

A New Fragment from the Letters of Aristotle

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Abstract An Arabic manuscript preserves what purports to be a letter from Aristotle to a noblewoman. Closer scrutiny of its contents suggests that the letter was addressed to Olympias (mother of Alexander the Great) on the death of her brother (Alexander I of Epirus). This identification is important because Aristotle was said to have left behind at his death one book of letters to Olympias, an edition of which was published in antiquity. The question is therefore raised as to whether the fragment is genuine or spurious.

Keywords Aristotle. Epistolography. Artemon. Andronicus. Ancient edition.



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At his death Aristotle left behind a large collection of letters. According to the ancient lists of his works, the philosopher wrote books of letters to Philip, Alexander, Antipater, Mentor, Ariston, Olympias, Hephaestion, Themistagoras, Philoxenus, and Democritus.¹

The surviving testimonia say that these letters were collected and edited by Artemon in eight books, and later by Andronicus in twenty books.² Other details are sparse. A number of ancient authors, however, reveal that some of these letters were written πρὸς τινὰς ἰδίᾳ, that is to say, they were private letters to certain individuals.³ Ammonius, among others, praised Aristotle for his concise and clear epistolary style.⁴

Few fragments have been found. In his edition of Aristotle's private letters, Plezia lists twenty meagre fragments, most only a line long, which seem to have the appearance of genuineness.⁵ Some brief but complete letters from Aristotle to Philip, Alexander, and Theophrastus are also attested.⁶ About the interpretation of these fragments there is much debate and disagreement.⁷

The object of this paper is to draw attention to what I shall argue is a fragment which should be included in future editions of Aristotle's letters. Some years ago an edition of Arabic gnomologia about Greek philosophers was published.⁸ Despite the fact that the text, dating to between c. 1050 and 1309 AD, contains many items of interest for scholars of ancient philosophy, it is not at all well known.

In the part of the work dealing with Aristotle, there is what purports to be an excerpt from an Aristotelian letter. It reads:⁹ "He [Aristotle] wrote to a noble lady in his family, consoling her about [the death of] a brother of hers: 'I am loath to rush to be among the first to console you at the very beginning of your affliction, because it is as arduous to the consoler to contend with the brunt of grief as it is difficult for the swimmer to face the current; but it is not proper for someone like you, a descendant of men remembered for their courage and high-mindedness (*kibar al-himmah* = μεγαλοψυχία), to display excessive grief, especially not in the case of an affliction like the one you have suffered. For your brother left this world praised

1 D.L. 5.27. For textual difficulties in these lists, see the edition of Plezia 1977, 7-9.

2 Plezia 1977, 7-9. For background, see Rist 1964, 2-8.

3 Ammon. *In Categ.* 3.22-26; Olympiod. *In Categ.* 6.10-13.

4 Ammon. *In Categ.* 7.4-6: ἐν δέ γε ταῖς ἐπιστολαῖς φαίνεται κατωρθωκῶς τὸν ἐπιστολιμαῖον χαρακτήρα, ὃν καὶ σύντομον εἶναι δεῖ καὶ σαφῆ καὶ ἀππλλαγμένον πάσης περισκελοῦς συνθέσεώς τε καὶ φράσεως.

5 Plezia 1977, 15-25.

6 Plezia 1977, 28-33.

7 See, for instance, Renehan 1995 on fr. 9 Plezia and fr. 15 Plezia.

8 Gutas 1975.

9 Arabic text in Gutas 1975, 198-200.

and famous for noble deeds and outstanding qualities. And then, the way in which he died was the best of ways. Moreover, whoever betrayed him and violated a compact with him will live permanently in reproach and shame. Know that the eyes of the people are looking at you, watching to see how you will bear up in this situation. Display, then, the high-mindedness and hardiness in the face of affliction that conform with your [noble] lineage. Greetings”.¹⁰

On this letter the editor, Gutas offered a brief comment: “a letter to a noble lady which in all probability stems from genuine ‘Aristotelian’ epistolographic tradition”.¹¹ He does not elaborate. One contemporary reviewer described the letter as one of the “lost texts” recovered from this Arabic work.¹² The text has nonetheless been completely ignored by editors of and commentators on the fragments of Aristotle’s letters. It has not even found a place in the spuria. Some aspects of the contents of the letter, however, rouse curiosity.

To begin with, it is addressed to a noble lady. Who could this be but Olympias, a woman undoubtedly being watched by “the eyes of the people”? As is known, a whole book of Aristotle’s private letters to Olympias was circulating in antiquity.¹³ Then we see that it is a letter about the death of a brother who was betrayed by some unspecified persons. Would this man not be Olympias’ brother, Alexander I of Epirus, who was killed in 331 BC after being betrayed by Lucanians, and fell on the battlefield near Pandosia?¹⁴ The Lucanians broke a treaty in the process; perhaps this is what the words “violated a compact” in the letter refer to. The comment that he died in “the best of ways”, that is to say in battle, is appropriately Aristotelian.¹⁵ The letter, if genuine, would date to the last decade of Aristotle’s life.

Fabricated letters tend to introduce new ‘facts’. Forgers cannot help bringing in anachronistic information, or using language completely out of character with the author being imitated. They usually make clear the name of the writer and the addressee, and come as part of epistolary novels.¹⁶ Here we have none of that. The style is concise and clear; its language is markedly out of character with the rest of the gnomologia in which it is transmitted. It may even be the case that the compiler did not understand the text he was excerpting, for the “noble” lady plainly cannot be a member of Aristotle’s own family, contrary to what his brief introduction to the excerpt states.

10 Translation in Gutas 1975, 199-201.

11 Gutas 1975, 426.

12 Glucker 1979, 168.

13 D.L. 5.27.

14 For the sources, see Schaefer 1887, 196-9; Klotzsch 1911, 87.

15 See Arist. *NE* 1115^a30-35.

16 For a good discussion of spurious letters in antiquity, see Burnyeat, Frede 2015, 7-12.

Naturally, there is no way to tell for certain whether this is or is not a letter fortuitously transmitted in Arabic via earlier Greek and Syriac originals. Doubts about authenticity surround a great number of letters from antiquity, and in most cases there is no external evidence with which to verify their contents.¹⁷ One cannot, however, rule out a lucky chance of transmission.

This neglected text therefore deserves attention. If the above historical interpretation is considered, this could well be a lost letter from Aristotle to Olympias, all the more interesting because it would be a rare example of an epistolary consolation from the classical period.¹⁸ If it is spurious, then it is also interesting, for it would be the only surviving example of a spurious letter addressed by Aristotle directly to Olympias.¹⁹ In any case, as this appears to be a new text, the question of its authenticity is a subject worth exploring.

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17 On the Aristotelian material, see Natali 2013, 122-4.

18 See e.g. Kassel 1958, 30; Chapa 1998, 10 fn. 5: "Although we know that some ancient Greek authors wrote letters of condolence, few of them have been preserved".

19 The Syriac History of Alexander the Great of Ps.-Callisthenes preserves a letter from Aristotle addressed to Philip and Olympias, but this deals entirely with matters related to Alexander: Wallis Budge 1889, 20.