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Plato, Locri and “the Flower of Italy”: Revaluating an “Ancient” Epithet

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1 Introduction: “The Flower of Italy”

The Greek colony of Epizephyrian Locris was founded in the early seventh-century BC. The city was settled by the Locrians, a Greek people who occupied three small localities in mainland Greece, separated by the larger regions of Doris and Phocis. The Greek Locrians were a historic people; Homer includes them in his catalogue of ships, and their own mythology traced them back to Locrus, the grandson of Deucalion and Pyrrha, the founders of the Hellenic people.¹ Epizephyrian Locris, called Locri by the Romans, remains a thriving Italian city today. Its longevity, unsurprisingly, has provided its own remarkable history, and the city was an important centre in its own right from the late Classical into the Roman periods. A long running dispute with its neighbour, Rhegium, gave rise to its own distinct mythology and history.²

¹ Hom. *Il.* 2.534-535 includes: ‘forty black ships of the Locrians who dwell across the straits from holy Euboea.’ All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

Deucalion and Pyrrha were the mythic founders of the Greek race, primarily through Deucalion’s son Hellen. Opus (or its port Cynus), in Locris, is held to be one of the first places where this pair landed in mainland Greece, and this was believed to be the site of Pyrrha’s grave. See Str. 9.4.2.

² Dionysius II, the Greek ruler of the mighty local power, Syracuse, sided with Locri against Rhegium in c. 356 BC, razing the city to the ground, and incorporating Locri into the Syracusan sphere of influence. This pro-Syracusan sympathy lasted only a few years before Locri reverted to a more open constitutional leadership. For more on Dionysius II and his relationship with Locri, see Evans 2022.

The city was reasonably well known in antiquity, with heroic figures such as Euthymus and Eunomus hailing from the city, and authors such as Strabo and Aelian celebrating Locri in their writings.³ This memory led to the idea that Locri was considered, in antiquity and today, to be “the flower of Italy.” Though important, Locri was never a major settlement in the narrative of Italian and later Roman history, but nonetheless earned this overwhelmingly positive reputation early on in its history.

This generous description—that Locri was titled “the flower of Italy”—has been widely embraced, and surfaces in both popular and academic writings, from modern travel blogs to Victorian descriptions of Italy.⁴ It provides a shorthand description that celebrates the city as a jewel in the crown of the Italian peninsula, and it is most commonly attributed to Plato.⁵ In the academy, as in more mainstream parlance, the phrase is a part of recognised rubric on the subject. Delano-Smith, for example, in her historical geography of Western Europe, repeated this description of Locri and once again attributed the title to Plato.⁶ More recently, Giovanna Ceserani cited both the epithet and the Platonic attribution in her study on Magna Graecia. Ceserani writes that Plato described the city as “the flower of Italy, both on account of its wealth and of the virtue and courage of its men.”⁷ Despite being explicit that the phrase is Platonic in origin, Ceserani does not point her reader to any extant Platonic work, but in fact cites the writing of the Italian Dominican scholar Leandro Alberti. Alberti lived and wrote in the sixteenth century, and his chief publication was his 1550 *Descrittione di tutta Italia*. The *Descrittione* (which was immensely popular, being reproduced in ten further volumes between 1551 and 1631) followed his publication of several histories of the Dominican order and a history of his native Bologna.⁸ This larger work offered an encyclopaedic topographical and historical description of Italy, borrowing much material from the

3 See Str. 6.1.7-10; Ael. *N.A.* 5.9.

4 This “ancient” description maintains traction in more popular descriptions of the ancient and modern city. See for example: <https://www.italyheritage.com/regions/calabria/reggiocalabria/locri.htm>. Last accessed: 20.02.2023; <https://www.lalocride.it/reggio-calabria-e-la-sua-provincia/personaggi-illustri/>. Last accessed: 20.02.2023. This description is found in writings of the nineteenth century too. See, for example Veratti 1868, esp. ‘Discorso intorno alle unità statuali: secondo le stirpi, le lingue o i territori’, 177-204, esp. 196.

5 See, for example: Madden 2008, 1.

6 Delano-Smith 1979, 157.

7 Ceserani 2012, 29.

8 See further Bartlett 2006, 130-132.

writings of Alberti's predecessors Annius of Viterbo and Flavio Biondo.⁹ Given his work sought to cover the entirety of the Italian peninsula and its dependent islands, his discussion of Locri is to be expected, as the city remained a notable settlement in the sixteenth century. In the *Descrittione* Alberti makes the following claim in describing Locri: “questa Città (come scrive Platone ne'l Timeo ne'l primo libro) era il fiore d'Italia tanto di divitia quanto d'huomini virtuosi, e animosi, ad ogni degna opera.”¹⁰ Alberti describes the city as “il fiore d'Italia” and suggests that this description is provided by Plato in the “first book of his *Timaeus*.” In tracing this expression back to the Renaissance, we are at last met with a Platonic reference. Nonetheless, Alberti offers no further comment on this description and soon focuses his attention elsewhere.

Succeeding Alberti we find scattered references to this Platonic expression in Italian scholastic literature. Alberti himself suggested that Plato awarded the city this epithet because of the excellence, virtue and spirit of the men of Locri. This sense of excellence and nobility is echoed by several authors over subsequent years. Plato is always given loosely as the source, but the root of the description is Alberti's. Girolamo Marafioti described Locri in 1601 as “la citta Locri bellissima, e fiore de tutte le citta d'Italia, per le sue ricchezze, e nobilita; che gia fiore d'Italia viene ad essere chiamata da Platone in diversi luoghi delle sue scritture”—admitting a vagueness in his attribution to Plato but mirroring the sense of Alberti in his use of the phrase.¹¹ Nearly two hundred years later, Giovanni Donato Rogadei similarly described Plato's description of Locri. “Platone stima Locri essere stata il fiore dell'Italia per la nobiltà, per la ricchezza, e per la gloria delle cose oprate.”¹² Once again the sense of nobility and virtuous deeds characterises Rogadei's description. Both men echo Alberti's summation that Locri was “il fiore d'Italia”; they recognise the Platonic roots of the phrase but neither can provide a reference for this exact epithet. Despite a clear tradition emerging within Italian Renaissance and Enlightenment scholarship, the phrase finds no preservation in scholastic discourse prior to Alberti in 1550.

Alberti provides our earliest reference to this Platonic descriptor. He suggests that Plato awarded the city this epithet because of the excellence, virtue,

9 Though much of the material Alberti covered was dependent upon Biondo in particular, Alberti differed from his source in dividing Italy into nineteen regions, rather than eighteen. This was primarily due to his inclusion of the Italian islands, which Biondo overlooked.

10 Alberti 1550, 178.

11 Marafioti 1601, 78.

12 Rogadei 1780, 333.

and spirit of the men of Locri. This sense of excellence and nobility is then echoed by several authors over subsequent years, and is picked up again by modern scholars such as Ceserani as it enters wider popular discourse. This note suggests that the epithet itself was not Platonic in origin, but in fact stems from a misreading of Alberti's own brief description. Given the ongoing attribution of this descriptor to Plato, a modern correction is needed. Therefore, this note will briefly examine Plato's extant references to the city, before arguing for an origin within the writings of Alberti himself.

2 Plato on Locri

Only three Platonic references to the Italian Locri survive. Alberti referred to "the first book of *Timaeus*" in his writings, and comments also survive in the *Laws* and in *Epistle XIII*.¹³ For the purposes of this note, it is the passage from the *Timaeus* that is of greatest interest. The city is mentioned early in the work.¹⁴ Socrates is addressing Timaeus, Critias and Hermocrates, and makes a passing reference to Timaeus' hometown.

Τίμαιός τε γὰρ ὁδε, εὐνομωτάτης ὦν πόλεως τῆς ἐν Ἰταλίᾳ Λοκρίδος, οὐσίᾳ καὶ γένει οὐδενὸς ὕστερος ὦν τῶν ἐκεῖ, τὰς μεγίστας μὲν ἀρχάς τε καὶ τιμὰς τῶν ἐν τῇ πόλει μετακεχείρισται, φιλοσοφίας δ' αὖ κατ' ἐμὴν δόξαν ἐπ' ἄκρον ἀπάσης ἐλήλυθεν.

For Timaeus here is a citizen of the Italian Locris, a most well-governed state, and he is not inferior to any of its citizens there, either in property or in reputation; and not only has he held the highest offices and

13 The titular character Timaeus is, of course, one of the main interlocutors in Plato's *Timaeus*, and also features in another dialogue, *Critias*. Timaeus hailed from Locri, and given his significant presence in Plato's oeuvre it is clear the philosopher possessed an understanding of the city. Given Plato's several Sicilian voyages, it may well be that he had visited the city himself. For Plato's voyages to Sicily, consult Nails 2006. Nails includes descriptions of Plato's various trips to Sicily in her brief study.

14 Alberti was, of course, writing before the universal introduction of Stephanus numbers. Indeed, writing in 1550, Alberti's own work predates the publication of Plato's works by Henri Estienne (1528-1598, also known as Stephanus) in 1578, in which this referencing system was printed for the first time. Thus, although less specific, we can be confident that Alberti was referring to the same section of the *Timaeus* discussed here, despite offering a more archaic reference to simply "book one" of the dialogue.

positions of honour in his city, but he has also achieved the very greatest success in all areas of philosophy.¹⁵

The governance of the city is commended by Plato, a coded reference to the revered law-code of the seventh century Locrian Zaleucus.¹⁶ The historical traditions surrounding Zaleucus in antiquity are poorly preserved—yet his importance was certainly significant, as Aristotle affirmed by including him in a list of great Greek lawgivers.¹⁷ Diodorus Siculus offers a brief description of the figure that echoes something of the later reputation of Locri itself—describing him as ‘a man of noble family, admired for his education, and a pupil of the philosopher Pythagoras.’¹⁸ This learned Zaleucus was closely tied to the city, and his law codes earned Locri a reputation for a well-behaved citizenry celebrated by Plato here and below in the *Laws*.¹⁹ This reputation saw the Locrian gain popularity in the writings and artistic expression of sixteenth and seventeenth century humanists, adding to the legend of Locri that developed in the writings of Alberti and others.²⁰ It is that legend that Plato contributes to here, suggesting the Locrians distinguish themselves in obeying these laws of Zaleucus. The Locrians are not passive in Plato’s compliment. Timaeus himself is flattered, as an example of the best of men hailing from the city, origins which honour his character and intellect. Nonetheless, this description does not contain any reference to Locri as the jewel or flower of Italy. We cannot be certain how Alberti had consulted the text, though we can rule out the notable

15 Pl. *Ti.* 20a.

16 Zaleucus’ law code was considered almost divine in antiquity. For more on the legend of Zaleucus, consult Szegedy-Maszak 1978.

17 Arist. *Pol.* 2.1274a-b. Zaleucus ‘of Epizephyrian Locri’ is included alongside Lycurgus, Solon, Charondas of Catana, Onomacritus, Philolaus of Corinth, Draco, Pittacus of Mytilene and Andromadas of Rhegium.

18 D.S. 12.20. The full description of Zaleucus is offered across 12.19–21. The suggestion that Zaleucus studied under Pythagoras is illustrative of the legends that surrounded this figure, and was picked up by several ancient authors. See further Szegedy-Maszak 1978, 199.

19 This reputation endured into the Roman world. Valerius Maximus, for example, records how Zaleucus sacrificed one of his own eyes to atone for his adulterous son facing the just punishment of his own law code, an act for which he was greatly admired by the justice-loving citizenry. See V. Max. 6. 5. ext. 3. Zaleucus and his law code are also praised by both Strabo and Plutarch, among others. See Str. 6.1.8; Plu. *Num.* 4.

20 On the role of Zaleucus in artistic productions of the time, consult Hayaert 2019, 18–19. The “Judgement of Zaleucus” became a popular subject for artists, and the most notable example of this is perhaps Otto van Veen’s 1610 oil painting—“The Judgement of Zaleucus”.

1484 Latin edition of the Italian philosopher Marsilio Ficino.²¹ The Venetian scholar Aldus Manutius had published the first printed Greek edition in 1513, and other European scholars printed editions in 1532 and 1534.²² Regardless of the exact manuscript used in the text consulted by Alberti, we can be confident that there was no deviant textual tradition that took Socrates' reference to Timaeus' hometown into the realms of the epithet described in the introduction to this short note.²³ If Plato called Locri "the flower of Italy", it was not in his *Timaeus*.

The other two Platonic references to the city similarly omit such an expression. The first of these is found in Plato's *Laws* in a discussion of larger states subjugating lesser ones.

ἐπειδὴ γὰρ αἱ μείζους τὰς ἐλάττους πόλεις νικῶσιν μαχόμεναι καὶ καταδουλοῦνται, Συρακόσιοι μὲν Λοκρούς, οἳ δὴ δοκοῦσιν εὐνομώτατοι τῶν περὶ ἐκεῖνον τὸν τόπον γεγονέναι, Κεῖους δὲ Ἀθηναῖοι· μυρία δὲ ἄλλα τοιαῦτ' ἂν εὔροιμεν.

For greater cities are victorious in battle over smaller cities and reduce them to slavery, the Syracusans with the Locrians—of whom it is said they had been the most well-governed of all people in that part of the world—and the Athenians with the Ceians, there are myriad other such examples.²⁴

The Athenian speaker illustrates his argument with Syracuse' subjugation of the Locrians, and the Athenian conquest of the Ceians. These are, he assures his interlocutors, but two examples. Nonetheless we see echoes in the *Laws* of the attitude cited by Alberti in the *Timaeus*. Locri is described as consisting of 'the best-governed [εὐνομώτατοι] of the peoples of that part of the world.' As in the *Timaeus*, a form of εὐνομος is once again employed to describe the legal

21 Ficino's chapter divisions do not allow for Alberti to argue for Plato's reference to Locri being in "book one"—as the reference falls within what Ficino termed "Chapter Two". See further Farndell 2010. Farndell provides an overview of Ficino's division of the work, 107-167.

22 For a summary of these editions, and the varied manuscript traditions that inform them, consult Jonkers 2017, esp. "The First Printed Editions of the *Timaeus* and *Critias*", 355-377.

23 Jonkers details separately the primary manuscripts of the *Timaeus*, demonstrating no evidence for a significant corruption in the transmission of 20a. See Jonkers 2017, 91-201.

24 Pl. *Lg.* 1.638a-b.

system implemented by Zaleucus.²⁵ The philosopher once again praises the virtue of these inhabitants.

The third reference to Locri is found in a letter from Plato to Dionysius, the tyrant of Syracuse, as Plato describes a feast the two men attended.

τοὺς Λοκρούς ποθ' ἐστῶν νεανίσκους, πόρρω κατακείμενος ἀπ' ἐμοῦ, ἀνέστης παρ' ἐμέ καὶ φιλοφρονούμενος εἶπες εὖ τι ῥήμα ἔχον, ὥς ἔμοιγε ἐδόκεις καὶ τῷ παρακατακειμένῳ—ἦν δ' οὗτος τῶν καλῶν τις.

Once when you were feasting with the Locrian youths, you reclined apart from me, yet you got up and came over to me and in a cheerful spirit made some comment which I for my part thought excellent, as did my table companion, who was one of the beautiful youths.²⁶

Dionysius approached the philosopher and made a comment that Plato clearly considered memorable, and the event is further distinguished by the presence of ‘the Locrian youths’. Plato’s dining companion is described as one of the youths, and one of τῶν καλῶν—the beautiful ones. No further comments on the youths or their hometowns are offered, though once again we find a positive reference to this ancient Greek colony.

Neither of these other two references to Locri and her people contain any phrase suggesting Plato explicitly labelled the city “the flower of Italy”. In his mention of the city, Alberti wrote that “questa Città (come scrive Platone ne’l Timeo ne’l primo libro) era il fiore d’Italia tanto di divitia quanto d’huomini virtuosi, e animosi, ad ogni degna opera.”²⁷ Just as Plato was so positive regarding Locri in his brief references to the colony, so too was Alberti, who stressed the virtue and good spirit of the inhabitants of this city. Nonetheless, none of these three references contain any term such as ἄνθος or χλωρίς which would indicate Plato meant a sense of Locri as “the flower of Italy”. Even words such

25 Of interest here is the word choice by Plato. Twice he labels the city εὐνομος—the name of a famous musical hero who hailed from the city. See further on Eunomus, Clem. *Protr.* 1.2-3. This interesting coincidence raises questions about the relationship between Eunomus, Locris and the myth associated with this ancient minstrel, though these questions are beyond the scope of this short note.

26 Pl. *Ep.* 13.360a-b. If Alberti had consulted this text, he may possibly have drawn a connection between Plato’s use of νεανίσκους and the idea of youthful blooming or blossoming. If this was the case, the designation of Locri as “the flower of Italy” would be a natural step. Alberti, however, points only to the *Timaeus* in his description of Locri, and offers no reference to Plato’s *Epistle XIII*.

27 Alberti 1550, 178.

as κόσμος are lacking; Plato does not offer his reader even a sense of adornment or jewel in his descriptions. The explicit epithet repeatedly attributed to Plato is wholly lacking from his extant corpus. Plato simply never called the city by this title. We find, in fact, no record of the expression until Alberti's sixteenth century writings.

3 Conclusions: Renaissance Roots

Alberti's writings offer a solution to this confusion. Alberti recognised in Plato a generous view of this ancient city. Plato is wholly complimentary of Locri when he mentions it and awards it glowing commendations—particularly on account of its governance and citizens (the jewel of which, for Plato and Socrates, was Timaeus). Alberti took this positive sense and ascribed to it, in shorthand, the title “the flower of Italy”. The epithet stems not from Plato, but from Alberti himself. Alberti is not quoting Plato in his use of the phrase, but is instead summarising the Platonic view in his own words. Certainly, the Greek philosopher had a positive view of the city, but he does not provide the origin of this popular epithet.

Alberti first linked Locri with this descriptor, and a Platonic attribution is therefore incorrect. We must, however, by way of conclusion, ask ourselves why Alberti chose this title for this ancient city. If the origin of this expression was Alberti's writing in 1550, was it the case that Alberti himself mistranslated his Platonic sources? His reference to *Timaeus*, as noted above, includes the most likely culprit in an adjective shared with the *Laws*—ἐὺνομώτατος. It would be feasible for Alberti's description of Locri as “the flower of Italy” to stem from a generous stretching of this superlative attributing Locri with the best governance in all of Italy. Yet it seems that the rationale for this epithet is in fact found earlier on in Alberti's work. For Alberti sought to provide a description of the whole of a disunited Italy. His project, so he claimed himself, displayed a picture of Italy in its entirety, celebrating “la patria nella quale son nato e nodrito”—the homeland in which he was born and nurtured.²⁸ Despite hailing from the northern, powerful city of Bologna, Alberti presented himself as a product of a greater sense of “Italy”. As a result, Alberti sought to offer his reader a description of that Italy that focussed not on the individual states and political contexts, but a broader geohistorical profile that presented a

²⁸ Alberti 1550, 5.

composite of the whole.²⁹ It should therefore be no surprise that Locri is not the only city awarded such an illustrious descriptor.

In Alberti's work this description of Locri is in fact preceded by an earlier attribution of this epithet to a more celebrated northern rival. The renaissance city of Florence is described at length by the Dominican author. His conclusion on the city is, by all accounts, highly complementary. “Ella'è molto bella talmente che meritamente ha ottenuto il nome di Fiorenze bella, che inuero la pare il fiore d'Italia.”³⁰ Florence, he writes, deservedly takes the title of “the flower of Italy.” Alberti settles on this description in reflection of the name itself. Though a now obsolete name for Florence (Firenze in modern Italian), Fiorenze echoes its linguistic roots even more closely than the modern name—translating simply as flower or blossom. Alberti takes this name and reworks it into his celebration of the city itself. For Alberti, Fiorenze is a city true to its identity, and it is rightly considered as beautiful as the root of its name itself.

In its application to Italian cities, this is no Platonic expression, it is Albertian. Having already employed the title for the city he considers to be the most beautiful in Italy, he inserts it into the mind, and mouth, of Plato. Having examined Plato's positive description of the city, Alberti considers Locri to be for Plato what Florence is for him. More than this, it is for the South of Italy what Florence is for the North, a reflection of beauty across the wider Italian whole. In Alberti's literary picture of a greater sense of an Italian peninsula, the words of Plato concerning Locri are generously summarised in reflection of Alberti's own view of Florence. Locri is for Plato, in the words of Leandro Alberti in 1550, quite simply “the flower of Italy.”³¹

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²⁹ See further Gaiga 2014, 14-15.

³⁰ Alberti 1550, 37.

³¹ I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for their thoughtful comments on this piece.

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