

STUDENTS' SUICIDE IN PTOLEMAIC ALEXANDRIA?

The sketchy and largely hearsay evidence for the suicide allegedly committed by the listeners of the Cyrenaic Hegesias, who is commonly believed to have taught his pessimistic ethics in Alexandria around the first decade of the 3rd century BC,¹ comes down to us from three sources. These, in chronological order, are Cicero *Tusc.* 1. 83, Valerius Maximus 8. 9 (ext.) 3 and Plutarch *De amore prolis* 497 D 5. The vulgate version of the story runs as follows: Hegesias showed life to be unbearably awful, and communicated his doctrine in so convincing a manner that some of his students later killed themselves; consequently, King Ptolemy (Soter) prohibited him from delivering these deadly lectures. This anecdote is supposedly confirmed by the nickname of Hegesias cited by Diogenes Laertius (2. 86) and in the *Suda* (α 3908, cf. π 1471) – Πεισιθάνατος, the “Death-Persuader”.² Of the above mentioned three testimonies two are probably derivative: Kurt Lampe, the current authority on the Cyrenaics, considers Plutarch to have borrowed immediately from Cicero, and forgets to mention Valerius Maximus altogether.³ Yet, even if the account of Valerius is of no independent value, the way he and Plutarch deal with their source helps to gain understanding of how the students’ suicide story actually came about. This curious anecdote, as the present study aims to prove, rests entirely on a misinterpretation of the crucial passage, that of Cicero, a closer look at which would reveal quite other, much less romantic story on the ground.

As is well known, in the opening sections of the *Tusculanes* it is argued that death is by no means an evil. Since soul is immortal, in losing life one will lose nothing worth keeping, but escape troubles that make our earthly existence virtually intolerable, 1. 83: *a malis igitur mors abducit, non a bonis, verum si quaerimus*. Next comes the locus in question:

¹ Murray 1893, 27; Pauen 1997, 34; Matson 1998, 553 *et al.*

² Murray 1893, 27.

³ Lampe 2015, 21; 125–127. Murray (1893, 25) mentions Valerius, but forgets Plutarch.

Et quidem hoc a Cyrenaico Hegesia sic copiose disputatur, ut is a rege Ptolemaeo prohibitus esse dicatur illa in scholis dicere, quod multi is auditis mortem sibi consciscerent.

The text quoted here and further on is that of the scrupulous 1905 edition by Th. W. Dougan.⁴ The MSS identified by him as the best have the mistaken *quo* instead of *quod* which might be thought-provoking⁵ if indeed not a result of haplography in the majuscule or a misunderstood abbreviation – to this we will shortly return.

The translation by A. E. Douglas renders the phrase thus: “Indeed the Cyrenaic Hegesias argued for this so eloquently that it is alleged he was forbidden by King Ptolemy to make those statements in his classes because many on hearing them committed suicide”.⁶ Wallace M. Matson, whose paper concentrates on Hegesias’s teaching, cites this rendering as perfectly reliable.⁷ Apparently, it makes of the suicide story a historically attested event. Yet readers may notice a deviation from Latin in the main clause: Douglas translates *disputatur* with the past tense “argued”. This seemingly trifling inaccuracy creates a false impression that Cicero means something that really took place in Egypt.⁸ But in fact, the present is quite coherent, for it is not with Hegesias’s lectures but his writings that the narration here is concerned. *Copiose* normally characterizes an exposition rich in arguments and examples (*ex. gr. Verr. 2. 3. 155; De or. 1. 48. 3*), and *copiose disputatur* must refer to the reasoning set out in some essay of Hegesias. Dougan comments on the text in just this way,⁹ whereas

⁴ Dougan 1905, 106.

⁵ Some earlier editors tried to defend it: see Kühner 1853, 139 *in app. cr.*

⁶ Douglas 1985, 65.

⁷ Matson 1998, 553. For the paraphrase of J. Clark Murray, whose essay is, to my knowledge, the only one before Matson’s dealing with this subject, see the next note.

⁸ The same mistake is made by Giannantoni (1958, 446 [F 3]: “questo concetto fu messo in discussione così ampiamente da Egesia Cirenaico che, si dice, il re Tolomeo gli vietò di insegnare quelle idee nelle scuole, poiché molti, uditele, si davano spontaneamente la morte”) and Gasparov 1975 [Марк Туллий Цицерон. *Избранные сочинения*. Пер. М. Л. Гаспарова], 235: “Недаром киренаик Гегесий рассуждал об этом так пространно, что царь Птолемей, говорят, запретил ему выступать на эту тему, потому что многие, послушавши его, кончали жизнь самоубийством”). Cf. Murray 1893, 27: “To this fact [i. e. that Hegesias was the author of Ἀποκτερεῶν] Cicero adds a second bit of information, that in his lectures in the schools of Alexandria this theme was treated by Hegesias with so much eloquence that he was said to have induced many of his hearers to commit suicide, and to have been therefore prohibited from lecturing on the subject by the Ptolemy of his day”.

⁹ Dougan 1905, 46 (n. 3), providing a valuable refinement: “the present is correct where the writings quoted are extant at the time when the quotation is made”.

Lampe's fairly literal translation combines a writer with a lecturer: "This is so abundantly argued by the Cyrenaic Hegesias, that he is said to have been prohibited by Ptolemy from giving this lecture in the schools, because many people were killing themselves after hearing it".¹⁰ Instead of ruling out the problem this version makes it salient. Where and when did the fatal lectures take place? How do they correspond to the book?

To this book of Hegesias Cicero returns having reported about a certain Cleombrotus of Ambracia, who "though suffering no molestation was so impressed by reading Plato's book,¹¹ that he threw himself from the wall into the sea". This, however, is told not as a bare historical fact but in paraphrasing a famous poem of Callimachus, 1. 84: *Callimachi quidem epigramma in Ambraciotam Cleombrotum est, quem ait, cum ei nihil accidisset adversi, e muro se in mare abiecisse lecto Platonis libro*. Apparently, we are dwelling in the world of books. Cicero casts an eye on the shelves of his Tusculan library reflecting on the power of persuasion possessed by the written word. All the more clear is the fact that *disputatur* is applied to someone who teaches – or should we say 'taught'? – philosophy not in school (as for instance in *Off.* 2, 87: *ab ullis philosophis ulla in schola disputatur*, or in *Fin.* 5. 18: *me in Academia tamquam philosophum disputaturum*), but in his book (as in *Lucull.* 7. 1–3: *sunt etiam, qui negent in iis qui in nostris libris disputent fuisse earum rerum, de quibus disputatur scientiam*).

What follows after the Callimachean example, is a brief survey of Hegesias' treatise, 1. 84. 3–7:

Eius autem, quem dixi, Hegesiae liber est Ἀποκατερῶν, quo a vita quidam per inediam discedens revocatur ab amicis; quibus respondens vitae humanae enumerat incommoda.

In Lampe's translation: "This Hegesias whom I mentioned has a book called *The Man Starving Himself to Death* in which a man who is departing from life by fasting is recalled by his friends. In response he enumerates the discomforts of human life". The standard 1918

¹⁰ Lampe 2015, 125.

¹¹ Viz. the *Phaedo*; cf. Call. *Ep.* 23 Pfeiffer (*AP* 7. 31): Εἵπας "Ἥλιε χαῖρε" Κλεόμβροτος ὠμβρακιώτης / ἤλατ' ἄφ' ὑψηλοῦ τείχεος εἰς Αἶδην, / ἄξιον οὐδὲν ἰδὼν θανάτου κακόν, ἀλλὰ Πλάτωνος / ἐν τῷ περὶ ψυχῆς γράμμ' ἀναλεξάμενος. Some good MSS (and editions) of the *Tusculanes* have *Theombrotum* which might even be authentic and thus a citation mistake rather than originally Callimachean. This Cleombrotus is possibly the one mentioned in *Phaedo* (59 c 3) among those who were absent.

Teubner-edition by Max Pohlenz differs from this in that it prints *quidem* instead of *quidam*. This seems to be an unconscious emendation or a simple pen slip of Pohlenz, since any remark concerning *quidem* in the apparatus is lacking and the editors are completely unaware of this alternative.¹² To be sure, even if *quidem* was intended as a conjecture,¹³ it is hardly acceptable, because Ἀποκαρτερῶν, to my opinion, presupposes an undefined speaker. But, erroneous as it may be, the particle hints at the correct understanding of the above-cited review: it would make Hegesias himself the protagonist of his book, which almost certainly was in a dialogue form with the *amici* also speaking. The author as a persona would by no means be an exception: it is the case with Cicero as probably was with Aristotle. And though the 'Self-Starver' remained, in fact, anonymous (*quidam*), the impression of an author speaking was no less unavoidable. The way Cicero concludes his excursion leaves no doubt that he perceived it likewise, 1. 84. 7–10: *Possem idem facere, etsi minus quam ille, qui omnino vivere expedire nemini putat* ("I could do the same, although less than he, who believes that living is advantageous to absolutely no one"). Obviously, *ille* is Hegesias, which means that he was thought to be the one behind *quidam* and Ἀποκαρτερῶν.

The author, who spoke in the person of a suicide starver trying to prove that the escape from the misery of life is to be found in death, was likely to gain notoriety among the reading public, and the Alexandrians were well known for their bent for contriving learned anecdotes. Both Matson and Lampe rightly notice that Cicero tells the story not on his own behalf, but prudently enough refers to the rumors (*dicatur*).¹⁴ Still, no interpreter elaborates on what exactly these rumors are. Previous to the causal clause (*quod multi is auditis sibi mortem consciscerent*) it is retold that Ptolemy prohibited Hegesias to deliver lectures on the matter he so eloquently discusses (*sic copiose disputatur, ut is a rege Ptolemaeo prohibitus esse dicatur illa in scholis dicere*). The "abundance", may it be repeated, refers to the book, and it is perfectly understandable that

¹² In his earlier commentary based on the school edition by Otto Heine (Pohlenz 1912) the text is rendered with *quidam*.

¹³ The lost hyparchetype (*X* in the sigla of Polenz) probably had *qdm*, which could stand for both a pronoun and a particle. The abbreviations of this kind are more than frequent throughout (Dogan notices most of them); *quo* in the immediate vicinity of *quidam* was contracted in the like way, some scribes understood it as *quod* (providing explanation for Ἀποκαρτερῶν), and Kühner kept this as *lectio difficilior*, while Bentley conjectured *in quo* (for the polemic see Kühner 1853, 139). The same case has been pointed out above.

¹⁴ Lampe 2015, 128; Matson 1998, 553; cf. Murray 1893, 27.

Cicero exhibits caution in reporting how an Alexandrian king reacted to a literary opus. His reason is given in the *quod*-sentence. Normally *quod* as adverbial subordinator expressing the cause needs no subjunctive. The subjunctive appears if there is an expression of opinion.¹⁵ The point at issue with this particular *quod* is that it falls within a reported speech where every statement is a priori subjective. To recount an event that has actually taken place indicative can certainly be used,¹⁶ but Cicero could have hardly put *consciverunt* instead of *consciscerent* or even *quoniam* instead of *quod* without thus pledging for the truth of the anecdote, whatever the exact reason for Ptolemy's verdict. But though subjunctive is not particularly instructive here, I still think that the reader should perceive the *quod*-clause as Ptolemy's assumption. (The same implication might have been intended by the clumsy *quo*.) Parallels are pretty difficult to find, but Sen. *Helv.* 9. 6 is much the same case: *Brutus ait C. Caesarem Mytilenas praetervectum, quia non sustineret videre deformatum virum*. Here, the *quia*-clause with subjunctive being part of Brutus' narration expresses not the narrator's view on things but most probably Caesar's own motivation for not visiting the exiled Marcellus. Seneca rephrases it shortly after speaking as if on his own authority, 9. 6–7: *illum exulem Brutus relinquere non potuit, Caesar videre; Brutus sine Marcello reverti se doluit, Caesar erubuit*. What seems to be decisive is that the text before *quod* gives no reason to believe that Hegesias has already practised as a lecturer. All we read about is that he has ingeniously put his theory on paper. Ptolemy is apprehensive that Hegesias's listeners might fall under the spell of his persuasive pessimism.¹⁷

That said, the text in question no longer remains evidence for the students' suicide. The story tells of how the king concerned about his subjects prohibited teaching what he had read in or heard about "The Self-Starver". This becomes more obvious after we examine how the legend was born. In this Valerius Maximus and Plutarch prove helpful. Their messages are much more affirmative. Valerius, who is closer to Cicero, puts it in the following way:

¹⁵ Ghiselli 1953, 231; Fugier 1989, 98. Both authors cite sets of examples.

¹⁶ Menge–Burkard–Schauer 2005, 659. *Quoniam* is more affirmative and unlike *quod* easily takes the indicative in indirect speech. Hereto see also Baños 2011, 222.

¹⁷ Olof Gigon seems to have put this sense in his translation, where the Latin subjunctive is literally rendered by the German: "weil viele, nachdem sie ihn gehört hatten, sich den Tod gegeben hätten" (Gigon 1992, 79). *Impf. consciscerent* stands for potentiality in the past. Note that *plqmpf. coni.* of *conscisco* is extremely rare and not to be found in Cicero. The same is true of *consciverunt*. Something like *quod multos is auditis mortem sibi consciscere posse putaret* would certainly be too heavy an ending for this already overloaded phrase.

Quantum eloquentia valuisse Hegesian Cyrenaicum philosophum arbitramur? qui sic mala vitae repraesentabat, ut eorum miseranda imagine audientium pectoribus inserta multis voluntariae mortis oppetendae cupiditatem ingeneraret: ideoque a rege Ptolomaeo ulterius hac de re disserere prohibitus est.

What power must we think the Cyrenaic philosopher Hegesias exercised through his eloquence? He displayed the troubles of life in such a way that having engraved their miserable image in the hearts of his listeners he filled many of them with the desire to take voluntary death, and thus king Ptolemy forbade him to talk on this subject further.

It can hardly be doubted that the story is drawn from Cicero: structure, rhythm and even vocabulary (*mala vitae*; *audientes*; *prohibitus*) reveal similarities that make the source recognizable. But the intention of Valerius is different. He needs an example of real persuasion working on real people to put it in line with Caesar, Peisistratus and Pericles (8. 9. 2 and ext. 1–2). Bookish eloquence does not suit him. Consequently, the Ciceronian pattern undergoes a certain transformation. *Eloquentia* and *repraesentabat* do not presume oral delivery and *audientium* can be said of readers. The concluding *disserere* is more definitive, since it seldom signifies written speech (cf. *De or.* 3. 128: *de natura rerum et disseruit et scripsit*). Taken separately, every component still allows Hegesias to be thought of as an eloquent writer. But put together they create a different image, namely that of an eloquent lecturer. The book of Hegesias, central in Cicero, is passed over in silence. Two elements are crucial for the birth of the suicide legend: (1) the imperfect *repraesentabat*, which has, just as in the above-cited translation by Douglas, replaced the present *disputatur* of the original text, implies that Hegesias had been lecturing over some time before Ptolemy interdicted it, and (2) *ulterius* going together with *disserere* explicitly confirms this.¹⁸ This implication is lacking in Cicero.

Unlike Valerius, who ignores Ἀποκατεργῶν, Plutarch seems to have centered on it. As one might have expected, it is the Greek word that grabs the attention of a Greek author in Cicero's report most. The historicity of the suicide story in Plutarch's rendering is indisputable. It is mentioned along with the terrible examples of people harming themselves contrary to human nature (as Oedipus who blinded himself: 497 D 2–4). The message is markedly short:

¹⁸ Cf. Walker 2004, 290: "for this reason King Ptolemy prevented him to give any more lectures on this topic".

Ἡγησίας <δὲ> διαλεγόμενος πολλοὺς ἔπεισεν ἀποκατερῆσαι τῶν ἀκροωμένων.

Hegesias, as he spoke, persuaded many of his listeners to starve themselves to death.

Lampe noticed that Plutarch describes the manner of suicide that coincides with the title of Hegesias's book in Cicero. In view of the expressive evidence his conclusion is too general: "The literary fiction has given birth to a biographical fiction".¹⁹ But it is quite obvious that Plutarch knows nothing about the book of Hegesias except for its title which he learned from Cicero (cf. 497 D 1: πολλοὶ σφάττουσιν ἑαυτοὺς καὶ κατακρημνίζουσιν: "throwing off the rock" reminds immediately at Cleombrotus the Ambracian). What suited his subject best was the "self-starving", so from the native word he came across in his source a pretty weird image has emerged: even if a real suicide was meant, it would be strange to think that all the victims of Hegesias' rhetoric have chosen this uncomfortable way of ending their lives.²⁰ The intermediate source is also worth considering, since it was Valerius Maximus who actually contrived the suicide story. Plutarch used the whole of biographical literature, Greek and Roman, and could have hardly overlooked a book as widely read as *Facta et dicta memorabilia*. One telling detail suggests his acquaintance with Valerius' report: τῶν ἀκροωμένων literally renders *audientium* which in turn goes back to *is auditis* in Cicero's text. (Could it be that the present participle διαλεγόμενος which risks creating an absurd impression of simultaneity echoes *disputatur*?)

To sum up, both derivative testimonies give a certain idea of how the students' suicide tale could have been read out of Cicero. The philosopher who propagates death might be nicknamed Πεισιθάνατος irrespective of the form of delivery. According to the core text Hegesias certainly did it in written form, and we have enough reasons not to believe that Cicero tells anything about his actual lecturing in Alexandria. Whether or not the story Cicero recalls has any historic background,²¹ it is about how

¹⁹ Lampe 2015, 128.

²⁰ What could make people imitate this particular manner of death, was the reading of Ἀποκατερωῶν: see n. 22.

²¹ In his note on Hegesias in the *RE* Wilhelm Weinberger goes as far as to suppose that Hegesias was banished from Alexandria (Weinberger 1912, 2607). In any case Hegesias was himself not prone to practise what he wrote about. Cf. Diog. Laert. 6, 48: Ἡγησίου παρακαλοῦντος χρῆσαι τι αὐτῷ [*sc.* Διογένει] τῶν συγγραμμάτων, "μάταιος", ἔφη, "τυγχάνεις, ὦ Ἡγησία, ὃς ἰσχάδας μὲν γραπτὰς οὐχ αἰρῇ, ἀλλὰ τὰς ἀληθινὰς· ἄσκησιν δὲ παριδὼν τὴν ἀληθινὴν ἐπὶ τὴν γεγραμμένην ὁρᾷς".

the king prohibited the dangerous theories from reaching the students audience. He would perhaps have banned Hegesias's book as well, had he known that copycat suicides could actually be induced by reading.²²

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- R. Kühner (ed.), *M. Tullii Ciceronis. Tusculanarum Disputationum libri quinque. Rec. et expl.* (Jena 1853).
- K. Lampe, *The Birth of Hedonism: The Cyrenaic Philosophers and Pleasure as a Way of Life* (Princeton 2015).

A philosopher, who comes to Diogenes asking him "to lend him one of his books" and is rebuked as someone who "passes over the true training and would apply himself to written rules", must be thought of primarily as a restrained man of letters rather than a charismatic teacher of many, and contrary to Lampe (2015, 21) οἱ Ἡγησιακοί in Diog. Laert 2. 86 and 2. 93 do not imply "a group of students", no more than the "Marxists" mean the students of Marx.

²² The "Werther effect" supposedly due to the "influence of suggestion of suicide": Philips 1974, 240. Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* caused many imitative suicides and was banned by some local authorities.

- W. I. Matson, "Hegesias the Death-Persuader; or, the Gloominess of Hedonism", *Philosophy* 73 (1998) 553–557.
- H. Menge, Th. Burkard, M. Schauer, *Lehrbuch der lateinischen Syntax und Semantik. Völlig neu bearbeitet* (Darmstadt 2005).
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The romantic story of the forceful lectures of the Cyrenaic Hegesias held responsible for suicides among his audience in Alexandria and consequently weaned off lecturing by Ptolemy Soter, although well-rooted both in derivative tradition, translation and commentary, hangs on a single *locus* in Cicero's *Tusc.* 1. 83 and appears to have been spun out of thin air. This piece aims at unwinding this story all the way through the fully derivative testimonies of Valerius Maximus and Plutarch, both serving their own ends, down to its source text which plainly is not about lecturing, but the power of the written word, to which Cicero, while disclaiming responsibility for the evidence, drew concern Ptolemy voiced about the potentially harmful theory.

История о самоубийстве, которое якобы совершили слушатели киренаика Гегесия, передана тремя авторами – Цицероном, Валерием Максимом и Плутархом. По общепринятой версии анекдот сводится к следующему: Гегесий будто бы доказывал, что жизнь нестерпима, причем у него выходило настолько убедительно, что некоторые из слушавших покончили с собой; в результате царь Птолемей запретил философу учить. В новейшей монографии о киренаиках К. Лампе сообщение Плутарха возводится к Цицерону, тогда как Валерий Максим оказывается и вовсе забытым. Между тем, оба производных свидетельства ценны для осмысления источника. Ключевое место (*Tusc.* 1, 83: hoc a Cyrenaico Hegesia sic copiose disputatur, ut is a rege Ptolemaeo prohibitus esse dicatur illa in scholis dicere, quod multi is auditis mortem sibi consciscerent) претерпевает одинаковое искажение в парафразе Валерия Максима (8, 9 [ext.], 3) и в ряде переводов на новые языки: *disputatur* передают прошедшим ("repraesentabat", "argued", "рассуждал", "fu messo in discussione", "was treated"), что создает ложное впечатление, будто автор "Тускуланских

бесед” повествует о событиях, некогда произошедших в Александрии. На деле речь о книге Гегесия, которую Цицерон реферирует ниже после пересказа эпиграммы Каллимаха на смерть Теомброта Амбракийского (1, 84). Валерий включает случай Гегесия в ряд исторических примеров, свидетельствующих о силе красноречия; книжная риторика ему не годилась. Комбинируя оба римских источника, Плутарх, в свою очередь, привлекает историю о самоубийстве в качестве иллюстрации противоестественной способности людей калечить и убивать себя (*De amore prolis* 497 D 2–5). Вычитанное у Цицерона заглавие книги Гегесия – Ἀποκάρτερόν – превращается в анекдот о том, как ученики Гегесия уморили себя голодом. Производные свидетельства ясно обнаруживают, как легенду вычитали из текста Цицерона. Если *disputatur* подразумевает не устные лекции, а книгу, значит, лекции упоминаются только один раз – в придаточном причины *quod multi is auditis mortem sibi consciscerent*. Хотя вся история передана с чужих слов, описывается, думаем, не историческое событие, а суждение Птолемея (для сравнения годится *Sen. Dial.* 12, 9, 6, где в чужой рассказ вплетена высказанная Цезарем мотивировка): прочтя книгу, или узнав о ее содержании, царь запретил философу доказывать высказанные положения перед слушателями, опасаясь, что, подпав чарам убеждения, те могут совершить непоправимое.

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