

Chilon of Sparta: The Man and the Legend

Several lists of the Seven Sages circulated in antiquity, but the most frequently cited list includes Cleoboulus of Lindus, Solon of Athens, Chilon of Sparta, Bias of Priene, Pittacus of Mytilene, Thales of Miletus, and Periander of Corinth. The Seven Sages were famous for their letters, banquets, the stories of their wisdom and especially their proverbs. One of the most famous stories is that of the golden tripod, which the Delphic Oracle proclaimed should be sent to "the one who is the wisest." It was sent first to Thales, who modestly sent it to another Sage, who, in turn, sent it to another. After being sent to all the Sages, the tripod finally reached Solon, who sent it back to Thales (Diogenes Laertius 1.27-29). In this story, the Sages' wisdom is demonstrated through their humility and self-restraint, virtues that comprise the Greek concept of *sophrosyne*. And the Sages' most famous proverbs demonstrate *sophrosyne* as well. According to Plato (*Protagoras* 343A), the Sages all met together at Delphi to inscribe on Apollo's temple their most famous sayings, "Know Thyself," and "Nothing in Excess" (Rössler: 357). These letters, stories, and proverbs demonstrating the Sages' *sophrosyne* are delightful, but they are the stuff of legend. And, as legend, they give us more information about the people who tell these stories than they do about the Sages themselves (Martin).

But these Sages were real historical figures, who lived during the 6th century BC, a time of tremendous upheaval for the Greek city-states (Engels: 9). So it is reasonable to ask who these men were as historical figures and why they were included on this list of the seven wisest men. Is there a connection between these men's lives and the reason why they were chosen for this famous list? Or was the selection made on an entirely different basis?

Since it is impossible to look closely at all seven Sages, I will focus on Chilon of Sparta, as being a typical sage. Chilon appears on almost all the ancient lists, including the most frequently cited list, cited above, which probably goes back to Aristotle (Barkowski: 2243-44). On the other hand, Chilon was not a household name, such as Solon or Thales, who were so well-known that they might not be representative. And the fact that Chilon was chosen, rather than the legendary Lycurgus, seems to indicate that his life and achievements were important factors in his selection. At the end of my talk I will look briefly at the lives of the other six Sages, to see whether we can discern a common pattern in their lives and achievements, which can help us understand on what basis these men were chosen for the list of seven.

Chilon was eponymous ephor in Sparta in 556/5 BC (Richer: 118-19). During the classical period, the ephors exercised considerable control over the kings' activities, as well as performing other key administrative duties, and they seem to have functioned "as popular, anti-aristocratic officials" (Cartledge: 510). Chilon has frequently been seen as the "great reforming lawgiver" who increased the powers of the ephors to the strong position they had in the classical period (Finley: 162; Luther: 6).

But Chilon also seems to have played an important role in Sparta's foreign policy. A papyrus fragment from the second century BC, probably an epitome of a 4th or 3rd century historical work, lists several tyrants who were deposed by the Spartans during the year that Chilon was ephor (Hammond; Leahy).

Thus Chilon not only helped to strengthen Sparta's institutions, but he was also one of the principal architects of the policies that laid the foundation for Sparta's strength and prosperity during the classical period.

A quick look at the lives of the other six Sages shows a similar pattern. These men were lawgivers, rulers, judges, and engineers, who made tremendous contributions to the lives of ordinary citizens. The lives and great achievements of these men reveal a strong contrast to their legendary *sophrosyne*.

Bibliography

Barkowski, O. 1923. "Sieben Weise." *RE* II A 2: 2242-2264.

Cartledge, P. 2012. "Ephors." *OCD*⁴.

Engels, J. 2010. *Die Sieben Weisen: Leben, Lehren und Legenden*. München: Beck.

Finley, M. 1987. "Sparta." In *The Use and Abuse of History*. New York: Penguin. Pages 161-77.

Hammond, N. G. L. 1956. "The Family of Orthagoras." *CQ* n.s. 6: 45-53.

Leahy, D. M. 1959. "Chilon and Aeschines Again." *The Phoenix* 13: 31-37.

Luther, A. 2002. "Chilon von Sparta." In *Gelehrte in der Antike: Alexander Demandt zum 65. Geburtstag*. Pages 1-16.

Martin, R. P. 1998. "The Seven Sages as Performers of Wisdom." In *Cultural Poetics in Archaic Greece*. New York: Oxford.

Richer, N. 1998. *Les Éphores*. Paris: Sorbonne.

Rösler, W. 1991. "Die Sieben Weisen." In *Weisheit*. München: Funk. Pages 357-65.