

## The Seven Sages as Performers of *Sophrosyne*

The Seven Sages of ancient Greece were famous for their practical wisdom, their political activities, their competition for a golden tripod, and for the pithy proverbs through which their wisdom was expressed. They lived during the late 7th and early 6th centuries BC (Mosshammer 1976). Although several lists with different Sages have come down to us, the most frequently cited list includes: Thales, Solon, Chilon, Periander, Pittacus, Bias, and Cleoboulus (Barkowski 1923: 2244; Martin 1998: 109).

This presentation will have three parts. First, I will summarize what is known about the Seven Sages and discuss the current state of scholarship about them. Next, I will attempt to add to this scholarship by focusing on their most characteristic quality, that of *sophrosyne*; a quality that has been neglected in recent discussions. Finally, I will briefly assess the importance of the Seven Sages to the history of Greek thought.

The most influential treatment of the Seven Sages remains that of Richard P. Martin (Martin 1998; Kurke 2011: 95-115 essentially follows Martin; see especially 102). Martin first demonstrates that the fragmentary nature of our earliest accounts of the Sages is due to the fact that these stories developed in oral tradition. (For a skeptical view of the Seven Sages tradition, see Fehling 1985; for other refutations of Fehling see Bollansée 1999, Busine 2002: 29-30, Engels 2010: 9-15 and Kurke 2011: 104.) Martin then concludes that the Sages were essentially performers of wisdom, in the sense that they publicly demonstrated their practical wisdom through their poetry, their political activity, their proverbs, and their competition for the prize of wisdom (Martin 1998: 119-20).

Martin's observations are important, but he does not sufficiently recognize that the qualities he has named are largely due to the characteristics of late archaic period in which the

Sages lived. In order to understand the content of the Sages' wisdom, we need to consider the content of their proverbs. When we examine their proverbs (such as "Know Thyself" and "Nothing in Excess"), it is clear that the single, most important characteristic of their wisdom is that of *sophrosyne* (as recognized by Snell 1938: 14). *Sophrosyne* combines the qualities of self-control, self-knowledge, and the acceptance of limit (North 1966: 10).

But the Sages' advocacy of *sophrosyne* was not limited to their sayings; they also followed their own precepts. One of the most famous stories told about them is their contest for a golden tripod, on which was inscribed the words, "for the wisest." In this legend, the tripod is first awarded to one of the Sages, who gives it to another, until the tripod has made the rounds of all of the Sages, at which point they dedicate it to Apollo at Delphi (Wiersma: 1933-34). Recent scholars have claimed that this *agon* fits well with the competitive nature of archaic Greek culture (Kurke 2011: 111), but I would point out that this contest is really an anti-contest. Each of the Sages believes he is NOT the wisest and that the others are more deserving than he is. Thus, I would argue that the Sages' contest for the prize of wisdom is a performance of their *sophrosyne*, and, as such, it functions as an alternative to the agonistic aspects of ancient Greek culture rather than as an example of them.

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