

# Plutarch and the Sublime Hymn of Ofellius Laetus

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**J**OHANNES NOLLÉ has recently published the full text of an inscription from the Street of Domitian in Ephesus.<sup>1</sup> It commemorates a Platonic philosopher by the name of Ofellius Laetus:

Ὀφέλλιον Λαίτον Πλατωνικὸν φιλόσ[οφον]  
ἐπιδειξάμενον λόγων καὶ ἠθῶν πᾶ[σαν]  
ἀρετήν·  
εἰ κατὰ Πυθαγόραν ψυχὴ μεταβαίνει εἰς ἄλλον,  
ἐν σοί, Λαίτε, Πλάτων ζῆ πάλι σωζόμενος.

Nollé argued incontestably that this Laetus is identical to the man known from a verse inscription at Athens with nearly the same two final lines as the Ephesian text (*IG II<sup>2</sup> 3816*):

θειολόγου Λαίτιο μετάρσιον ὕμνον ἀκούσας  
οὐρανὸν ἀνθρώποις εἶδον ἀνοιγόμενον·  
εἰ κατὰ Πυθαγόραν ψυχὴ μεταβαίνει εἰς ἄλλον,  
ἐν σοί, Λαίτε, Πλάτων ζῆ πάλι φαινόμενος.

The Athenian inscription has generally been dated to the third century A.D., although Dittenberger had assigned it to the first.<sup>2</sup> Now on the basis of the letter forms of the stone at Ephesus Nollé has established that this inscription must be dated to the first century of the Empire and accordingly that Dittenberger's date for the Athenian text was correct. The Ephesian text has therefore given us precious new evidence—not only Laetus' *nomen gentile* but his date and his rôle as a Platonic philosopher. J. and L. Robert have supplemented Nollé's conclusions with illuminating remarks on Laetus' *θεολογία* as well as an interpretation of Philostratus *Vit. Apol.* 4.21 (*Bull. épig.* 1981, 481).

The revelation that Laetus was a Platonic philosopher at last resolves some of Wilamowitz's uncertainty: "Nescio carmina interpreter

<sup>1</sup> "Ofellius Laetus, platonischer Philosoph," *ZPE* 41 (1981) 197–206.

<sup>2</sup> *Ad IG III 770*. In *IG II<sup>2</sup>* Kirchner preferred to accept the third-century date suggested by Kaibel (*Epigr.gr.* 882) on the basis of comparison with Plotinus.

an philosophiam an denique declamationes.”<sup>3</sup> Although, on the evidence adduced so far, Laetus’ hymn could have been in either prose or verse, it was undoubtedly philosophic in substance. As an exponent of the divine glory he would have created his piece with material from what another Platonist, Apuleius, calls *naturalis philosophia*.<sup>4</sup> The reference to the opening of heaven in the Athenian inscription must be more than a metaphor for rapture on the part of the listener. Laetus’ treatment of the Platonic god is related to the category of φυσικὸς ὕμνος, which Menander Rhetor (I 336f) was later to elaborate for prose authors who undertook to extol the divine by vivid descriptions of physical phenomena. For a Platonist the supreme god was ὑπερουράνιος,<sup>5</sup> and Apuleius emphasized in his *Apologia* the importance of heights beyond the height of heaven: *quin altitudinis studio secta ista [sc. Platonica] etiam caelo ipso sublimiora quaequam vestigavit et in extimo mundi tergo restitit*.<sup>6</sup> To evoke the Platonic god the speaker would have, quite literally, to imagine the opening of heaven and the divinity beyond it.

The significance of heavenly height in middle Platonism will serve to explain the expression μετάρσιος ὕμνος in the first line of the Athenian epigram. The hymn was an eloquent kind of μεταρσιολογία (sometimes called μεταρσιολεσχία, more often simply μετεωρολογία).<sup>7</sup> Laetus’ hymn was not, in any vague sense, sublime. It was sublime in the precise sense of *sublimis* in Apuleius. It was a hymn about the high realm of the world, heaven and what lay beyond: *ὕμνος περι μεταρσίων*.

It might naturally be expected that a Platonist of the early empire with a taste for τὰ φυσικά would have been of no small interest to that prolific Platonist, Plutarch, at the beginning of the second century A.D. The conclusions that can be drawn from the inscriptions of Ofellius Laetus make it more than likely that the hitherto mysterious Λαίτος, invoked twice by Plutarch in his *Aetia Physica*, is the same man (*Mor.* 911F, 913E). In both instances Plutarch’s Laetus had

<sup>3</sup> At Kaibel 882, and repeated by Kirchner.

<sup>4</sup> Apul. *De dog. Plat.* 189: *Nam, quoniam tres partes philosophiae congruere inter se primus obtinuit, nos quoque separatim dicemus de singulis, a naturali philosophia facientes exordium.* This is the category of τὰ φυσικά. For Apuleius as *philosophus Platonicus* see *Inscr. Lat. Algérie* I 2115 (Madaura).

<sup>5</sup> Pl. *Phdr.* 247C: τὸν δὲ ὑπερουράνιον τόπον οὔτε τις ὕμνησέ πω τῶν τῆδε ποιητῆς οὔτε ποτὲ ὕμνήσει κατ’ ἀξίαν.

<sup>6</sup> *Apol.* 64. Apuleius goes on to cite the passage in the *Phaedrus*, noted above.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Diog. Laert. 5.43 (Theophrastus’ τῆς μεταρσιολεσχίας α’) and 5.44 (his μεταρσιολογικῶν α’β’). Cf. Poseidonius’ Περὶ μετεώρων (Diog. Laert. 7.135 and 144); also Epicurus’ letter (2) περι μεταρσίων (Diog. Laert. 10.29).

offered opinions on rainfall and the effect of moisture on plants. Although Plutarch regularly cites the great authorities from the past, such as Heraclitus and Parmenides, with verbs in the present tense (*φησί, ιστορεῖ, μαρτυρεῖ*), he writes *ἔλεγε* of Laetus both times. The implication is that Laetus was some kind of contemporary witness, therefore of just the period to which Ofellius Laetus has lately been assigned. Plutarch's Laetus can now be given a certain substance—a Platonic philosopher of the first century A.D., honored in Asia Minor as well as in Greece (where Plutarch presumably knew him).

The name Ofellius (also spelled Ofillius) turns up at Athens in the middle of the second century A.D. in the person of Ofillius Ingenus,<sup>8</sup> whose *nomen* has been plausibly connected with the presence of A. Ofellius Maior Macedo, a procurator honored in Epirus some generations previously.<sup>9</sup> Apart from Macedo's service in the legion I Minervia, raised in about 83 by Domitian, his career shows no certain indication of date. The reign of Hadrian has been suggested, but an earlier time is possible.<sup>10</sup> The Platonist Ofellius Laetus, known in Athens at a time long before the Ofellii can be attested as a family at Ephesus,<sup>11</sup> probably points to a date for the procurator Macedo in Greece in the last decades of the first century. The Platonic philosopher must be connected with him and, in all likelihood, owed his *gentilicium* to him.<sup>12</sup>

A Domitianic date for Ofellius Macedo has important implications for the history of an office which he is known to have held under an unidentified emperor, the procuratorship *a voluptatibus Augusti* (*ἀπὸ τῶν ἀπολαύσεων Σεβαστοῦ*). Pflaum, operating with a later date for Macedo, judged this procuratorship to be a Hadrianic revival of the infamous post associated with Tiberius;<sup>13</sup> but we now know that Ti.

<sup>8</sup> J. H. Oliver, *Marcus Aurelius: Aspects of Civic and Cultural Policy in the East* (*Hesperia* Suppl. 13 [1970]) 3 fr.C.18; *cf.* 4–9 fr.E.43, 81, and 85. See also E. Birley, *Latomus* 31 (1972) 917, and W. Eck, *RE* Suppl. 15 (1978) 294 s.v. 11a.

<sup>9</sup> *ILS* 8849, a Greek inscription of Nicopolis (*cf.* Lebas II 1076).

<sup>10</sup> H.-G. Pflaum, *Les carrières procuratoriennes équestres* I (Paris 1960) 274: "Ces données [*i.e.*, the evidence for senatorial Ofellii in the second half of the second century A.D.] nous font supposer que, pour remonter au chevalier A. Ofellius Maior Macedo, il faut compter une et peut-être même deux générations, ce qui mettrait ce personnage au temps d'Hadrien." Although this is scarcely a strong argument, P. R. C. Weaver has taken the Hadrianic date as firm, *Antichthon* 14 (1980) 147.

<sup>11</sup> *Cf.* Nollé (*supra* n.1) 205 n.21.

<sup>12</sup> If the philosopher did not receive the citizenship from the procurator (the more likely alternative), there remains the possibility that Laetus and Macedo were blood relatives. Pflaum (*supra* n.10) speculated that Macedo might have been a Greek.

<sup>13</sup> Pflaum (*supra* n.10) 274, comparing Suet. *Tib.* 42.

Claudius Classicus held this very office under Nerva and Trajan.<sup>14</sup> Classicus, who began his public career as a freedman, appears to have ended it with an equestrian procuratorship of Alexandria.<sup>15</sup> It looks as if, like the freedman father of Claudius Etruscus, he had become a knight at some stage. Accordingly he may have held the procuratorship *a voluptatibus* also as a knight, just as Ofellius Macedo certainly did. Domitian is known to have entrusted to knights posts that had been formerly assigned to freedmen.<sup>16</sup>

Ofellius Macedo thus brings Ofellius Laetus more closely into the intellectual world of the emperor Domitian, and that was precisely the world of Plutarch and his friends. It was, after all, under Domitian that Plutarch visited Rome. And there he saw the philosopher Arulenus Rusticus, who reached the consulate in late 92 and must therefore have enjoyed some measure of imperial favor before the tide turned against all philosophers in the following year. Two particular friends of Plutarch, the brothers Avidii (Nigrinus and Quietus), prospered under Domitian; Quietus came to the consulate in 93. Plutarch had probably associated with both Avidii when they were serving in Greece as well as when he was in Rome.<sup>17</sup> In this international group of cultured men whom Plutarch knew in the reign of Domitian, Ofellius Laetus can now take his place.

Among the other friends of Plutarch was the Stoic Serapion, who was not only a philosopher but also a poet. J. and L. Robert have recently invoked him precisely in connection with Laetus,<sup>18</sup> since Nollé had repeated earlier opinion that the sublime hymn was probably a work in prose. Serapion clearly participated in the revival of the

<sup>14</sup> D. Knibbe, *JOAI* 49 Beibl. (1971) 19–20 no. 3 [*AE* 1972, 574]. Cf. J. and L. Robert, *Bull. épig.* 1974, 488; also W. Eck, *RE* Suppl. 14 (1974) 100 s.v. “Claudius 107b.”

<sup>15</sup> Ti. Claudius Classicus, the Trajanic procurator of Alexandria, seems clearly identical to the Trajanic occupant of the same post called Classicus (or erroneously Κλαστικός): Pflaum (*supra* n.10) 164–65 no. 70. The prefect of Egypt addresses a letter to three strategoi (*SB* IV 7378) in which he calls Classicus ὁ κράτιστος ἐπίτροπος. The new inscription (*supra* n.14) shows that Classicus had an *adiutor* in Alexandria. Weaver (*supra* n.10) 150–55 is therefore probably right in inferring that Classicus had become a knight. The comparison with the father of Claudius Etruscus (*Stat. Silv.* 3.3.143–45) is compelling.

<sup>16</sup> Observe the knight Titinius Capito, who served as *a rationibus* under Domitian, Nerva, and Trajan: *ILS* 1448. According to Tacitus (*Hist.* 1.58) Vitellius had already used knights in such posts. For Domitian’s policy see Suet. *Dom.* 7.2: *quaedam ex maximis officiis inter libertinos equitesque R. communicavit.*

<sup>17</sup> On the friends of Plutarch in Domitianic society see C. P. Jones, *Plutarch and Rome* (1971) 51–54. I should like to thank the author of that work for his acute criticism of the present article.

<sup>18</sup> *Bull. épig.* 1981, 481. Cf. J. H. Oliver, *Hesperia* Suppl. 8 (1949) 243–46, and C. P. Jones, *Phoenix* 32 (1978) 228–31.

old and honorable tradition of versified philosophy, practised formerly by the greatest authorities on τὰ φυσικά, Parmenides and Empedocles. Once Laetus is seen in the context of Plutarch's friends, it becomes more likely that his sublime hymn reflected this new fashion of philosophy in verse.

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