

“LIKE SOME ODYSSEUS”:
AELIUS ARISTIDES AND PLATO’S VISITS TO SICILY

by

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the comparison between Plato’s visits to Sicily and Odysseus’ *nostos* in Plato’s *Seventh Letter* and Aelius Aristides’ *Defence of Oratory* and *Defence of the Four*. It traces Aristides’ reformulation of the comparison which aims to cast a shadow on the philosopher and his encounters with Dionysius the Younger.

The Platonic *Seventh Letter*¹, much of which is dedicated to an explanation of Plato’s motivations for undertaking his three Sicilian journeys, indicates that the philosopher’s visits to Sicily and his encounters with the Syracusan tyrants provoked much discussion among his contemporaries². Extant fragments and paraphrases of Hellenistic anti-Platonic writings allow us to identify some of the charges raised against Plato: he was accused of being an associate of tyrants and a treacherous friend to Dion, he was depicted as a parasite at the court of Dionysius, and he was censured for gluttony and greed³.

The interest of Greek authors in Plato’s activity in Sicily was enduring. In the second century CE, Aelius Aristides, known for his familiarity with and employment of the anti-Platonic tradition⁴, kept referring to Plato’s Sicilian journeys in

¹ On the *Seventh Letter*, see e.g. MORROW 1962: 44–81; EDELSTEIN 1966; BRISSON 2004: 133–166; KNAB 2006. The still debated issue of the authenticity of the *Seventh Letter* has little relevance for my argument. In my discussion of the letter I will refer to “Plato” speaking in the text, by which I mean the first-person voice created by the author of the letter.

² On the much debated issue of Plato’s Sicilian voyages and their account in the *Seventh Letter*, see VON FRITZ 1968; SOUILHÉ 1977: XXXIII–CII.

³ For the depiction of Plato’s Sicilian journeys in anti-Platonic writings, see GEFFCKEN 1928: 89 f. and RIGINOS 1976: 70–92. For some modern reflection on Plato’s involvement in Sicily, see LILLA 2001: 193–216 (“Afterword: The Lure of Syracuse”).

⁴ The customarily used term “anti-Platonic tradition” is misleading since it suggests that the authors of anti-Platonic texts shared intellectual backgrounds and outlooks as well as motivation, which certainly was not the case. I retain the term, however, as a useful shorthand term for texts directed against Plato, written by authors of different backgrounds and in different historical and