

SOPHRON THE COMOEDOS

An inscription found in the theatre of Hierapolis (Pammukkale) in Phrygia and recently published is of interest both in itself and because it may help to elucidate a passage of Arrian's *Discourses of Epictetos*.¹ It is carved on a statue-base of white marble, and runs as follows:²

Ἀγαθῇ τύχῃ
Ἡ βουλὴ καὶ ὁ δῆμος καὶ ἡ γερουσία
Μ(άρκον) Ἰούλιον Σώφρονα κωμω-
δόν, τὸν ἑαυτῶν πολίτην,
ἡθῶν καὶ φιλοπονίας ἕνεκεν,
καὶ ἡ ἱερὰ σύνοδος τῶν ἀπὸ τῆς οἴκου-
μένης ἱε[ρ]ονε[ικῶν καὶ στεφανειτῶν].

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Lines 1 and 7 are carved respectively on the upper and lower moulding; on the status of lines 6 and 7 see below.

To Good Fortune. The council, people and *gerousia* (honoured) M(arcus) Julius Sophron, *comoedos*, their own citizen, for his moral character and his industry, and (so did) the holy synod of victors from all the world in holy and crowned contests.

3. The names 'M. Julius' are combined at Hierapolis in an inscription from the north necropolis, according to which a M. Julius Macedonicus and his wife Aelia Julia leave a *stephanotikon* (a foundation for garlands to be placed on their tomb) to 'the image-bearers of Apollo Archegetes'.³ 'Sophron' is a fairly common name, of which the most famous bearer is the mimographer from Syracuse;⁴ it might therefore have been a professional name of *comoedoi*, though only one *comoedos* called Sophron was previously known, and as will be seen later he may well be identical. *κωμωδός* at the end of the line is translated by Ritti as 'poeta (o attore) comico', but 'comedian' or 'comic actor' are the only possible translations; this is the invariable sense in later Greek literature, and the dozens of inscriptions mentioning *κωμωδοί* always refer to actors, not to writers, who are *ποιηταὶ κωμωδίας* (*κωμωδιῶν*) or *κωμωδοποιοί*.⁵

5. This belongs in a series of phrases assembled by Louis Robert whereby men (and occasionally women) of culture, and by extension public entertainers of various kinds, are praised for their combination of moral character and artistic skills. To take only *comoedoi*, one at Rhodes is honoured [*τᾶς*] *ἰς τὰν ὑπόκρισιν ἀκριβ[είας καὶ τᾶς] τῶν ἡθῶν σεμνότητ[ος ἕνεκεν]*; one at Ephesos *ἀρετῆς ἕνεκα καὶ σώφρονος ἀσκήσεως καὶ τῆς περὶ τὴν ὑπόκρισιν ἐμπειρίας*; one at Parion is commemorated by the colony

¹ I have used the following special abbreviations: Friedlaender ii.¹⁰ = L. Friedlaender, *Darstellungen aus der Sittengeschichte Roms*, ed. G. Wissowa (Leipzig, 1922); Judeich = W. Judeich, 'Inscripfen', *Altertümer von Hierapolis*, Jahrbuch des Kais. Deutschen Arch. Inst., Ergänzungsheft iv (Berlin, 1898); Moretti, *Iscr. Ag. Gr.* = L. Moretti, *Iscrizioni Agonistiche Greche* (Rome, 1953); Ritti = T. Ritti, *Hierapolis. Scavi e Ricerche* 1; *Fonti Letterarie ed Epigrafiche*, Archaeologica 53 (Rome, 1985); Bull. = J. and L. Robert, *Bulletin épigraphique*, appearing annually in *REG*.

² Ritti, 96 no. 11, with Pl. 10c.

³ Judeich no. 153; cf. H. W. Pleket, *Mnemosyne* 23 (1970), 194.

⁴ Körte, *RE* iii A (1927), 1100–4.

⁵ J. B. O'Connor, *Chapters in the History of Actors and Acting in Ancient Greece* (Chicago, 1908), 23–5; P. Ghiron-Bistagne, *Recherches sur les Acteurs dans la Grèce antique* (Paris, 1976), 123–4. The same error is corrected by J. and L. Robert, *Bull.* 1958.160, p. 223, discussing Moretti, *Iscr. Ag. Gr.* no. 74.

propter singularem artis prudentiam et morum probitatem.⁶ φιλοπονία can be used of intellectual as well as physical 'application', 'industry': thus Isocrates talks of ἡ περὶ τὴν παιδείαν φιλοπονία, and a poet is praised by a little city of Hellenistic Laconia, Boeai, [ἐπὶ τε τῇ φιλο]πονία καὶ εὐ[νοία] ᾧ τυγχάνει ἔχων].⁷ The choice of so solemn an expression may be due not only to decorum, but to the fact that arts like comedy were frequently practised in competitions, ἀγῶνες, where the rules could be very strict and offending performers could be ejected bodily. Even Nero feared to be 'removed from the competition' when he dropped the staff he was carrying in a tragic role; Lucian, with perhaps some exaggeration, describes how a bad citharode was 'dragged by the *mastigophoroi* across the middle of the stage with his legs bloodied by the whips'.⁸

6-7. These are written in smaller letters than the first five, and line 7 is cut on the lower moulding of the base: the general effect is of an addition which spoils the original layout. These two lines also disturb the syntax since, for reasons that will be discussed, the honorand could not be the fellow-citizen of an association whose members were 'from all the world'. The lines must therefore have been added after the original text had been drafted and inscribed, and not omitted by a simple lapse of memory.⁹

Ritti's restoration of 7 is certainly correct, but it is not enough merely to refer to 'la synodos degli artisti'. The various associations of athletes and artists in the imperial period have been much discussed.¹⁰ The 'synod of world *hieronikai* and *stephanitai*' first appears, at least under this name, in a famous letter of M. Antonius to the *koionon* of Asia; the latest reference seems to be an inscription precisely from Hierapolis, in which ἡ εἰεροτάτη σοῖνοδος καὶ ὑ ἀπὸ τῆς οἰκουμένης ἱερωνῖκαι join the council, people and *gerousia* in honouring the poet Q. Fabius (?) Secundus.¹¹ 'World *hieronikai* and *stephanitai*' must be prizewinners in 'sacred' contests, that is, those in which the prize was a crown and not money. 'Synod', however, does not always have to denote a fixed, unitary organization, but may mean the totality of those present at any one contest; and though much of the evidence suggests that, permanent or not, the synod consisted primarily of athletes, the present inscription together with the one for the poet Secundus shows that on such occasions artists must have been involved, and may even have constituted a majority.¹²

⁶ IG xii.1.84 (Rhodes: for the text given here, Robert, *REG* 49 [1936], 246 [*Opera Minora Selecta* 1.682]); *Gk. Inscr. Brit. Mus.* iii.606 (*Inscriften von Ephesos* v.1606); Dessau, *Inscr. Lat. Sel.* 5180 (*Inscriften von Parion* no. 12). Generally, Robert, *REG* 49 (1936), 245-6 (*Opera Minora Selecta* 1.681-2); id., *Études épigraphiques et philologiques* (Paris, 1938), 25 n. 5. J. Nollé, *ZPE* 41 (1981), 197 n. 3, collects a few examples without reference to Robert.

⁷ Isocr. 1.45; IG v.1.952 line 12.

⁸ Suet. *Nero* 24.1; Luc. *Adv. Ind.* 9. Cf. Aristides 29.14, κἂν εἰς τις ἀπάδη τῶν χορευτῶν, τοῦτον ἐκβάλλομεν; Philostr. *VS* 1.23.3, p. 45 K., a tragic actor appeals against the sophist Polemo, ἐξελαθῆναι γὰρ παρ' αὐτοῦ κατ' ἀρχὰς τοῦ δράματος.

⁹ As supposed by Ritti, 96.

¹⁰ For a full collection of the evidence, F. Poland, *Geschichte des griechischen Vereinswesens* (Leipzig, 1909), 129-52; among important discussions thereafter, L. Robert, *Hellenica* 7 (1949), 122-3; C. A. Forbes, *CPh* 50 (1955), 238-52; H. W. Pleket, *ZPE* 10 (1973), 197-227 with the criticisms of J. and L. Robert, *Bull.* 1973.75; D. J. Geagan, *Hesperia* 44 (1975), 397-400.

¹¹ Letter of Antonius: R. K. Sherk, *Roman Documents from the Greek East* (Baltimore, 1969), no. 57, with ample bibliography; on the priest of the synod, Charopinos, see now *Inscriften von Ephesos* iii.902 line 8 (J. and L. Robert, *Bull.* 1977.416). Hierapolis: Judeich no. 36, now republished by Ritti, 96 no. 10 with Pl. 10 b. Ritti's date, 'fine del II o III sec. d. C.', is too early at the upper end: the inscription has usually been put in the late third century (thus J. Keil, *JOEAI* 14 [1911], Beibl. 132).

¹² On the hierarchy of Greek contests, L. Robert, *CRAI* (1970), 6-7; for 'synod' referring to an occasional gathering, Dittenberger in *OGIS* 494 n. 8; J. and L. Robert, *Bull.* 1976.249; and

The motives for erecting honorific statues varied with the place and occasion, but for this one a clue is given by the fact that the base was found in the theatre. This building was dedicated to the patron-god of the city, Apollo Archegetes, and it must have been the setting for at least a good part of Hierapolis' principal contest, the Pythia.¹³ In other instances, the *hieronikai* thank citizens who had shown generosity on the occasion of a contest: thus at Tralles 'the world *hieronikai* and *stephanitai*' honour a man who had 'acted gloriously as gymnasiarch at his own expense' (*γυμνασιαρχήσαντα παρ' ἑαυτοῦ φιλοδόξως*), that is, had distributed free oil, no doubt at one or more of the several contests of the city.¹⁴ Though the synod might have joined in honouring Sophron merely for his generosity to visiting contestants, it would be surprising if this *comoedos* were not also one eminent in his art, and one of their own number; for similar reasons the synod could hardly have joined in praising the poet Secundus as 'the best poet in any metre' (*παντὸς μέτρου πνητὴν ἄριστον*) if he were in fact of no distinction.¹⁵

Ritti dates the inscription of Sophron on the evidence of the lettering and wording to the end of the second century or the first half of the third. The wording, as has been seen, would permit a date as early as the triumviral period. The photograph shows the script to be slightly elongated, as often in later inscriptions, but to be generally very sober; there are only three ligatures, two of them in the crowded last two lines; the orthography, especially when compared with the inscription for Secundus, is correct. A date rather earlier than Ritti's could be accepted if there were reasons to propose it.

In his *Discourses of Epictetos* Arrian gives a vivid and amusing account of an unnamed procurator of Epiros 'who had given somewhat indecorous support to a certain comedian' (*ἀκοσμότερον σπουδάσαντος κωμωδῶ τινι*). The procurator disposed his slaves in different parts of the theatre when the comedian was performing, and joined them in 'shrieking' (*κέκραγεν*) in his support; though the majority of the spectators favoured another actor, the procurator prevailed and was publicly jeered (*λοιδορηθέντος*). Epictetos advises him not to enter the theatre already determined that 'Sophron must be crowned'; when the procurator insists 'I want Sophron crowned', the philosopher advises him thus: 'Conduct as many contests as you want at home, and crown him victor at the Nemea, Pythia, Isthmia, Olympia; but do not overreach in public and usurp the general right'.¹⁶

The scene of the exchange, however much Arrian may have embroidered it, is

compare the papyri recording decisions of the various synods at particular contests like the Sebasta of Naples (U. Wilcken, *Grundzüge und Chrestomathie der Papyrskunde* 1 [Leipzig, 1913], Chrest. no. 156).

¹³ Dedication: Ritti, 108–13, replacing Judeich no. 4 (*IGRR* iv.808). Pythia: G. von Papen, *Zeitschr. für Numism.* 26 (1907), 161–77; L. Robert, *La Déesse de Hiéropolis-Castabala* (Paris, 1964), 91.

¹⁴ *MDAI(A)* 21 (1896), 262–3. On this inscription and the contests of Tralles, L. Robert, *Études anatoliennes* (Paris, 1937), 418–29; id., *Symbolae R. Taubenschlag = Eos* 48, ii (1957), 237–8 (*Opera Minora Selecta* 1.652–3). On this sense of *γυμνασιαρχεῖν*, Dittenberger in *OGIS* 479 n. 9: it has often been discussed by A. Wilhelm and L. Robert.

¹⁵ Secundus: above, p. 209.

¹⁶ Arr. *Diss. Epict.* 3.4. Both the 'shrieks' and the 'jeers' are doubtless to be understood as acclamations: on these in the theatre, A. Cameron, *Circus Factions* (Oxford, 1976), 234–7; C. P. Jones, *The Roman World of Dio Chrysostom* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), 92–3. 'At home' refers to the custom of mounting dramatic performances in private houses, where they may easily have taken the form of contests: cf. A. Carandini *et al.*, *Filosofiana: La Villa di Piazza Armerina* (Palermo, 1982), 287–91.

Nicopolis in Epiros, the capital of the province and the place of Epictetos' retirement. Arrian's stay there is usually dated about 108, and it has been thought that the procurator is a well-known Corinthian and friend of Plutarch, Cn. Cornelius Pulcher.¹⁷

Nicopolis had two theatres. The larger, still well preserved, was in a suburb north of the city, and with the nearby stadium and gymnasium served Nicopolis' great international contest of the Actia, refounded by Augustus in 28 and held every four years.¹⁸ This was a 'crowned contest' (*ἀγὼν στεφανίτης*), in which a winner was not only a *ἱερονίκης* but an *Ἀκτιονίκης*; it was the first such contest to be added to the ancient 'period' of the Olympia, Pythia, Isthmia, and Nemea.¹⁹ Though Sophron may have been competing in some minor local festival (since even the so-called *θέμιδες* offered a crown as well as a cash prize), it seems likely that the crown which excited so much discord was for comedy, either ancient or modern, at the Actia.²⁰ That may be the point of Epictetos' reference to the four contests of the so-called 'ancient period': even if Sophron won at the Actia, that was not one of the 'big four'.²¹

This incident illustrates a feature of ancient contests which is particularly marked in the Roman period. Umpires and judges were no doubt always liable to be swayed by bribery or prejudice: the Eleans were suspected from an early date of favouring their own citizens at the Olympia.²² When the power of Rome became paramount, however, and the emperors took an active interest in the spread and control of Greek contests, the danger was all the greater.²³ The corruption employed by Nero and the crooked judgements in his favour were notorious.²⁴ In the late second century, the great tragedian Clemens kept losing because his native city, Byzantium, was under siege from the forces of Septimius Severus; but the sophist Hippodromos, presiding at the Pythia when Clemens was in competition, cast the decisive vote in his favour, and was upheld when the runner-up appealed to the emperor.²⁵ When a contestant had the support of the emperor present in person, it was hard for the judges to vote against him, so that a great pancratiast of the late second century claims 'never to have won a contest by royal favour' (*μήτε κατὰ χάριν βασιλικὴν ἀγῶνα ἔχων*).²⁶ It is not therefore surprising in a small province like Epiros, where the procurator was the

¹⁷ Date: F. Millar, *JRS* 55 (1965), 142. Pulcher: Stein, *PIR*² C 1424; Millar, art. cit. 147.

¹⁸ General topography of the city in J. Gagé, *MEFR* 53 (1936), 41–58; F. Schöber, *RE* xvii (1936), 512–16; on the great theatre, W. M. Leake, *Travels in Northern Greece* i (London, 1835), 190–2, with plan at end. Actia: Str. 7.7.6 (325 C.); Suet. *Aug.* 18.2; Cass. Dio 51.1.2; Friedlaender, ii.¹⁰ 147–8; Gagé, art. cit. 91–8; T. C. Sarikakis, *AE* (1965), 145–62.

¹⁹ *Ἀκτιονίκης*: to those listed by Sarikakis (n. 18), 157–62, nos. 7, 10, 17, 28, 34, 35, add J. M. Cook, *The Troad* (Oxford, 1973), 414 no. 54 (*Ann. épigr.* 1973, no. 503), H. Zilliacus *et al.*, *Fifty Oxyrhynchus Papyri* (Helsinki, 1959), no. 25 lines 22, 29. On the system of the period and the various additions, J. and L. Robert, *Bull.* 1954.57.

²⁰ On the classes of entry, Sarikakis (n. 18), 152; I hope to discuss comedy in competitions of this era elsewhere.

²¹ For a different explanation, Millar (n. 17), 147.

²² Paus. 6.3.7, with Frazer's note.

²³ Cf. L. Robert, *REA* 65 (1963), 312–13, discussing a statue of Justice erected in the theatre of Iasos, probably of imperial date: id., *À travers l'Asie mineure*, Bibl. Ec. Fr. Ath. Rome 139 (Paris, 1980), 427 on Lucian, *VH* 2.22, 'In the poets' class, Homer was in fact far superior, but Hesiod won all the same'.

²⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 16.4; Suet. *Nero* 24.2; Cass. Dio 63.9.2, 14.1, 21.2.

²⁵ Philostr. *VS* 2.27.2, pp. 115–16 K.; on this incident, Robert, *RPh* 41 (1967), 26–7; Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World* (London, 1977), 451.

²⁶ Moretti, *Inscr. Gr. Urbis Romae* 1.240 lines 14–15 (*Inscr. Ag. Gr.* no. 79); cf. Robert in *L'Épigramme grecque*, Entr. Hardt xiv (1968), 191–2.

emperor's friend and himself a kind of 'little Caesar',²⁷ that he should have exercised almost 'royal favour'.

Sophron, the *comoedos* of this incident, has drawn little attention. He is absent from the standard prosopographies of ancient actors and from the usual handbooks.²⁸ A recent prosopography of Nicopolitans includes him with this comment: 'He was in all probability a pantomime. He is mentioned as performing in Nicopolis, but it is possible that he was from another city and was simply visiting Nicopolis'.²⁹ There is no reason to make Sophron other than a *comoedos*, but it may be correct that he is from elsewhere. For it is tempting to identify Arrian's Sophron with the M. Julius Sophron of Phrygian Hierapolis. The first was in all probability a *hieronikes*, and certainly an esteemed *comoedos*: the second is a *comoedos* honoured by his city and by the synod of *hieronikai* and *stephanitai*. If this identification is right, the inscription must be roughly from the first quarter of the second century, not from the end of that century or the early third; it is unclear whether the incident in Arrian is earlier or later than the inscription.

According to the Suda, Epictetos himself was from Phrygian Hierapolis.³⁰ Though he shows no attachment at all to his native city, the presence of a noted actor from there might have caught his attention, or at least led the procurator to expect from him a more sympathetic ear.

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²⁷ Cf. Epictetos' language in this very passage, sections 2, 4, 7–8.

²⁸ Not in O'Connor (n. 5) or in the supplement of I. Parenti, *Dioniso* 35 (1961), 5–29; not in *RE* or *PIR*.

²⁹ T. C. Sarikakis, *AE* 1970, 82–3 no. 161. Schenkl in the index of his *editio maior* of Epictetos (Leipzig, 1916), 500, makes him a mime; however, Friedlaender, ii.¹⁰ 145 and R. E. Fantham, *TAPhA* 114 (1984), 309, are correct.

³⁰ E 2424, 'Επίκτητος, Ἱεραπόλεως τῆς Φρυγίας, φιλόσοφος.