3/4). The tragic fate of the murdered pupil and the repeatedly evoked divine influence (εἴ τις θεῶν 324b2) make their first appearance here, as well as ‚Plato the teacher‘ (here: of Dio’s nephew Hipparinos. 324b4).<sup>7</sup>

The main body of *Ep. 7* is structured into three parts.<sup>8</sup> On the whole the narration follows the chronology of Plato’s three journeys to Sicily. After he has retold the first and second journey the speaker interrupts himself, because „first I must counsel you as to the course you ought to adopt in view of the present circumstances (330c3/4: συμβουλεύσας ἂν χρῆ ποιεῖν ἐκ τῶν νῦν γεγρονότων), so as not to give the first place to matters of secondary importance“. After the advice there follows the third journey and what happened immediately after it. In all three parts the speaker gives a kind of more general orientation to the reader before coming to his main point: So in part I we learn how Plato’s own *διάνοια* was formed by the political turmoil (The Thirty, Socrates etc.) during his youth in Athens (324b7–c4); before giving advice in part II he reflects upon the modalities of counseling in general (330c7–31d4) and gives a report of what Dio and he himself tried to teach Dionysius II in the past (331d5–33c6). The third part recounts not only the circumstances of the third and last visit to Syracuse but contains also the philosophical digression (341a7–45c3). This comes immediately before

Plato has to comment on his final breakdown of relations with Dionysius II and thus the end of all hopes to transform the political system in Syracuse by non-violent means.

The letter ends in rather short final remarks: Plato recounts, deeply moved, the sad (in his words: ‚tragic‘) circumstances of Dio’s violent death (see 3.4) and comes back to his advice in part II which is the consequence to be drawn out of Dio’s death. The very last words of the letter justify the whole third part of it (*Ep. 7: 352a1–6*), i.e. the report of the third journey out of „absurd and irrational stories are being told about it. If, therefore, the account I have now given appears to anyone more rational, and if anyone believes that it supplies sufficient excuses for what took place, then I shall regard that account as both reasonable and sufficient.“

What you get is thus a text which takes its main structure from the chronology of the events within the speaker’s life (the three journeys to Sicily) and fits all other points into this report: first a quick resumé about the speaker’s youth, second a fairly common political advice, third the philosophical digression and fourth an interpretation of his pupil Dio’s failure and death, or, to sum up: autobiographical narration is the structuring paradigm of this letter and it is carefully interwoven with politics (the friends’ request, advice), philosophy (digression), and biographical elements (Dio).

It is thus to look out for (auto-)biographical writings as a means of contextualization.

#### *1b. (Auto-)biographical writing in Classical Athens: A very short summary*

When we start with this in the fourth century, the earliest possible date for our letters (due to Plato’s lifetime), we have first to state that there is no such thing as a genre of autobiography or biography. As you know, the history of biography *sensu stricto* (i.e. of *bioi*) has its late start in Hellenistic times. As far as auto-biography is concerned we get even later; most handbooks make Augustinus’ *Confessiones* the first representative of this genre. But this does not mean that Classical authors never say ‘I’ or do not show a significant interest in noteworthy individuals. What we have to look for thus are – one could say – (auto-)biographical utterings within literary genres originally invented for other purposes.

By doing so you get a vast amount of texts the starting point of which could be seen in the 5<sup>th</sup> cent. with the *Epidemiai* of Ion of Chios who is both: A narratee of his own impressions and encounters and a committed observer of the famous of his days. One could go on by looking through historiography, as e.g. Xenophon’s *Anabasis*, and the Attic orators, especially Demosthenes, for autobiographical remarks and do the same for biographical elements within – again – Attic oratory, early Prose encomia, the rising literature about the Seven sages or the remains of the writings of the early Socratics (including the dialogues of Plato insofar as the display biographical elements). By doing so one ends up with a set of common features for all of these texts which one could call a kind of ‘Typology’ of (auto-)biographical writing in Classical times: All these texts are, insofar as the display (auto-)biographical elements a) ‘*Political*’ in the sense that they cannot speak about the remarkable person (be it identical with the speaker or not) detached from his *polis* with its demands and obligations. Thus there is often more than one addressee. b) Almost all these texts ring an apologetic tone: The

remarkable individual cannot express himself or be object of interest without being asked to do so. So very often an apologetic situation is the occasion (be it real or constructed) for (auto-)biographical remarks. In a minor instance of cases this apologetic moment can be replaced by the role of the adviser. c) Mainly through the apologetic situation most of these texts/passages are concerned with the *ethos* of the person in question and it is this concern which governs what is told about the person's deeds; d) Of this deeds you never get anything like what we probably expect in an (auto-)biographical account, i.e. a report "from cradle to grave"; all you get, but this regularly is a kind of resumé of one's life ("Lebenssumme"), and the e) display certain literary techniques, as: i. the (auto-)biographical material is put into a digression, ii. (auto)biographical elements very often break into the chronological order of the narration, and iii. autobiographical and biographical elements are carefully interwoven.

Due to restrictions of time I cannot give you a display of the material, but since it is a bad thing in a paper to ask one's audience simply to believe, let me just remind you of two famous texts of our period which show the described features in different ways, I mean Plato's *Apology of Socrates* and Isocrates *or. 15* (περὶ ἀντιδόσεως). The former dates at the latest into the 380ies of our century, the latter is contemporary to the date suggested of *Ep. 7*, i.e. it dates 354/3 B.C., we do not know which one of these two texts is earlier. Both texts evidently have strong (auto-)biographical elements; in the case of the *antidosis-speech* this is stated explicitly (6a): „this will be about my character, how I live and about my profession“ says Isocrates, and we also can hear out of this words that he is going to give a kind of ‚what his life was hitherto all about‘ (d). For the Platonic Socrates the situation itself – the reader knows that Socrates won't survive this – suggests the air of a resume of the philosopher's life. Both texts intertwine the apologetic situation (b), a trial which was certainly once real in the case of Socrates and may have had a real kernel in the case of Isocrates, with certain elements of fictionality: In the case of Isocrates this is stated explicitly (6b: ἐν σχήματι ἀπολογίας); in the case of the Platonic Socrates the *Apologies* by the other Socratics, of whom we only have the one of Xenophon, are sufficient evidence that we do not owe Socrates' own words but that in the *Apology* Plato was up to write a more comprehensive evaluation of his teacher. Both speeches are eminently ‚political‘ in more than one sense: The charges against Socrates blame him to neglect the values of his *polis*. For Isocrates a trial *peri antidoseos* is, as you know, just then admitted by Athenian law if a donation for a public service is rejected. In addition to that Socrates as well as Isocrates make their fates inseparable from that of their home-city. I have put one passage for you on the handout. It is the famous passage from the first speech where Socrates reminds his audience of his brave behaviour under the Thirty in the case of Leon of Salamis and makes this bitter experience the cause for his refusal of traditional political participation in the *polis*. Mind that this information as almost all other bits of biographical information about Socrates' is given in the digression; in the second part of which the refusal itself is made the basis of the – contrary to the charges: – benefit the Athenian youth could gain from this man. It were these two elements which made interpreters (e.g. Strycker/Slings) take above all the digression as that part of the speech where the specific qualities of this man, Socrates, are to be seen in a more general level. So far for more general remarks on (auto-)biographical writing.

Let's now turn back to our letters and see how they fit into this. First *Ep. 7*

### 1c. A reading of *Ep. 7*

If we go through our typology now the first item seems – for our text – trivial. Of course, the *seventh letter* is ‘political’. The historical background in Sicily as well as the occasion at which the letter purports to be written, *stasis* in Syracuse, the reflections about how to give advice and the advice itself are ‘political’. ‘Political’ in that sense that they are evoked by or aim at events which are primarily not concerned with an individual’s deeds or thoughts but with the question which (kind of) government rules the community of Syracuse.

But what we want, is not this rather unspecific sense of ‘political’ but a much closer connection between the life of the speaker and his political surrounding. And that is exactly what we get: The Plato of the *Seventh letter* introduces his life as being unseparably intertwined with the fate of his home-city Athens: The very first moment in which he makes us envisage himself is the moment of full legal capacity, when young Plato was old enough to play an active role in the government of Athens (*Ep. 7*: 324b7f.: εἰ θᾶπτον ἑμαυτοῦ γενοίμην κύριος).<sup>9</sup> That, as a youth, Plato was „full of ardent desire“ (325b2 ἐπιθυμία) to participate is something not to be questioned (*Ep. 7*: 324b7 πολλοῖς δὴ ταῦτόν ἔπαθον. 324d2/3 καὶ ἐγὼ θαυμαστὸν οὐδὲν ἔπαθον); participation is the normal duty of this young man (προσῆκοντα πράγματα 324d2). It were the “following changes” within his *polis* (324c1/2: τύχαι τινὲς τῶν τῆς πόλεως πραγμάτων) which made this youth withdraw from his original enthusiasm for politics. This Plato is – so we are told in *Ep. 7* – in his personal development almost wholly dependent on the vicissitudes of his city: „Some“ of the Thirty „were actually connections and acquaintances“ of him, but nevertheless they are judged only by their misdeeds, „above all“ (324e1) by the pressure they put on Socrates concerning the case of Leon of Salamis (324e1–325a3). Thus Socrates, Plato’s „aged friend .., whom I would hardly scruple to call the most just of men then living“ (324e) is made, the first instance which made young Plato refrain from active political participation. Nothing we hear about the philosophical dimension of this encounter. The same is true when, in the following, Plato utters his grievance about the trial of Socrates (325b5–10): Under the charge of impiety Plato’s “comrade and friend” (ἑταῖρον 325b5), so we are told, “was put to death by certain men of authority” (325b6/c2: δυναστεύοντές τινες ... ἀπέκτειναν) which „he of all men least deserved“ (325c1), because his piety has been so obvious in his conduct under the Thirty, i.e. in his behaviour in his role as a politically active citizen of Athens.

That Plato withdrew from all active participation is thus something which has to be justified by telling the story of his repeated disappointments by political reality. For this sake the speaker of *Ep. 7* has created the *ethos* of a young man who only reluctantly turns away from the ordinary way of political participation. After this introduction of the speaker the statement about the philosopher-kings (326a6–b3) is only the very last consequence out of a series of disappointments. In addition to his programmatic potential it rings also a strong apologetic tone. If *all* laws in *all* poleis (περὶ πασῶν τῶν νῦν πόλεων) are “almost incurable” the refusal of young Plato is made less offensive for his home-city Athens, and it is not by co-incidence that the speaker presents himself here for the first time as philosopher: It is „in his praise of the right philosophy“ (ἐπαινῶν τὴν ὀρθὴν φιλοσοφίαν 326a5) that he formulates his

expectations for good governance, makes this expectations then his “conviction” (διάνοια 326b4), which is the guiding principle for his attempts in Syracuse.

That this is just a very first level of *apologetic* tendency within our letter may be guessed from the very general tone of the passage which seems (like many other passages of our text) slightly odd if we imagine it spoken exclusively to the friends of Dio in their daily turmoil of civil war at Syracuse. As I said before, we can make it plausible that *Ep. 7* as we have it was intended to reach a wider public, i.e. not only the friends of Dio, but also (perhaps: foremost) an Athenian public. I cannot go into details here, but let me give you at least a few hints: First the prescript itself “To Dio’s friends and comrades” (οἱ Δίωνος οἰκεῖοι τε καὶ ἑταῖροι) is of remarkable non-preciseness. If Plato was ever in Syracuse (as I still confidently believe): Would it not have been much more natural to name one of the friends he knew (e.g. Hipparinos (2))<sup>10</sup> instead of writing to a group, which, as far as we know, never reached any kind of institutionalized power or had anything like a regular meeting place or venue? Second Plato often writes about things “in Sicily”, but in no single instance adds something which makes Sicily the place where his addressees live (“at you”, “in your place” etc.) nor does he anywhere leave out informations which Dio’s friends must certainly have been familiar with (“Informations-Leerstellen”).<sup>11</sup> And third there are a couple of passages where the speaker addresses not only the friends, but also “other people who might ask”. You find one instance on the handout; the passage connects the reports of the first to the second journey (330c2–5). We would like to know more precisely who these other people are. We are not told anywhere explicitly but end up with the Athenian public, if we turn now towards the other instances where the Plato of *Ep. 7* shows an explicit tendency to apologize.

This is – more or less – the case throughout the letter. Not seldom Plato transfers the responsibility for what has happened to some supernatural power or deity. This transfer of responsibility is adhibited for the mere fact, that Plato undertook the travels to Syracuse at all; so the former of these journeys (i.e. not even the more disastrous one of the two) is introduced as caused by “a fate ... perhaps (ἴσως μὲν κατὰ τύχην) because some of the Stronger ones made then the beginning with the troubles which have befallen Dio now.” (ἔοικεν μὴν τότε μηχανωμένῳ τινὶ τῶν κρείττονων ἀρχὴν βαλέσθαι n326e1/2). And it is with the name of Dio that we approach the very kernel of that which makes the Plato of *Ep. 7* feel guilty. You find the passage where Plato refers to his first encounter with Dio on this very journey (327a1–4) on your handout; note the windedness of the verbal expression and how it is now Plato himself, who “the one way or the other” (τινὰ τρόπον) is to be blamed for all future catastrophies (again: μηχανᾶσθαι) (327a1–4). The main feature of this passage, the “powers stronger than us” (τύχη, τύχη τις...), the claim, that he himself wanted only the very best, and the permanent assurance, that it was philosophy alone who connected Dio and Plato form a kind of ‘Leitmotiv’ throughout our text. ‘Fate, friendship, and philosophy’ are the three most important lines, along whom Plato obviously tries to defend himself against several charges.

On a first level the Plato of *Ep. 7* obviously feels criticized as a person who was driven by blind ambition and sheer greed. Out of those evil motifs he fulfilled, so the unnamed

detractors, his perilous mission at the court of Syracuse which caused as its last bitter consequence the murder of Dio and thus the end of all hopes.

This is bad enough, but on a second level there is much more at risk for the Plato of *Ep. 7*: When Plato reaches the point to answer now the original request of the friends he tells amongst others what Dio and he himself tried to convince Dionysius II of. It is here where the main apologetic tendencies of our text culminate in one passage. Plato writes:

Those who are urging me to address myself [333d] to the affairs of today ought to hear what then took place. I, a citizen of Athens, a companion of Dion, an ally of his own, went to the tyrant in order that I might bring about friendship instead of war; but in my struggle with the slanderers I was worsted. But when Dionysius tried to persuade me by means of honors and gifts of money to side with him so that I should bear witness, as his friend, to the propriety of his expulsion of Dion, in this design he failed utterly. And later on, while returning home from exile, Dion attached to himself two brothers from Athens, [333e] men whose friendship was not derived from philosophy, but from the ordinary companionship out of which most friendships spring, and which comes from mutual entertaining and sharing in religion and mystic ceremonies. So, too, in the case of these two friends who accompanied him home; it was for these reasons and because of their assistance in his homeward voyage that they became his companions.

Here again, we have „Plato the Athenian“, the non-greedy, good-hearted, impeccable friend („a companion of Dio, an ally of his own“), in our passage as a kind of contrasting foil for the Athenians to be named in what follows. Here this honorable man had to face the worst: Not only that his pupil Dio, who through his „justice, courage, modest temper and wisdom-loving“ (*Ep. 7*: 336a6f.: ἀνδρὸς δικαίου τε καὶ ἀνδρείου καὶ σώφρονος καὶ φιλοσόφου: „just and courageous and temperate and wisdom-loving man“) came close to a fulfillment of the cardinal virtues, as Plato says later in the letter, that his role in the conflict with Dionysius II is far from being unambiguous. This Dio also made comrade with his future assassins. The „two brothers“ are Kallippos<sup>12</sup> and his brother. We cannot be absolutely sure that for the recipients of *Ep. 7* this Kallippos, the future murderer of Dio, already was an official pupil of Plato at the Academy as later tradition wants him to be (cf. the list of pupils at D.L. 3,46: 221,5 Marcovich and Athen. 11, 119: 508e, where we are told that he and Dio knew each other from their common time at the Academy). But the troubles our speaker takes to make clear that the disastrous acquaintance „was not derived from philosophy, but from ... mutual entertaining and sharing in religion and mystic ceremonies“ makes it, as I think, highly probable that it was exactly that rumour – former students of the Academy murder each other at a place where their master himself was more than once – against which our speaker wishes to argue in our passage. It is Plato, the teacher of philosophy, it is the Academy which is at stake and which our speaker obviously feels obliged to defend.

At a last and for our speaker obviously most important level the loss of reputation of himself and his pupils denigrates his philosophy as a whole. In this respect *Ep. 7* displays, as did the other texts from Classical Athens, the motif of a “resume of one’s life”. Plato himself turns the question if he should travel a second time to the court of Syracuse a kind of acid test of his whole existence an intellectual (328b6–c2). When pondering about Dio’s arguments for the journey, Plato felt driven to go by the danger that, if he did not, „at some point (ποτε) I should seem to myself to be utterly and absolutely nothing more than a mere voice (λόγος) and never to undertake willingly any action (ἔργον).“ (328c5f.). Again we have here the *τινες*



(,irgendwelche' 328c3), the anonymous detractors. This time their rumours are defeated not by arguing about the events of the day, but by radically changing the perspective: When Plato made his decision to travel a second time this was not due to meanly not so honorable personal aims but in full responsibility for his philosophy as such.

In this respect the philosophical digression is an indispensable part of our letter: It is inserted into the letter quite diligently at the very moment after Plato has given his apology the twist that this all is not about pupils killing each other but (for him) about philosophy; and before he has to tell what happened during his third stay, i.e. before he has to recall how he got almost into the midst of events in his fight with Dionysius II in the garden (348a4–350b5) and his non pleasant encounter with Dio at Olympia (350b6ff.). The digression is carefully prepared through the *peira* (340b1–341a6) and is framed by the double verdict against Dionysius' scripture (*syngramma*) (341a7–c3) (344d3–c2) – Plato keeps on stressing that he not even really knew what was written in it. When Plato gives his account about the, as I take it, immediate evidence (the *spinther*) which can be reached only in a long process of benevolent discussions and spending a life together over these things (*syzen*) (341a7–342a5) we certainly are meant to understand this as a testimony for the spirit our speaker wants to assume us for the school of Plato, the Academy. Within the letter this is provoked, once again, by the wrong comradeship of Dio and his assassins on the one hand, and the rash and arrogant activities of Dionysius II as a writer on the other. Reading the digression like this, it has a function, quite comparable to that of the digression of the *Apology*: It shows the peculiarity of the person in question, here: Plato the teacher. If we combine this interpretation with the fact stated hitherto, that this text was designed for a wider Athenian public to defend Plato and his school against the charge of having to face the responsibility for what went on in Syracuse, this has also consequences for what we think the Plato of *Ep. 7* wants to communicate in the heart of the digression, when we learn that any kind of knowledge which is gained by means of the ‚Four‘ suffers from a contamination, i.e. the ‚Four‘ bring with them the qualities of things (*to poion-ti*) „no less than its real essence“ (τὸ ὄν ἐκάστου 342e3, Bury). We then would have to understand this – much disputed passage – along the lines as e.g. was done by Gadamer (1964) or, less rigid, by von Fritz (1971/1981). Looking at the digression within its context we indeed should rather expect a „theory of teaching and learning“ on a „propaedeutic level“ (Gadamer 1964, 95. 97) or, as von Fritz puts it „the central problem here is how to communicate knowledge“<sup>1</sup> than epistemology *sensu proprio*.

To sum up: *Ep. 7* fits in any respect very well into the scenario we have developed for (auto-)biographical writings in Classical times, when a genre proper was not at hand and thus a kind of experimenting with different literary genres opened the door for making the remarkable person main subject of one's writings. That the author of our text chose the form of a letter may have been offering itself by the very fact, that, as was not the case with Isocrates and

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<sup>1</sup> GADAMER 1964 (95 „überhaupt keine Theorie der Erkenntnis, sondern eine Theorie des Lehrens und Lernens“) , cf. also 97 „propädeutisches Niveau“, and VON FRITZ 1978, 223 „das zentrale Problem des siebten Briefes, das Problem der Übertragbarkeit und Mitteilbarkeit von Erkenntnis“, ebenso bemerkt DERS. 1971, 232 „daß ... zwar natürlich *auch* von dem Weg zur Erkenntnis von Ideen die Rede ist, vornehmlich aber von der Übertragung solcher Erkenntnis auf andere“ (Hervorh. von VON FRITZ).

Socrates, the charges against which he had to write an apology did not happen in Athens but in a distant place. When we are shown Plato the teacher this may first seem a trivial thing to note, but we do not find anything like this in any of the other letters, so that this kind of inner-Academic view on Plato is one of the peculiarities of our text.

So far for *Ep. 7*. We do not have enough time to go with equal diligence into the other letters now, but let me give you at least an idea how different the situation is with them by having a quick glance one other text of our collection, i.e. *Ep. 13*.

*Ep. 13*.

## 2. *Ep. 13: Plato, friend of the family and solicitor of Dionysius' financial affairs*

It is one of the letters of our collection which has despite his obviously spurious character (here we can make for once a quite strong case out of stylistic criteria) attracted some scholarly interest, above all because of a number details of Plato's biography we do not find elsewhere in our tradition

2a. *Ep. 13*:

As a whole it is this, the high density of biographical, antiquarian, and prosopographical detail which is one of the main features of this text. Thus in this letter we see a Plato in interaction with his family (the daughters of his nieces, his mother, Speusippos) including the freed slave Iatrocles, with his friends and acquaintances (Dio, Cratinos, Timotheos, Cebes of Thebes, Terillos – Leptines, Erastos, resp. Helicon) and ambassadors of the king of Persia (Philagrus, Philaides) – altogether up to 30 different persons or group of persons, which is more than twice as much as in *Ep. 7* in a text of about four pages.

A first impression of the obsession with details of our speaker you already get at the very beginning of the text. Here you also find the two other main issues of our letter. Plato's familiarity with Dionysius II which is developed in the body of *Ep. 13* mainly along the motif of Plato as solicitor of Dionysius' financial affairs in mainland Greece. And a certain kind of Pythagorizing colour which pervades the letter as a whole. As far as the last point is concerned the very word ξύμβολον at the beginning of our text (360a2, again 363b1) certainly rings a Pythagorizing tone.<sup>13</sup> This becomes more explicit when Plato is sending „some Pythagorean works“ and Helicon, „a man of whom you and Archytas ... may be able to make use“. Helicon is, amongst others an indirect pupil of Eudoxos of Knidos, so we understand that the author of this letter thought of the mathematical side of Pythagoreanism. And if we are right, and the Leptines mentioned later in the letter (361a2. b3. 362b5. 363c3. d5) is the Pythagorean (who is going to kill Kallipus at Rhegion), then the Pythagorean colour pervades this letter from its beginning to the end, for Leptines remains the main intermediary throughout our text. „Pythagorean colour“ I call this, because – as Gaiser 1981 (in my opinion correctly) against a big part of foregoing scholarship has pointed out – these Pythagorean elements remain superficial in that sense that they are not filled with any precise philosophical content whatsoever. The same holds true for all philosophical allusions in this text: The identification of the works *Pythagoreia* and *Dihaireseis* for Plato is difficult. Works with the former title is attested for Aristotle and Xenocrates,<sup>14</sup> not for Plato. Platonic *Dihaireseis* are

known to Aristotle, but probably this is a collection done by Plato's pupils which afterwards was transmitted also within the Peripatos.<sup>15</sup> It is also hardly possible to understand the named titles generically<sup>16</sup> and to identify them with dialogues of Plato (the *Timaeus* and the *Sophistes* or *Politicus* respectively). This not only would cause chronological improbabilities,<sup>17</sup> but is also prevented by the partitive genetives. Should we understand that Plato had „excerpts from (certain dialogues)“ sent to Dionysius? So we are left in a cloud of impreciseness concerning the philosophical side of this Plato – a kind of mathematical, pythagorizing Platonism – rather than in an exact philosophical setting.

This corresponds very well to the rest of the letter: First, even in his final adhortation „keep well and study philosophy and exhort thereto (363d) all other young men and greet for me your fellow-sphereists“ we get nothing precise on the one hand, and on the other read about „sphereists“ who leave us with the question, if Plato sends greetings to a football-team or rather to a club of globe-enthusiasts, i.e. people who gather around a *sphairion* as a kind of astronomical model.<sup>18</sup> And second, the philosophical profession is something which *Ep.* 13 presupposes for its speaker simply as a matter-of-fact, and which is not a point of special interest for this text (I will come back to this).

## 2b. Contextualization

What this text is interested in above all, becomes clear if we read it against our typology. The Plato of *Ep.* 13 is firmly rooted in his home-city Athens. It is mentioned twice (361c3. 362a2), it benefits from a *leitourgia* of Dionysius (the Leucadian ship 361b6f.), thus Athens is the framework, the “at us” (ἡμῖν 361e3) within which Plato communicates with Dionysius.

Yet all elements which ‘Athens’ evoked in the other texts we have discussed here as ‘political’ are either absent in *Ep.* 13 or occur in an altered form: The speaker (*not* the author) of *Ep.* 13 does not imply any other addressees but Dionysius himself. On the contrary, he sends information, sealed with the *symbolon*, which would lose any significance if dissipated to a wider public (363b1–5). In the reality of the text there is nothing this Plato has to apologize for: He has no conflict with his immediate social environment, his home-city, with whomever in Sicily or Syracuse. Even in the case of Dio this Plato displays a wait-and-see attitude (362e2–7), worlds apart from the deep despair of the Plato of *Ep.* 7. If he speaks “with trepidation”, then this is just in his recommendation for Helikon, because “I am uttering an opinion about a man, and man though not a worthless is an inconstant creature“ (360d2, cf. *Ep.* 7: 335e). Nothing we hear about any other uncertainty, and thus nothing we hear about real dangers for one's philosophy or the resumé of one's life. Looking back into one's own past means for this Plato to remember anecdotes like the one told in the beginning of the letter with its symposiastic niceties at the court of Dionysius (361a1ff.). The worst this Plato has to indulge is some bodily „illness“ (361a5) which could be cured by Dionysius' wife (not even a doctor). The alternative to the apologetic tone, the position of an adviser is present in the letter and is marked with the typical attitude of the ideal adviser, who speaks without any restrictions, i.e. with *παρρησία* („frankness“). But is is neither about politics nor about his philosophical concerns that this speaker advises Dionysius but *περὶ τῶν χρημάτων* („about your financial affairs“ 362c3ff.), i.e. the creditworthiness of his addressee outside Sicily. Altogether the *ethos* we get for this Plato is the one of a man, whose role as a philosopher has

not any longer to be established by refusing an active political role, he simply is Plato, the well-known author of the dialogues (the writings). This Plato is a man of culture (the statue), of common sense in practical issues (the money) and thus – no wonder that – intimate friend of the mighty inside (Timotheus) and outside (Dionysius) Athens.

Modern scholarship (partly) found this picture of the great philosopher distasteful and thus argued that here for once a letter originally stemming from a hostile branch of the traditions about Plato found the way in our collection (Gaiser 1981). I do not think that we should assume that, because this would be, as far as I can see, a quite singular case within the collections of letters of famous men which normally do not preserve the hostile traditions about their ‚hero‘ (let alone that we have no hint for this reading in the whole ancient tradition, Plutarch quotes our letter several times, it is imitated in the *Socr.epp.* and *Chion.epp.*).

What is true in this bewilderment is the fact that this Plato certainly was designed for an audience whose expectations were completely different from that of *Ep. 7* and that this audience was acquainted with substantial parts of the hostile traditions which had formed after the great philosopher's death. Take for example the symposiastic scene at the beginning of the letter: Of course one is reminded of Aristoxenos' pestering about the *kolakes* at the table in Syracuse, but at the same moment one may think of Sophocles and the beautiful youth in *Ion* of Chios. Equally the *Pythagoreia* may make one think of the long-winded story about Plato plagiarizing Pythagorean thought. But the Plato of *Ep. 13* does not buy these works and they are sent – so to say – into ‚the other direction‘, from Athens to Sicily. All rivalry which later tradition ascribed to the relationship between Plato and the Pythagorean Archytas is equally far away, let us only note, that Archytas, as Plato, is, without any further questions, the Pythagorean philosopher Archytas and not any longer the politician of *Ep. 7*. And finally, when it comes to Plato looking through the credit files of the tyrant (an idea which met with deep dislike in scholarship), this was a motif quite familiar for an ancient recipient, even if we refuse to compare here again *Ep. 7* where Plato takes care of Dio's financial affairs (*ep. 7: 346c1–5*). It seems that the motif ‚philosopher-friend cares for financial issues‘ is more common than we primarily think, at least from Hellenistic times onwards: We have traces of a (certainly spurious) letter from Dionysius II to Speusippus, where the latter did a similar service to Hermias of Atarneus.

Taking all this together we end up for our letter with an author who is well versed in an obviously at his time long tradition of writing about the remarkable person as well as with the different strands of the traditions about Plato's life and thought. He writes for an audience which can appreciate hints he gives towards even remote antiquarian, biographical and prosopographical material, an audience which is much more interested in seeing the great men of former days as people like themselves, cultivated men dealing with practical issues of the court than to get deeper insight in philosophical problems. I think we have to envisage an audience similar to that we can imply for the earlier writers of biography *sensu stricto*, let it be an Antigonos of Carystos or a Hermippus. These authors wrote for an educated elite about philosophers as ‚people like you and me‘, also about philosophers' lives. But a Hermippus never shed anything hostile upon his philosophers, the uttermost he evokes is good-hearted

banter, not hatred. One cause for that attitude is the fact, that (at the latest) in the 3rd century knowledge about philosophical issues obviously got something like an integral part of common *paideia*, but for Hermippus and his audience did not have anything so immediately important that it would be worth arguing about it. Letters like *Ep.* 13 are in a good sense „Unterhaltungsliteratur“ (literature for your entertainment), they are fiction without the eager zeal to take sides in philosophical discussions.

In this reduced sense the Academy, so I think, is still present in *Ep.* 13: Plato is the philosophical teacher surrounded by his pupils, he is writing philosophical tracts which reflect the Early Academy's interest in mathematics, the pythagorizing elements in some strands of Platonism, but all this is observed from a huge distance. One could even say: In *Ep.* 13 the distance has grown so big that from the Academy as a living institution of philosophical research and exchange just the lighthouse, the great philosopher Plato is visible. If this is partly due to an increasing specialization and thus non-communicability of the discussions to outsiders we may only guess. For the readers implied by *Ep.* 13 certainly the same holds true as for the author of our text: they are highly educated members of an elite which had or wished to have some closeness to the mighty of their days, but they were no philosophical professionals, both of them, the audience as well as the author. *Ep.* 13 in this sense is a witness of how the Academy was seen in Hellenistic times from the outside, not from any person in closer contact to it, let alone from inside the Academy.

##### 5. *The other Plat.Epp.: Summing up*

We have now reached a point where we have gained some familiarity with – chronologically speaking – the two poles of our collection: *Ep.* 7 certainly is part of the eldest core of it and presents us with, as I think we are allowed to suppose, some perspective from inside the Academy, whereas *Ep.* 13 with high probability has to be counted amongst the most recent members of our collection, and shows no signs whatsoever, that it presents anything else but a view on the Hellenistic Academy from the outside.

The next steps now would be to go through all other texts of the collection along the same criteria and to fit them into the scale at whose opposite ends *Ep.* 7 and *Ep.* 13 are to be positioned. As you might have seen in our discussion of *Ep.* 13 we would need for this a much more detailed framework concerning both, the history of (auto-)biographical writing *and* the traditions about Plato's life and thought. Due to restrictions of time I only give you some outline with what we end up after this procedure. If we examine the whole collection the first thing which becomes obvious is the productive power of *Ep.* 7. Apart from the very short texts (mainly *Epp.* 10 and 11) of our collection which due to their small size do hardly allow for extensive comparison almost all letters seem to be inspired by *Ep.* 7 in the one or the other way. If you take the letter of the Sicilian group, *Ep.* 3 (*To Dionysius*, supposed to be written after 360) is closest to *Ep.* 7; these letters share Plato's *Apology of Socrates* as a common intertext and the author of *Ep.* 3 knew *Ep.* 7 so well that he took over even single expressions of style and vocabulary. *Ep.* 8 (*To Dio's comrades and friends*, 353/2) is, as *Ep.* 7 an open letter, and gains special meaning if we read it as a kind of revised, more precise version of the political advice of *Ep.* 7. *Ep.* 1 (*To Dionysius*, in 360) is most probably spun out of one motif of *Ep.* 7 (the travel fare). *Ep.* 4 (*To Dio*, 357/6?) shares with *Ep.* 7 prosopographical

peculiarities (Herakleides and Theodotes). Only *Ep. 13 (To Dionysius, not before 365)* is obviously inspired not only by *Ep. 7*; we can also connect it with other members of our collection (*Epp. 2, 3, 6, 12, perhaps 1*). Concerning a relative chronology one would say that *Ep. 8* is closest to *Ep. 7*, *Ep. 1* closest to *Ep. 13*, perhaps written before the latter. *Epp. 3* and *4* show some tendencies to get over the Classical paradigms of (auto-)biographical writing, but do not yet display the full range of Hellenistic features. That their supposed dates are both before *Ep. 7* and that they both presuppose this very letter demonstrates their post-Platonic date.

The second group of letters, the Pythagorizing ones (*Epp. 2, 9, 12*), fits into this first conclusion. They form a very heterogeneous group but nevertheless share some common features: All letters of this group are, again, heavily influenced by *Ep. 7*. Especially its most important member, *Ep. 2 (To Dionysius, after 360?)* reads in his major parts as a kind of rhetorically embellished shortened remake of *Ep. 7* with neo-pythagorean color. This brings up the second common feature: All these letters can be read as reactions towards the pseudopythagorean literature that emerges from the 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. onwards. And third: In all these letters Plato already is ‘the famous philosopher’ who does not need any legitimation in this respect, even if his role in society remains to be discussed now and then. *Ep. 2* and *Ep. 13* share remarkable prosopographical details, I do think, the author of *Ep. 13* rather knew already *Ep. 2* than the other way round.

There remain *Epp. 5, 6, 10* and *11*, of which *Ep. 10* is too short to make any substantial guesses based on our method. The other three letters, *Epp. 5, 6, and 11* widen the geographical horizon and guide our eyes now to Macedonia (*Ep. 5: To Perdikkas, 353/3?*), Assos (*Ep. 6: To Hermias, Erastus and Coricus, not after 350?*) and Thasos (*Ep. 11: To Leodamas, autumn 360*). With their common theme of “Plato sends his pupil/acquaintance or does not send his pupil/acquaintance” resp. here again it is above all Plato’s Academic surrounding which is discussed in its various involvements in local politics. *Ep. 5* seems relatively old, *Ep. 6* has close connections to *Ep. 2* and seems to have inspired a detail of *Ep. 13*, thus belongs to the more recent texts; also *Ep. 11* cannot have been written before the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. So far for relative chronology. I am sorry that I cannot show up with a simple timeline, things are quite tricky, as you may have realized.

Taking all this into account we now come back to the question from which we started: The letters under the name of Plato – Evidence for the history of the Academy? What I have proposed here is by accepting the fictional character of the majority of these texts and by contextualizing them with the literary tradition outside the Platonic corpus we get clues for what audiences they were written by what kind of author. Doing so we can answer the question at the beginning of this paper with ‘yes’. The letters then give us an idea of the perception of Plato and his school from the outside. Even the oldest members of the collection answer questions which obviously came from the social environment of the school, not from within. The answers given by the oldest texts of our collection probably stem from within the school or someone so closely connected to it that for him Plato was mainly ‘the teacher’; in the more recent letters we get a rather distant view on ‘the philosopher’ as we know him from his writings. In this sense the corpus of the Platonic letters as a whole is an interesting and

rich testimony how questions and answers about Plato and the Academy underwent changes through the centuries along the main lines of the manifold reception of Plato's thought.