

Republic, Plato's 7th letter and the concept of Δωριστὶ ζῆν

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Abstrakt: If we accept the 7th letter as authentic and reliable, a matter that we will not be addressing in this paper, the text that we have in front of us is “an extraordinary autobiographic document”, an autobiography where the “I” as a subject becomes “I” as an object, according to Brisson. The objective of the paper is to examine how we could approach and interpret the excerpt from Plato’s 7th letter regarding the Doric way of life (Δωριστὶ ζῆν). According to Plato, the Sicilian life (Σικελικὸν βίον) that was allegedly a blissful life (βίος εὐδαίμων) would never allow anyone to become virtuous with all these excesses on behalf of the appetitive part of the soul (ἐπιθυμητικόν). In contrast to this specific type of life that is presented as prevalent in the 7th Letter, only Dion used to live virtuously above pleasure and luxury. The “therapy” for this φλεγμαίνουσαν πόλιν of Syracuse is the return to Δωριστὶ ζῆν κατὰ τὰ πάτρια, the return to the Doric way of the forefathers. The phrase Δωριστὶ ζῆν in its context in the 7th Letter is an important one, because it probably shows the significance of adopting the Doric way of life, in order to create the appropriate conditions for a political reform. Examining the guardians who are the ἄριστοι of the ideal city, a class that constitutes the platonic idea of aristocracy in the Republic, we can understand that they receive many important traits from the Doric ideal (especially the educational program). Combining the concept of Δωριστὶ ζῆν with the Doric ideal, we suggest that the Doric model is quite important for the Athenian philosopher functioning as the cornerstone of reform.

Keywords: Republic, Plato, 7th letter, Doric way of life.

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1 Introduction or Syracuse as a φλεγμαίνουσα πόλις

If we accept the 7th letter as authentic and reliable², a matter that we will not be addressing in this paper, the text that we have in front of us is “an extraordinary autobiographic document”³, an autobiography where the “I” as a subject becomes “I” as an object, according to Brisson⁴. The objective of the paper is to examine how we could approach and interpret the excerpt from Plato’s 7th letter regarding the Doric way of life (*Δωριστὶ ζῆν*)⁵. We read in the specific passage:

...if any amongst you is unable to live in the Doric way of his forefathers following the Sicilian way of life and that of Dion's murderers, him you should neither call to your aid nor imagine that he could ever perform a loyal or sound action...

...τὸν δὲ μὴ δυνάμενον ὑμῶν Δωριστὶ ζῆν κατὰ τὰ πάτρια, διώκοντα δὲ τὸν τε τῶν Δίωνος σφαγέων καὶ τὸν Σικελικὸν βίον, μήτε παρακαλεῖν μήτε οἴεσθαι πιστὸν ἂν τι καὶ ύγιες πρᾶξαι ποτε...⁶

In order to comprehend the concept of the Doric way in Plato’s thought, the context is in fact essential, since it is necessary to answer a question. Apparently, the *Δωριστὶ ζῆν* is expressed as a sociopolitical option, one that the city should follow; it is though an opposing option in response to what exactly? Plato says:

...when I came (in Sicily) I wasn't pleased at all with “the blissful life,” as it is there termed, replete as it is with Italian and Syracusan banqueting... For not a single man of all who live beneath the heavens could ever become wise if these were his practices from his youth, since none will be found to possess a nature so admirably strong, nor would he ever be likely to become temperate. The same thing may be truly said for the other virtues...

...ἐλθόντα δέ με ὁ ταύτη λεγόμενος αὐτὸς βίος εὐδαιμων, Ἰταλιωτικῶν τε καὶ Συρακουσίων τραπεζῶν πλήρης... ἐκ γὰρ τούτων τῶν ἐθῶν οὕτ' ἀν φρόνιμος οὐδείς ποτε γενέσθαι τῶν ὑπὸ τὸν οὐρανὸν ἀνθρώπων ἐκ νέου ἐπιτηδεύων δύναιτο – οὐχ οὔτως θαυμαστῇ φύσει κραθήσεται – σώφρων δὲ οὐδ' ἀν μελλήσαι ποτέ γενέσθαι καὶ δὴ καὶ περὶ τῆς ἄλλης ἀρετῆς...⁷

According to Plato, the Sicilian life (*Σικελικὸν βίον*) that was allegedly a blissful life (*βίος εὐδαιμων*) would never allow anyone to become virtuous with all these excesses on behalf of the appetitive part of the soul (*ἐπιθυμητικόν*)⁸. In contrast to this specific type of life that is presented as prevalent in the VIIth letter, only Dion would live virtuously above pleasure and

² M. Vegetti, *Quindici lezioni su Platone*, ed. Einaudi, Torino, 2003, p. 3 ; R. Gangemi, *Oralité et Écriture : Une lecture de la lettre septième par Franco Trabattoni*, Revista Ética e Filosofia Política, No. XIX Vol.2, 2016, p. 200.

³ “Straordinario documento autobiografico”. M. Vegetti, *Quindici lezioni...*, p. 12.

⁴ L. Brisson, *La Lettre VII de Platon, une autobiographie ?*, Platon :1990-1995 Bibliographie, ed. Vrin, Paris, 1999, p. 46.

⁵ *Plato, Letters*, VII 336c.

⁶ *Ibid.* 336c-d.

⁷ *Ibid.* 326b-c.

⁸ The use of the word σώφρων clarifies that Plato refers to the *ἐπιθυμητικόν*. “Σώφρων ὁ μετρίας ἐπιθυμίας ἔχων”, *Pseudo-Plato, Definitions*, 415 d 7.

luxury⁹. The city of Syracuse reminds us in a way the commentary of the “feverish city” in the Republic¹⁰, a city whose phenomenology of genesis indicates that Plato refers to Athens, as Vegetti strongly supports¹¹, nonetheless, its universal content could be easily applied to the case of Syracuse. The “therapy” for this *φλεγμαίνουσαν πόλιν* of Syracuse is the return to *Δωριστὶ ζῆν κατὰ τὰ πάτρια*, the return to the Doric way of the forefathers. So, what is *Δωριστὶ ζῆν* and why is it so important for an Athenian philosopher?

2 **Republic and the Doric Ideal**

Despite the fact that Plato doesn’t hesitate to criticize the city of Sparta¹², the Athenian philosopher demonstrates a constant admiration towards the political system of the specific city¹³, and to be quite honest Plato isn’t the only Athenian that shows that tendency¹⁴. An obvious example is the case of Xenophon, another Athenian thinker who clearly demonstrates a more vivid admiration for the city of Sparta¹⁵. Canfora describes Sparta as “the hearth and the archetype of the Greek aristocracies”¹⁶ and it could be said that his phrase is justified if we put in perspective the influence of this unique Doric city. Pindar, who in a way was the poet of the “military” aristocracy¹⁷, can’t hide his appreciation, calling the city “blissful Lacedaemon”¹⁸, praising at the same time the Doric ideal, an ideal of honor, courage and virtue¹⁹. But who are these Dorians? H. Taine once wrote one of the fullest and to the point definitions, describing them as:

...vigorous and tough men...much less bright and much less brilliant in comparison to the Ionians, having a fondness for the tradition, the sentiment of respect, the instinct of discipline, with a noble, calm and virile spirit, (a people) whose mentality can be stamped on the seriousness of their religion, straightforwardly found in the heroic character and morality of their gods. The Spartans, the principal tribe (of the Doric people) settled in Laconia, among the ancient habitants (who were exploited or enslaved); Nine thousand families of proud and

⁹ Plato, *Letters*, VII 327c.

¹⁰ Plato, *Republic*, 373a.

¹¹ M. Vegetti, *Guida alla lettura della Repubblica di Platone*, ed. Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2007, p. 45,47.

¹² Plato, *Laws*, 636a-c, 698d-e.

¹³ L. Canfora, *Le citoyen*, in the collective work J.-P. Vernant, *L’homme grec*, ed. Seuil, 1993.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 171-172.

¹⁵ Xenophon, *Agesilaus*. The author’s purpose is to present a rather favourable literary portrait of Agesilaus, but Xenophon doesn’t lose the opportunity to speak positively about the city itself. The fact that both of them, Plato and Xenophon, show an approving disposition for the Doric city is quite interesting. Since both of them were members of the Socratic circle, could this be an indication that Socrates himself approved of the political system that Lycurgus as a legislator had constructed?

¹⁶ Canfora, *Le citoyen*, p. 171.

¹⁷ R. Thomas, *Memorial and Choral Poetry: The Origins of Epinikian Poetry – an Historical Study*, in the collective work S. Hornblower, C. Morgan, *Pindar’s poetry, Patrons and Festivals*, ed. Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 42.

¹⁸ Pindar, *Pythian odes*, X, 1.

¹⁹ E. Des Places, *Pindare et Platon*, ed. Beauchesne et ses fils, Paris, 1949, p. 41-49.

*tough rulers, in a city without walls... an army whose (permanent) camp was in the middle of enemies ten times as many*²⁰.

A propos of Plato's work and his opinion on the Doric ideal and mostly on the Spartans, Des Places underlines the element of the idealization of the Doric aristocracy along with the admiration towards the city of Sparta²¹. It seems there is a plethora of reasons that convince Plato to hold Sparta in high esteem. We can pinpoint quite a few, positive attitude towards action, contempt for death, dedication to community, fidelity to the concept of tradition. All these traits enchant Plato²². The Athenian philosopher belongs to these thinkers of the antiquity that considered Sparta as a paradigm of a superior ethic²³, nevertheless there are many others that rejected brusquely the idea (or at least essential elements of the Spartan paradigm). We will not expand on this, but we can mention Euripides that detested the nudity of young Spartan women (*φαινομηρίδες*) during their daily *γυμναστική*, considering this nudity as immorality²⁴. Another example is the Father of Comedy, Aristophanes, who made fun of the Spartan women for their corporal strength/muscular appearance, products of the *γυμναστική*²⁵.

In any case, Plato describes the Spartan *ἔθος* in the dialogue *Alcibiades*:

Should you choose, again, to look at the temperance and orderliness, the facility and placidity, the magnanimity and discipline, the courage and endurance, and the toil-loving, success-loving, honor-loving spirit of all the Spartans, you would count yourself but a child.

εἰ δ' αὖ ἐθελήσεις εἰς σωφροσύνην τε καὶ κοσμιότητα ἀποβλέψαι καὶ εὐχέρειαν καὶ εὐκολίαν καὶ μεγαλοφροσύνην καὶ εύταξίαν καὶ ἀνδρείαν καὶ καρτερίαν καὶ φιλοπονίαν καὶ φιλονικίαν καὶ φιλοτιμίας τὰς Λακεδαιμονίων, παῖδ' ἀν ἡγήσαιο σαυτὸν πᾶσι τοῖς τοιούτοις²⁶.

Consequently, this is an important and profound comparison between Alcibiades and the Spartans. It seems that Alcibiades in the specific dialogue symbolizes the Athenian of the era of Pericles²⁷, charismatic but catastrophic, genius but “versatile”, generous but aggressive. On the one hand we have the decadent sociopolitical system of the city of Athens, but on the other hand we have the Doric ideal. The morality of the Spartans is the product of their educational system that relies on the political constitution of the city. The praise of the Doric-Cretan constitution in Plato's *Laws* doesn't permit any misinterpretation; the Athenian philosopher must be heavily influenced by the city of Lycurgus²⁸.

²⁰ H. Taine, *Philosophie de l'art, Tome II*.

²¹ E. Des Places, *Pindare et Platon*, p. 109.

²² Ibid. p. 108-109.

²³ See also Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus, Institutions of the Spartans*.

²⁴ Euripides, *Ἀνδρομάχη*, 585-590. See also A. C. Reese, I. Vallera-Rickerson, *Ancient Greek Women Athletes*, ed. Ideothéâtre, Athens, 2000, p. 154.

²⁵ Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, 78-83. This is probably the only time that Euripides is in accordance with Aristophanes and vice-versa.

²⁶ Plato, *Alcibiades*, 122c.

²⁷ We could say that Alcibiades' character (in the specific context) is the manifestation of the ambitions of the Athenians, see J. De Romilly, *Alcibiade ou les dangers de l'ambition*, ed. de Fallois, Paris, 1995. Regarding the roles of the personae used in the platonic dialogues and the effort of revisiting the Athenian society of the age of Pericles, see M. Vegetti, *Guida alla lettura della Repubblica...*, p. 25-37.

²⁸ E. Des Places, *Pindare et Platon*, p. 109.

What is the central concept of the city of Sparta regarding the sociopolitical structure? Concisely, there is a military aristocracy devoted almost entirely to matters relating to war (all the aspects of it), an aristocracy that defines liberty in a particular way especially in comparison to the other Greek states. For example, Plutarch narrates a story in which we can find a crucial element of the Spartan concept of liberty.

Herondas was at Athens when a man there was found guilty on a charge of not having any occupation, and, when he heard of this, he bade them point out to him the man who had been convicted of the freeman's crime.

Ἡρόνδας Ἀθήνησιν ἀλόντος τινὸς γραφὴν ἀργίας παρὸν καὶ πυθόμενος ἐκέλευσεν ἐπιδεῖξαι αὐτῷ τὸν τὴν ἐλευθερίας δίκην ἡττηθέντα²⁹.

For a Spartan, liberty means abstaining from any type of working, since the only occupation that is dignified for a free man is preparing for war. The contrast between liberty and slave labor is in fact quite intense in the Lacedaemonian society, who purposefully cultivates this opposition between these two “different worlds”, between the Spartans and the others, the elite and the mass, in other words, the warriors and the dependent classes³⁰.

After having presented the Spartan concept of *ἄριστος*, we have to locate where the Doric ideal can be found in the *Republic*. The case that the guardian is the undeniable protagonist of the *Republic*, Plato’s political conception³¹, is a fact that we can comprehend effortlessly. The guardians are the *ἄριστοι* of the ideal city, a class that constitutes the platonic idea and the philosopher’s theoretical manifestation of aristocracy. The guardians are indeed warriors³² and their mission is to be always ready for battle, since their educational system prepares them for that³³. In the *Republic* the contrast between the *άριστοι* and the *πολλοί* is so clear that we could suggest that the guardians are the only truly free citizens of the city³⁴, notwithstanding, we do have to clarify that Plato adds another dimension in the notion of liberty. At no point can we reduce the guardians to a simple version of ferocious and capable warriors. It needs to be emphasized that the guardians are citizens-philosophers, capable of combating vigorously against their vices notably through a superior educational system provided by the city (*Republic*), free from ignorance and foolishness³⁵, distant from an uncultivated way of life and the element of irrationality³⁶. In short, the guardians are the ideal citizens, whose classification isn’t hereditary³⁷, contrary to that in the city of Sparta. Despite the fact that Plato develops the notion of *άριστοι*, he preserves quite a few important traits that demonstrate the initial influence. Some of these traits are clear like the obvious relation between the dominant class

²⁹ Plutarch, *Apophthegmata Laconica*, 221C.

³⁰ L. Canfora, *Le citoyen*, p. 171.

³¹ M. Di Donato, A. Teja, *Agonistica e ginnastica nella Grecia Antica*, Rome, ed. Studium, 1989, p. 200.

³² M. Vegetti, *Guida alla lettura...*, p. 48-49.

³³ E. Des Places, *Pindare et Platon*, p. 115.

³⁴ P. Impara, *Platone, Filosofo dell’educazione*, ed. Armando, Rome, 2002, p. 56.

³⁵ Plato, *Republic*, 411e.

³⁶ A. Brancacci, *Musique et Philosophie en République II-IV*, in the collective work M. Dixsaut, *Études sur la République de Platon*, 1. *De la justice, éducation, psychologie et politique*, ed. Vrin, 2005, p. 103.

³⁷ Plato, *Republic*, 415a-d.

and war, since the guardians are basically the only class gets involved with war³⁸, the importance of military γυμναστική, women's access to γυμναστική and to the whole educational system of the guardians (women can actually become guardians)³⁹. In fact the most noticeable characteristic that the *Republic* “inherits” from the city of Sparta is the basis of the educational program⁴⁰.

3 Δωριστὶ ζῆν and the Doric ideal

...I counsel you, his friends, to imitate Dion in his devotion to his fatherland and in his temperate mode of life; and to endeavor to carry out his designs, though under better auspices; and what those designs were you have learnt from me clearly.

...μιμεῖσθαι μὲν συμβουλεύω Δίωνα ύμιν τοῖς φίλοις τὴν τῆς πατρίδος εὔνοιαν καὶ τὴν τῆς τροφῆς σώφρονα δίαιταν, ἐπὶ λωρόνων δὲ ὄρνιθων τὰς ἔκείνου βουλήσεις πειρᾶσθαι ἀποτελεῖν - αἱ δὲ ἥσαν, ἀκηκόατε παρ' ἐμοῦ σαφῶς⁴¹.

With these words, Plato in his 7th letter incites the Syracusans who were friends of Dion to imitate him, if they really want to reform the decadent city of Syracuse. In this effort the Syracusans must abandon, according to Plato, the Sicilian way of life, preferring the Doric way. One could wonder why Plato is so nonnegotiable when it comes to the way of life that the Syracusans ought to follow. Could we suppose that Plato suggests the *Δωριστὶ ζῆν* as a better way of life comparing to what the Syracusans had adopted at that period, only because Syracuse's origin was Doric? Could Plato simply suggest a return to a traditional way of life, one that used to be familiar, instead of something completely different and new? That is a simple explanation and to be quite honest, we can't totally reject it, but it seems to ignore Plato's philosophical background and beliefs. Another suggestion that one could come up with is the “accusation” against Plato's φιλολακνισμός. That simply means that Plato prefers the *Δωριστὶ ζῆν*, because he's a “friend” of the Spartans, a simple admirer of the city of Lycurgus, but that is a suggestion completely out of context. Apart from that Plato always showed his “dedication” to the city of Athens. We read in the *Laws*:

...I regard as absolutely true the common saying that “good Athenians are always incomparably good,” for they alone are good not by outward compulsion but by inner disposition.

...καί μοι νῦν ἡ τε φωνὴ προσφιλῆς ύμῶν, τὸ τε ύπὸ πολλῶν λεγόμενον, ώς ὅσοι Ἀθηναίων εἰσὶν ἀγαθοὶ διαφερόντως εἰσὶν τοιοῦτοι, δοκεῖ ἀληθέστατα λέγεσθαι. Μόνοι γὰρ ἀνεύ ἀνάγκης αὐτοφυῶς, θείᾳ μοίρᾳ ἀληθῶς καὶ οὕτι πλαστῶς εἰσὶν ἀγαθοὶ⁴².

The reason we used the *Republic* in this paper is one of the dialogue's purpose, which is of course the reform (individually and collectively). It's an imaginary and ideal reform; nevertheless, it is a reform. That is the common element with the 7th letter which has to do with Plato's plans for reform in Syracuse. In the *Republic* the Doric ideal seems to be quite essential, while the *Δωριστὶ ζῆν* is the basic element that the Syracusans should be looking for, if they

³⁸ *Ibid.* 374.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 456d – 457b.

⁴⁰ M. Vegetti, *Guida alla lettura...*, p. 49-50.

⁴¹ Plato, *Letters*, VII 336c.

⁴² Plato, *Laws*, 642c.

really want to reform their city. Plato probably thinks that the Doric way of life, a modest and *σωφρων* way of living away from excess, suits best for a city that wants to create real philosophers.

4 Conclusions

The Sicilian life that was allegedly a blissful life would never allow anyone to become virtuous with all these excesses on behalf of the appetitive part of the soul. Instead of this “blissful life” Plato incites the Syracusans to turn to Doric way of life. The phrase *Δωριστὶ ζῆν* in its context in the 7th letter is an important one, because it probably shows the significance of adopting the Doric way of life, in order to create the appropriate conditions for a political reform. Examining the guardians who are the *άριστοι* of the ideal city, a class that constitutes the platonic idea of aristocracy in the *Republic*, we can understand that they receive many important traits from the Doric ideal (especially the educational program). Combining the concept of *Δωριστὶ ζῆν* with the Doric ideal, we suggest that the Doric model is quite important for the Athenian philosopher functioning as the cornerstone of reform.

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