The Sidonian section of the Φιλόγελως

Giuseppe Minunno

University of Pisa

giuseppe_minunno@libero.it

Abstract

The Φιλόγελως is a Greek anthology of humour. One of its sections testifies that Sidonian people had a reputation for foolishness which is otherwise unattested. The jokes of this section are here presented and examined, also in order to try to shed some light on the possible origin of this ancient ethnic humour, as well as to evaluate the presence of genuinely Sidonian features.

Le Φιλόγελως est une anthologie humoristique grecque. Une de ses sections témoigne du fait que les Sidoniens avaient une réputation de sottise inconnue par ailleurs. Les plaisanteries de cette section sont ici présentées et examinées dans le but de rechercher l’origine de cette ancienne «humour ethnique», ainsi que pour y repérer la présence d’éléments véritablement locaux.

key words: Philogelos, Sidon, Jokes, ethnic humour

1. The Φιλόγελως

The Φιλόγελως is a Greek anthology of humour. This collection includes a total of 265 jokes, which are divided into sections according to their main characters. Here I wish to investigate some features of the section in which the main characters are people of Sidon.

Some of the manuscripts of the Φιλόγελως indicate as author of the work a certain Hierocles and a grammarian named Philagrius (or Hierocles alone), about whose identity and chronology nothing certain is recorded. The Byzantine lexicon known as Suda records Philition the
mimographer as writer of the Φιλόγελως. This plurality of attributions could reflect a plurality of sources that converged in the collection. Indeed, the Φιλόγελως does appear to be a composite work, as clearly indicated by the repetition of many jokes in more than one section, often with just minimal variations. So it would be more appropriate to speak of editors or compilers, rather than authors. The Φιλόγελως is very likely to represent the written record of a humorous heritage which had been handed down orally. Although the collection as a whole seems to be have been edited in IV-V cent. AD, it shows some linguistic features which are much more recent, the result of textual alterations intended (at least partly) to update the language of the work. For present purposes this is a significant issue, as we shall see.

2. The section about Sidonian people

Almost each section of Φιλόγελως has a particular type of “fool” as its main character. The larger section (§§ 1-103) is that relating to the σχολαστικός. The word σχολαστικός most properly denotes a silly pedant, but in the Φιλόγελως it appears rather to mean simply a fool. Three of the sections of the book have main characters distinguished by their citizenship: people from Abdera (§§ 110-127), from Cuma (§§ 154-182) and from Sidon (§§ 128-139). The section concerning the latter contains twelve jokes, although eight of them also appear in the section devoted to the σχολαστικός. One of the jokes (§ 131) has even a Σιδόνιος σχολαστικός as its protagonist.

The jokes about Sidonians which are similar to jokes present in other sections of the Φιλόγελως are the following:

§ 128: A Sidonian commander travelled on a cart. Since the mules were tired and could not go on, the carter untied them to let them rest and graze for a while. But when untied, they ran away. Then the commander said to the carter: “Do you see, you scum, that the mules run, but the cart is standing still since it cannot move?”
Here it is not clear why the fool is labelled as a Σιδόνιος Ἐπαρχος, not simply as a Σιδόνιος. Another version of the same joke has a σχολαστικός as its protagonist (§ 100).

§ 129 A Sidonian rhetorician debated with two fellows. One of these said that it is unfair to slaughter sheep, since they provide milk and wool; the other said that it is unfair to slaughter cattle, too, since they give milk and they plough. Then the rhetorician said that to slaughter a pig is also unfair, since it supplies liver, udders, and loins9.

In another version of the same joke (§ 103) the protagonist is a σχολαστικός, who mentions βοῦλβα instead of νεφρία.

§ 130 A Sidonian scholar who came to the baths right at the opening time, not finding anyone inside, says to his servants: “As far as I see, it does not wash”10.

As in the case of the Sidonian commander in § 128, it is not clear why the Sidonian is characterized as a σοφιστής. Was this a way to retain the satirical reference to scholars, implicit in the very use of σχολαστικός as a “fool”?

§ 131 A Sidonian σχολαστικός who owned a field several miles distant, wanting to make it nearer, pulled down seven milestones11.

Here we have a Σιδόνιος σχολαστικός, that in the context of the Φιλόγελως sounds something like a “silly fool”.
§ 132 A Sidonian merchant was travelling together with one of his fellows. As he was forced by his stomach to stop for a while, he stood apart. His fellow left him, but wrote on a milestone: “Hurry up, catch me up”. The other, when he read this, wrote below: “And you wait for me!”

A similar joke in the first section has two σχολαστικοί as its characters (§ 42), although one of them does not behave in a silly manner. Could such couple have been derived from a reading of Σιδόνιος πραγματευτής μετὰ ἐτέρου ὠδέω (as in the manuscripts, emended by Dawe to μετὰ ἐταίρου)? At § 42 the joke is incomplete, stopping at “catch me up”.

§ 134 A Sidonian centurion said to his soldiers: “Sit down a lot today, since tomorrow you’ll have to march a lot”.

The joke also appears in the first section (§ 84), where its protagonist is indicated as “the same” (ὁ οὖν τός). As correctly observed by Rowe in his critical apparatus ad loc., the joke seems to fit better after § 82, where a σχολαστικός in battle is mentioned.

§ 136 A pupil asks his Sidonian teacher: “The five-cotyle flask, how much can contain?”; the latter says “Do you mean wine or oil?”

In joke § 92 there is only the question, which a σχολαστικός asks to his father. Indeed, although the question itself is foolish, in § 136 the pupil is not expressly indicated as a Sidonian. The same answer (with “water” instead of “oil”) to a question about the capacity of a vessel is ascribed to a σχολαστικός in a joke (§ 265) only recorded in a manuscript (G = Morgan MS 397, X-XI cent. AD). The “Sidonian” version seems therefore to join up two originally independent jokes.
§ 137 A man says to a Sidonian cook: “Lend me a knife as far as Smyrne”. The cook answers: “I have no knife which reaches so far”\(^{16}\).

This joke is very much like § 99, where a man asks a σχολαστικός to lend him a coat to go down to the country, and the latter answers that he only has one reaching down to the ankles.

The following jokes only appear in the “Sidonian” section:

§ 133 A man says to a Sidonian fisherman: “Does your fishpot contain hermit crabs?”; he answers furiously: “Does your chest contain crabs?”\(^{17}\).

This joke can hardly be translated, since it seems to be based on the double meaning of κύρτιν as “fishpot” and as “back”, “hump”\(^{18}\).

§ 135 A man says to a Sidonian candle-maker: “Sir, do you have stumps?”; he answers angrily: “Sir, do you have anthrax?”\(^{19}\).

This joke too can hardly be translated, since it seems to be based on the double meaning of ἀπόκαμμα: “ember”, whence “(candle-)stump”, and “burn”\(^{20}\).

§ 138 A Sidonian centurion, having seen a carter riding his cart across the square, ordered him to be beaten. But since the man said “I’m a Roman, and according to the law I cannot be beaten”, the centurion ordered the oxen to be beaten\(^{21}\).
This episode reminds the Latin saying “who cannot beat the ass, beats the saddle” (*qui asinum non potest, stratum caedit*, Petronius, *Satyricon* 45).

§ 139. A Sidonian doctor, who had received a legacy of one thousand drachmas from one of his clients, after the latter’s death, followed his funeral procession reproaching the deceased for having left him such a small sum. Later, when the dead man’s son fell ill and asked the doctor, who was visiting him, to cure his illness, the doctor replied: “If you leave me a legacy of five thousand drachmas, I will cure you as I did with your father”\textsuperscript{22}.

3. Humour about Sidonians

As you can see, these jokes involve essentially those same absurdities that Cicero pointed out as often ridiculous (*De oratore* II 274: *sunt etiam illa subabsurda, sed eo ipso nomine saepe ridicula*), actions and speech of fools that are ridiculous, as observed by Quintilian (*Inst. Or.* 6.3.71: *stulta reprehendere facillimum est, nam per se sunt ridicula*). At the same time, the actions and characters represented comply with the requirement indicated by Aristotle for the ridiculous: not to be either too tragic or too ugly (*Poetica* 1449A: *τὸ γὰρ γελοῖον ἐστιν ἀμάρτημα τι καὶ ἀσχος ἀνόδυνον καὶ οὗ φθαρτικόν*; cf. Cicero, *De or.* 2.238 [59]: *ea facillime luduntur, quae neque odio magno neque misericordia maxima digna sunt*).

But why the Sidonians? It should be noted that - outside of Φιλόγελως – there seems to be no reference to a reputation for stupidity that distinguished the inhabitants of Sidon. In the case of the inhabitants of Abdera, to whom a section of Φιλόγελως is also dedicated, it has been hypothesized that their poor reputation derived from the tradition according to which Democritus, a citizen of Abdera, laughed at the foolish sorrows of men - in first place those of his fellow citizens. Less convincing is the hypothesis that excessive – and therefore silly – laughter was attributed to
Democritus precisely because of his Abderite origin\textsuperscript{23}. With respect to Sidon, however, scholars have only suggested that the city may have been affected to some extent by the proximity of Emesa\textsuperscript{24}, the modern Syrian city of Homs, whose inhabitants in the Arab world were traditionally regarded as foolish\textsuperscript{25}. Indeed, Heliodorus, author of the \textit{Aethiopica}, labels himself (X, 41) as ἀνήρ Φοίνιξ Ἐμισηνός. This evidence suggests that, at least in part, the people of Emesa considered themselves as Phoenicians. But the Φιλόγελως knew nothing of the tradition concerning the inhabitants of Emesa. It would seem, then, that the reputation of Emesa worsened in parallel with the decline of that of Sidon. In modern Lebanese proverbs the inhabitants of Homs are mocked, while those of Sidon are not\textsuperscript{26}.

In the Greek novel the image of the Phoenicians, though they appear more Hellenized than other peoples, is still based on a traditional view\textsuperscript{27}, according to which the Phoenicians were a particularly clever people\textsuperscript{28}, although not without morally questionable aspects. With regard to the Sidonians, Strabo records their fame as πολύτεχνοι καὶ καλλίτεχνοι and the philosophical flowering of that time (καθ᾽ ἡμᾶς δὲ ἦκε Σιδῶνος μὲν ἐνδοξοὶ φιλόσοφοι γεγόνασι)\textsuperscript{29}. It is very likely, therefore, that the origin of the Sidonians’ poor reputation is not to be sought in the malignant attitude of Greek culture towards the barbarians. It could rather have grown up in an area close by to Sidon\textsuperscript{30} itself, in the wider context of competitive relations between neighbouring local communities\textsuperscript{31}: Sidonian foolishness was probably popularized by people of Tyre or Berytus. Indeed, the best mimes were said to come from Tyre and Berytus\textsuperscript{32}. They may well have mocked, to local appreciation, the inhabitants of the nearby town\textsuperscript{33}. As Freud astutely observed, “To make another comical, the method most commonly employed is to transfer him into situations wherein he becomes comical (...). This transferring into a comic situation may be real (...) or it can be feigned by means of speech or play. It is a good aid in aggression, in the service of which production of the comic is wont to place itself in order that the comic pleasure may be independent of the reality of the comic situation; thus every person is really defenceless against being made comical” (Freud,
1916: 321-322). From the formal point of view, in fact, the jokes involving the Sidonians are mainly based on those that Propp called “alogisms”\(^34\), and that frequently appear in contexts similar to those which we are now concerned with, where stupidity is considered a collective phenomenon\(^35\).

Bergson’s statement that “le rire a justement pour fonction de réprimer les tendances séparatistes” (Bergson, 1900: 181) takes no account of what Dupréel called “rire d’exclusion”: “Chacun connaît un rire d’exclusion où ce sont des groupes qui s’opposent. Les habitants d’une bourgade sont un sujet inépuisable de plaisanteries pour ceux de la ville voisine” (Dupréel, 1928: 237). Recent studies point out that in Greek culture laughter oscillated between the polarities of play and aggression\(^36\).

4. Sidonian features?

But are there, in the jokes on Sidonians, any genuinely local aspects? Stereotyping is strong in all sections of the Φιλόγελως\(^37\). As for the jokes which appear in more than one section, one might wonder whether they were originally aimed at Sidonians and only later ascribed to a less precisely identifiable fool, a σχολαστικός; or conversely whether their protagonists were only later specified as Sidonian. Both processes can be imagined. From the point of view of the language used, while the very large section on σχολαστικός only occasionally shows Byzantinisms\(^38\), several of the latter appear in the quite brief section on Sidonians: in § 135 the words ἀνθράκωμα, ἀπόκαυμα, κηρουλάριος\(^39\), and κηρουλάριος\(^40\) point to a final editing not before the seventh century AD\(^41\). Other Byzantinisms are ἐμπείρομαι\(^42\) in § 139 and φθάζω for φθάνω in § 137\(^43\). Changes aimed at modernizing the texts must however be taken into account, so that the date of a joke does not necessarily correspond to the chronology of its language\(^44\). Therefore each case must be examined individually: the presence of merchants (§ 132) may well be appropriate to a Sidonian context, though they seem to move on foot rather than by sea, according to the classic image of Phoenician trade; seaside scenery also features in the joke about the Sidonian fisherman (§ 133). It is not to be ruled out, finally, that the clumsy intervention of the Sidonian rhetorician in defence of the pig
consists of a humorous deformation of a real philosophical controversy that was debated by Phoenician scholars, as attested by the *De abstinentia* of Porphyry, who was from Tyre.
References


Perry, 1943; Ritter, 1955; Andreassi, 2004; Troca Pereira, 2013.

2 Suida, s.v. *φιλαστιόν*.

3 Cf. Rapp, 1951: 290: “The Philogelos, as we have it, is really not one joke book, but two. It seems to have been compiled from previous collections made by two different men: Hierocles and Philagrius”.


5 Characters “die verschieden Spielarten desιπρος, des Albernen sind” (Reich, 1903b: 470).


7 The text is that established by R. Dawe (ed. Teubner, 2000).

8 Λοίδονος ἔσπαρξε ἐπὶ ὁμάθος ὠδείς. ἔτει δὲ ἀπονήσασθαί αἱ ἡμιόνιοι οὐκ ἡδύναντο βαδίζειν, ἀπέλυσεν αὐτὰς ἢ ἦνιοχος ἢ ἰκοῦρος. ἤνικραν βοσκηθεῖσα αὐταλάβονται. λυθεῖσα οὖν ἐφούν. καὶ ἐσπάρξες πρὸς τὸν ἰνιοχὸν ἔφη Ὄρβις, καθαρμα, ὅτι αἱ μὲν ἡμιόνιοι τρέχουσι, τὸ δὲ ὁχιμα δραμεῖν μὴ δυνάμενον ἴσταται.

9 Λοίδονος ῥήματι μετὰ δύο ἐσκιάτον διαλέγετο. τῷ δὲ ἐνός ἐσκιατον ὅτι οὐκ ἦν ὁ δικαίον πρόβατα σφαζέσθαι διὰ τὸ φέρειν γάλα καὶ ἐριν, καὶ τῷ ἄλλῳ εἰπόντος ὅτι μηδὲ βοῦν (προσήκει) ἀναρεῖσθαι γάλα παρέχουσαν καὶ ἀργομίσαν, ὁ ῥήματι ἔφη μηδὲ χοίρον εἴναι δικαίου σφαζέσθαι ἃπαρ παρέχουσαν καὶ οὐθαν καὶ νεφρία.

10 Λοίδονος σοφίστης κατὰ πρώτην ἄνουξεν τὸν βαλανεύον [λουόμενον] λεκάναλων καὶ μηδένα ἔσωθεν εὑρόν λέγει πρὸς τοὺς Ιδίους οἰκέτες: Καθός βλέπω, οὐ λομεῖ.

11 Λοίδονος σχολαστικὸς ἀπὸ πολλῶν μιλῶν χωρίν ἔχον καὶ θέλων αὐτὸ ἐγγὺτερον πώλησα ἐπίκον κόμας μιλῶν κατέστρεψε.

12 Λοίδονος πραγματευτῆς μετὰ ἐσκιάτον ὠδείς. τῆς δὲ γαστρὸς ἀναγκαζοῦσις μικρὸν ἀπολειφθῆναι πρόσω ἀπέμεινεν. ὁ δὲ συνοδοτέρας ἀρκέτην αὐτῶν, γράψας ἐν τι [κόιν] τῶν μιλῶν. Τάχινον, φθάσας με. ὁ δὲ, ὧς ἄνεγέϑη, ἐπέγραψε κατωθὲν καὶ αὐτὸς μεθύνει με.

13 Λοίδονος ἐκκατόνταρχος τοῖς στρατηγώσις ἐλέγεν. Σήμερον πολλὰ καθίσατε; αὔριον γὰρ πολλὰ μέλλετε ὁδοιπορέτεν.

14 Λοίδονος γραμματικὸν ἢρότα ὁ διδασκόμενος: Ἡ πεντακότυλος λήκυθος πόσον χωρεῖ; ὁ δὲ εἴπεν: Οἶνον λέγεις ἢ ἔλαιον;

15 Perry 1943: 165.

16 Λοίδονος μαγείρῳ λέγει τῷ Λάνεισσον μοι μάχαριν ἔως Σμύρνης. ὁ δὲ ἔφη: Οὐκ ἔχω μάχαραν ἄως ἐκεῖ φθάζουσαν.

17 Λοίδονος ἄλλει λέγει τῷ Ἐχεί τὸ κύρτιν σοι παγούρος; ὁ δὲ μανεῖς ἀπεκρίνατο: Ἐχεί τὸ στηθῶς σου καρκίνος; The joke would be based on the double meaning of καρκίνος, cf. Latin *cancer*.


19 Λοίδονος κηριουλαρίῳ λέγει τῷ Ἐχες, κύρι, ἀποκαμίαται; ὁ δὲ ὀργισθεὶς ἀπεκρίνατο: Ἐχες, κύρι, ἀνθρακώματα;


21 Λοίδονος κεντουρίων ἱδρῶν ζευγηλατὴν διὰ τῆς ἄγορᾶς ἀμαξάσι φέρουσα ἐκέλευσεν αὐτὸν τυφθῆναι. τοῦ δὲ εἰπόντος ὅτι Ῥωμαίός εἶμι, καὶ οὐ χρῆ τύπτεσθαι με διὰ τὸν νόμον, τοῖς βόσας ἐκέλευσεν ὁ κεντουρίων μαστιγωθῆναι.

22 Λοίδονος ἱππος λεγάτον ὑπὸ ἄφροσσων αὐτοῦ χλίας δραμᾶς μετὰ τὸ ἀποθανεῖν αὐτῶν κοιμάσανος, ἐκφερομένου δὲ αὐτῶ τῇ κηθείς ἄκολουθον ἐνεκάλεῖ, ὡς ἄλγον αὐτὸ λεγάτον κατέληπεν. ἔπει οὖν καὶ ὁ ύπο τὸν τελευηθήσαντος εἰς νόσον ἐμπερίς περικάλει αὐτῶν ἐπισκεπτόμενον ἀνταγωνίσασθαι τῇ νόσῳ, ὁ ἱππος ἔφη: Ἐάν πεντακοχιάς δραμᾷς εἰς λεγάτον καταλείψης, ἐγὼ σε ἱππεύσω ὅς τὸ πατέρα σου.


25 Reich, 1903b: 823; Horovitz, 1905: 53-54.


28 In Diogenianus (8.19 and 8.67) Phoenicians are proverbially πανοργανοῖ.
Strabo 16, 2, 24: Σιδώνιοι δὲ πολύτεχνοι παραδέδονται καὶ καλλίτεχνοι, καθάπερ καὶ ὁ ποιητὴς δήλοι: πρὸς δὲ καὶ φιλόσοφοι περὶ τε ἄστρονομιαν καὶ ἀριθμητικὴν, ἀπὸ τῆς λογιστικῆς ἀρξάμενοι καὶ τῆς νοητικοὶ: ἑμπορικὸν γὰρ καὶ ναυκληρικὸν ἐκάτερον. (...) ἦκεν εἰς τοὺς Ἑλλήνας πεπιστεύκασιν, ἄστρονομιαν δὲ καὶ ἀριθμητικὴν παρὰ Φοινίκων: νονὶ δὲ πάσης καὶ τῆς ἄλλης φιλοσοφίας εὐθορίαν πολὺ πλεῖστην λαβεῖν ἠστὶν ἐκ τούτων τῶν πόλεων: εἰ δὲ δὲν Ποσειδωνίων, πιστεύεται, καὶ τὸ περὶ τῶν ἄτομων δόγμα παλαιόν ἔστιν ἄνθρωπος Σιδωνίου Μόχου πρὸ τῶν Τροικῶν χρόνων γεγονότος. τὰ μὲν οὖν παλαιὰ ἔκθεσι: καθ’ ημῶς δὲ ἐκ Σιδώνως μὲν ἔνδοξοι φιλόσοφοι γεγονότας Βοηθὸς τέ, ὡς συνεφιλοσοφήσαμεν ἡμεῖς τὰ Ἀριστοτέλεια, καὶ Διώδωτος ἄδελφος αὐτοῦ.

The formula ‘š sdn, which apparently indicated a status lower than that of full citizens, perhaps freedmen, would be much less likely to assume a negative influence on the image of the Sidonians (cf. Huss, 1985: 497-499). In some inscriptions this title is associated with the indication of the occupation of its owner (CIS 273,274,277, KAI 65, 11). In the Philogelos the protagonist’s profession is almost always specified in the jokes on Sidonians (Ritter, 1955: 108).


On the relations between Philogelos and mime cf. Reich, 1903b: 454-475.

A type of fairy folklore with fools as characters focuses on the inhabitants of some locality.

Halliwell, 1991. “One of the main uses of laughter in Greek culture is as an agency for the projection of dishonour onto people or things perceived as shameful” (Halliwell, 2008: 244). “To laugh derisively (katagelan, literally ‘laugh down’) is paradigmatically, in Greek culture, a hostile act” (Halliwell, 2008: 248).

Quintilian (VI, 3, 34) discouraged orators from deriding entire social groups: male etiam dicitur, quod in plures convenit, si aut nationes totae incessantur aut ordines aut condicio aut studia multorum.


Porphyry died ca. 300 AD. According to Andreassi (2006: 103) “i dati a disposizione consentono infatti di ipotizzare che già nel III secolo d.C., se non prima, doveva essere in circolazione il nucleo di quello che sarebbe diventato, per continue addizioni e sottrazioni, l’attuale Philogelos”.

A similar humorous issue, however, had already been placed in the mouth of Trimalchio by Petronius: “Nam mutae bestiae laboriosissimae boves et oves: boves, quorum beneficio panem manducamus; oves, quod lana illae nos gloriros faciunt. Et facinus indignum, aliquis ovillam est et tunicam habet” (...).