

# THE THREE SOCRATIC FATHERS OF CHION THE TYRANNICIDE

By Chr. Gorm Tortzen

**Summary:** In the early Imperial epistolary novel *Chion's Letters* the main character Chion (375?-353 BC) attends Plato's Academy in order to become a true philosopher. A reading of the novel makes it clear that the main source for the young man's development into a philosophical tyrannicide is not inspired by Plato but by Xenophon, who is actually the most influential of his three Socratic fathers.

*Chion's Letters* are the oldest known Greek examples of the epistolary novel genre. It consists of 17 short letters, allegedly from a correspondence between Chion of Heraclea Pontica, his father and, among others, Plato, of whom Chion was an ambitious young student. In the middle of the fourth century BC Chion left his hometown in order to study philosophy at the Academy in Athens, at the instigation of his father, but after five years of Academic studies he returned to Heraclea and killed the tyrant Clearchus, in accordance with the ideology of his teacher, as he explains.

It has long been widely accepted that the novel is a fraud manufactured in the early Empire – a pious fraud, certainly, but nevertheless a fiction. On the other hand, the story of the brave young Platonic student who gave up his studies in order to kill the tyrant of his hometown is based on well documented and indisputable facts.<sup>1</sup> There is no doubt that a student of Plato's called Chion of Heraclea actually did plan and succeed in killing the tyrant Clearchus, and was killed immediately afterwards together with a few fellow assassins, probably in 353 BC. Fascinating

1 Isocr. 7.12; Diod. Sic. 15.81, 16.36; Philodemus: *Philosophorum Academicorum Index Heraculanensis* ed. Kilian J. Fleischer (2013) Textkritische Ausgabe: P. Herc. Col 6. line 13-16). Here Chion is mentioned among other students: 'Chion who killed the tyrant of Heraclea'; Memnon FHG III.526; Just. Ep. 16.4.4-8; Ael. fr. 86. Brodersen 2026: 62-87 gives a handy bilingual synopsis of the historical testimonia. I am very grateful to Professor Brodersen for sending me his book directly from the press.

though the historical background of a philosophical tyrannicide is, I shall here leave it aside and concentrate on the anonymous author's plan, or stage setting of the novel, in order to understand why he chose Chion as the protagonist, electing to write a novel about a political assassination carried out about four hundred years earlier.

A Platonic dialogue has several similarities with an epistolary novel: The author is absent from the scene, but never the less communicates with the reader in an indirect and rather sophisticated way, since the understanding of the text is wholly dependent on the reader's ability to pick up the messages sent from the author through the persons of the dialogue or the writer of letters. In short: Here, I am not interested in the historical Chion but in the portrait of him and his philosophical inspiration as described by the author.

In the fifth book of the *Politics* Aristotle gives a detailed disquisition on tyranny and tyrannicides (1311a1-1313a15). Here he mentions Python and Heraclides who killed Cotys, king of the Odrysians (in 359/358). In the *Index Academicorum* (col. 6.13-15) they are listed as members of the Academy together with Chion and just after another member, Dion, 'who put an end to the tyranny of Dionysius'. The fragmentary state of Philodemus' *Index* does not permit too many conclusions about this list, but it is worth noting that these four assassins are mentioned together as if they were a group of political activists. Aristotle also lists the common reasons for becoming a tyrannicide: hatred, jealousy, lust for power and honour – but not philosophical conviction. Aristotle may have forgotten Chion, or – equally plausibly – the motives of the historical Chion were not philosophical at all, but an invention of the author, based on nothing more than the fact that Chion had attended the famous Academy of Plato. We do not know, but if he invented the combination of philosophy and tyrannicide, it presented him with both a range of narrative problems as well as possibilities.

## The novel

The Greek text is transmitted in several manuscripts and is normally referred to in the standard edition of Ingemar Düring.<sup>2</sup> The letters form only Chion's part of the correspondence between him, his father Matris, his friends in Heraclea and Clearchus the tyrant; the novel opens *in medias res* with a response of Chion to a letter given to him by his father, to be opened only at Chion's arrival in Byzantium on his way to Athens. The correspondence consists mainly of letters between father and son but ends with a farewell letter from Chion to Plato.<sup>3</sup>

It is evident that the letters are not part of a real correspondence but a work of art: they are carefully composed in ring composition, a *stephanos*, which presupposes knowledge of (or plans for) future events.<sup>4</sup> In the history of European literature, the first epistolary novel is traditionally dated to the 17th century, but the Chion novel fulfils all the requirements of the genre, and among scholars of ancient novels there has long been agreement that it is an ancient forerunner to a type of epistolary novels which later on became very popular.<sup>5</sup>

- 2 Düring 1951 is the first to call the Chion letters a novel. Düring's text has been reprinted several times: W.R. Connor (ed.) in *Greek Texts and Commentaries*. New York (1979), and Pierre-Louis Malosse, *Lettres de Chion d'Héraclée*. Cardo; 1. Salerno (2004), with Düring's text and a French translation. While I was working on this article an important edition of the text was published: Andrea Beghini: *[Chione] Lettere. Saggio introduttivo, edizione critica, traduzione e commento* (Diotima 13) Baden Baden 2025. Unfortunately, I did not have access to this book. – Perry 1967: 85 doubts whether they could be called a novel at all.

Quotations from the letters are taken from Düring's English translation (with a few alterations). Some years ago, I made a preliminary Danish translation of *Chion's Letters* (Tortzen 2017a), and hope to publish an emended Danish translation with commentary in a not too distant future.

- 3 As Düring has pointed out (Düring 1951: 18-19) the letters are composed according to Hellenistic epistolary conventions, similar to the categories stated by Demetrios in his *Τύποι ἐπιστολικοί*, see my analysis in Tortzen 2017b.
- 4 Excellent analyses of the composition in Düring 1951; Constan & Mitsis 1990; Usher 1987; Holzberg 1994 (esp. pp. 28-32; Rosenmeyer 2001).
- 5 Hägg 1980: 173 has a short comment in his influential survey *Den antika romanen* (= *The Ancient Novel*). See also Holzberg 1994: 28-32.

Düring's linguistic studies of the text and his *index verborum* have convinced most readers that the anonymous author lived hundreds of years after the assassination of the tyrant; probably in the first (or early second) century AD: several words and phrases are undoubtedly Hellenistic, and, perhaps more importantly, the reckoning of the hours of the day (e.g. 'the sixth hour' for noon) follows a practice known no earlier than the texts of the New Testament. The author is thus, in a way, a composer of a historico-philosophical novel. The text has often disappointed readers (initially including myself) who dreamt of reading a sort of historical novel about Plato and his teaching, written by an eyewitness, just as *Plato's Letters* have been read as sources for the life and ideas of the philosopher. There are short descriptions of the philosophical life in the Academic community (see ep. 5 below) and some chit-chat about problems in Plato's family life (ep. 10), but philosophy in itself does not interest Chion. In the following I shall try to explain why the anonymous author found the old story about a young upper-class philosophical tyrannicide fascinating enough to turn it into an epistolary novel.

### The characters

To answer this question, we must investigate the literary *persona* of Chion, and what he says about himself and the purpose of his studies in Plato's Academy. First of all, his father Matris – who is depicted as a rich merchant and shipowner in Heraclea – had also made the journey to Athens in his youth and had met Socrates, a story Chion must have heard several times in his childhood and proudly mentions in ep. 3. From a letter to his friend at home, Bion (ep. 9), we learn that they both attended some sort of a school in Heraclea and that Chion must have been about 20 years old when he left – much to the chagrin of his parents, especially his mother, as he explains in ep. 1. The young man misses his family too, but his *epithymia* for learning compels him to stay in the Academy with its fascinating atmosphere – although we do not hear of other students and the famous lectures, let alone anything about Plato's *ungeschriebene Lehre*.

But we have to start from the beginning. On his way to Athens, Chion arrives at Byzantium where he (ep. 3) meets none other than Xenophon

the Athenian, another former student of Socrates. He too is travelling but on the return journey from his Persian Expedition with what little is left of the 10.000 Greek mercenaries. Chion reports to his father:<sup>6</sup>

When Cyrus fell in the first battle and, contrary to the treaty, the Greeks were beheaded, he was elected general on account of his gallantry and skill in various matters, for he believed that he had the best qualifications for rescuing the Greeks”, Chion reports, retelling the adventures of the *Anabasis*. “This is remarkable,” he continues, “but much more remarkable and more important is what I now witnessed.”

In what we may call standard chronology, it is obviously not possible for a young man of 20 years to meet Xenophon and his army passing through Byzantium in 399 BC, only to kill a tyrant five years later, in 353.

Normally this is explained – or rather explained away – as a slip of the mind: the author is not well versed in the history of the fourth century and therefore he is not aware of the anachronism – or he assumes his reader either does not know or care. It has also been suggested that the letters mentioning Chion’s chance meeting with Xenophon are interpolated.<sup>7</sup> This ingenious idea presupposes, of course, that the other letters are genuine. But the *stephanos* composition of the letters makes it clear that the author meant them to be integral part of the story. This means either that we have a clumsy disposition of the text or – as I shall argue – that the author considered the *persona* of Xenophon too good for his stage setting to leave out.

If we accept the general opinion that the author lived in the first or second century AD, he will have had the same sources for the murder of the Heracleote tyrant Clearchus in 353 BC that we have. He may even believe the tradition<sup>8</sup> that Clearchus was a student of Plato, although he

6 Ep. 3.1.

7 Coberus 1765; Brodersen 2026: 13–14.

8 According to Aelianus fr. 86 H and *Suda* s.v., the young Clearchus went to Athens and studied for some time at the Academy. In a dream he saw a woman cursing him and saying: “Leave the Academy and keep away from Philosophy! It is not θέμις for you to touch her.” After that experience he went back to Heraclea, where he was killed “first by Dike, then by the hand of Chion.”

does not mention it. He also has an idea of describing the main character Chion as a young idealistic man who began his Academic career as an eager student of Plato and ended up as a determined tyrannicide. I believe the anonymous author inserted Xenophon in order to make his young protagonist more realistic and energetic, lending him the vigour of Xenophon that he did not find in Plato. His inspiration is of course literal: he knows from his studies of Hellenistic historical literature that Chion attended the famous Academy in order to study philosophy, and added to the CV of his epistolographer his father Matris' tour to Athens and Socrates; he knows that Plato was adored as a charismatic teacher by his students, but also that he was a man of letters and not politically active, except perhaps for the catastrophic adventure in Syracuse known from *Plato's Letters*. On the other hand, he knows Xenophon from the *Anabasis*. Before his departure for the military expedition to Persia, Xenophon consults Socrates about his participation in the rash expedition against the Great King and he is advised by him to consult the Delphic Oracle.<sup>9</sup> He also knows that Xenophon (according to his own report in the *Anabasis*) was the main architect of the Greek soldiers' safe return and his own success as a leader later on. On the other hand, the author knows nothing about the motives of the young Chion and therefore must supply his main character with plausible reasons for his heroic deed. Xenophon's appearance in Byzantium, and his way of calming down his enraged soldiers makes a great impression on Chion, and in my opinion this is the most important meeting in the novel.<sup>10</sup> Chion observes the hopeless situation in the town and prepares to fight for his life, but Xenophon's calm behaviour changes everything, including Chion. From Xenophon's other works, e.g. the *Cyropaedia*, *On Horsemanship*, and *Hieron*, the writer (and we) know that his ideal leader propagates exactly the same ideas of leadership as Chion's hero practises in Byzantium, according to Chion.

Xenophon's personal appearance, and his calm yet energetic attitude to his rebellious soldiers make a great impression on Chion, who in despair had bravely fetched his shield and spear and run to the city walls. From here, the readers get a 'teichoscopic' report: the soldiers are exhausted from the journey and are evidently suffering from what we

9 *Anabasis* 3.1.4-8.

10 The scene is a paraphrase of *Anabasis* 7.1.7-39.

might today call PTSD; they have taken part in all the troubles on their homeward journey depicted in the *Anabasis*, and now they have finally come to a Greek city with all they have dreamt of: food, money, luxury, women. They are planning raids, plunder and rapes, but from a distance Chion witnesses the speech of the warlike, yet Socratic Xenophon, delivered to the roaring soldiers, and his effective quelling of the riot, all the while explaining what is right and wrong:<sup>11</sup>

I saw a man wearing long hair, a person of beautiful and mild aspect, striding in their midst and stilling their passions. That was Xenophon. When, on the contrary, the soldiers exhorted him to yield to numbers, since he was alone, and finally let them make an end of their wearisome and hard roaming, he shouted: 'Come to order and take counsel! [ἀνάγετε οὖν ἐπὶ πόδα καὶ βουλευσάσθε] There is no risk that the matter in our charge shall pass from our hands while we are deliberating.' Since they were ashamed of disobeying him, at least in his appeal, Xenophon came forward in their midst and addressed them in an admirable way, as appeared from the result of his speech. For it was not possible for me to hear it clearly.

Here the author uses a very clever narrative trick. Chion admits that he did not actually *hear* the details of what Xenophon says to the soldiers; he simply concludes from Xenophon's appearance and gesture, and from the soldiers' reactions:

... What I witnessed was a display of Xenophon's personality, his sound judgement and eloquence... I introduced myself to him, and he remembered your [i.e. Matris'] friendship with Socrates and encouraged me to study philosophy and, for the rest, did not talk at all like a soldier but like a very educated man... It will interest you to hear that I am now much more eager to sail to Athens and study philosophy,

Chion continues, adding that at home the exhortations of his father had made him a bit skeptic:

11 The following quotations are taken from *Ep.* 3.3-6.

... on one point I was full of fear. For it seemed to me that philosophy made men more serious in other matters upon which it touched (in fact I thought that men drew soundness of mind and justice from no other source than philosophy) but greatly enfeebled their power of action and made the timorous and meek. Inactivity and tranquillity were, as you used to say, the subject of admirable eulogies by philosophers.

In Chion's eyes, Xenophon proves the ideal combination of a philosopher and a man of action, a combination of *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, as it were. As we shall see, Plato is sketched in the same way, but just that: only sketched. Chion's first philosophical hero is Xenophon, who is obviously based on the *persona* Xenophon as described in the *Anabasis* – and the speeches therein held and written by Xenophon himself. It is also interesting to note that Xenophon is described as καλὸς καὶ γαθός, with long hair like an Athenian aristocrat, and good manners. Their meeting was short, only one day, but of enormous consequence for the young man – and, indeed, for the anachrony of the novel.

On the journey from Byzantium to Athens (we are in the end of September), the ship is caught in a terrible gale:<sup>12</sup> “And having endured hardships which I refrain from describing, we landed at midnight in Perinthos and fell asleep. But another gale was in store for us, not easier to overcome than the gale at sea,” because Perinthos was occupied by some Thracians, and Chion and his friends are forced to defend themselves against these fierce barbarians. “At present we are in Chios after having enjoyed fair winds<sup>13</sup> all the way,” Chion concludes his report to his father, once again pointing out his ability to take part in military action.

On his arrival in Athens, Chion is introduced to Plato:<sup>14</sup>

We have arrived in Athens and talked with Plato, the disciple of Socrates. He is a wise man in all respects and endeavours to make philosophy appear to his disciples as not incompatible with an active life, in

12 *Ep.* 4.2.

13 Here as elsewhere the weather situation corresponds to Chion's actual conditions.

14 *Ep.* 5.

fact as something with its face turned towards practical life as well as towards quiet contemplation. You wrote to me that in making friends with him too, your intimacy with Socrates might be of no small advantage to me. So, it will interest you to learn that he pays considerable heed to all those who have been together with Socrates even for one day only, and he makes particularly those persons his friends who are most capable of drawing benefit from him.

Chion is not very specific about Plato's teaching, but he is very proud of his assistance when the oldest of Plato's nieces is going to be married to Speusippus. The philosopher cannot afford the whole dowry, so Chion proudly chips in a talent (*ep.* 10).<sup>15</sup>

When the news about the *coup d'état* in Heraclea and Clearchus' tyrannical behaviour reaches Athens, Chion changes his mind and plans to sail home instead: "I cannot any longer stand being better off in respect to my security than my fellow citizens, and if it please God, I shall sail by the spring. Now in the middle of winter, it is impossible" (*ep.* 12). But the tyrant has sent the Thracian spy Cotys<sup>16</sup> to Athens where he tries to kill Chion in Pericles' Odeum.<sup>17</sup>

I understood at once what was at stake. When I saw him grimly grasping his dagger, I scared him with a shout, rushed out and, bending and wrenching his arm round, I threw away his dagger. I was wounded when he was knocked down, but not seriously. Giddy as he was I pinned him with his belt and brought him before the magistrates ... As to myself, my mind has not changed. Living or dying I shall remain good. In order that I may be able to serve my city, persuade Clearchus to believe that I cling to quiet studies and that I am no man of action,

the brave young Xenophon *redivivus* writes to his father.

15 The author has found this story in Plato's 13th letter (361c). It is interesting to note that the letter is considered genuine.

16 It may be a coincidence that the name of the assassin is the same as the Odrysian king killed by the two Academics mentioned earlier.

17 *Ep.* 13.

In the long and rather high-flown farewell letter to his father (ep. 14), Chion argues that he is free, and the tyrant actually a slave. Düring compares his opinion with Plato *RP* 579b (ὁ τῷ ὄντι τύραννος τῷ ὄντι δοῦλος ‘the real tyrant is really a slave’), but there are remarkably few other quotations from the works of the master he has followed for five years.<sup>18</sup> Chion is a man of action, not a man of letters.

Letters 15 to his father and 16 to Clearchus show how clever and cunning Chion is. To his father he explains how he is planning his attack, while to Clearchus he plays the rôle of the bookish philosopher, uninterested in the real world and totally harmless.<sup>19</sup>

... Even if I had not been a student of philosophy, I think that it is a sufficient testimony to my not being your enemy that I have never been injured by you. For not even unphilosophical persons, unless they are not completely mad, make enemies for their own sweet pleasure ... While I was studying philosophy in Athens, my father and some of our common friends wrote to me that I was suspected by you and asked me to refute this calumny. I think this is just and also good for myself... Up to this day there has been between you and me no act of hatred, either great or small. Yet you exhibit only suspicion and indictments, although I am absolutely innocent of such things. What would be the object of suddenly revolting against you, particularly when, up to this day, I have not yet seen my native city under your rule ... I was not without natural talent for the study of philosophy, and I assisted nature to the best of my powers. As a young man I did not set my heart on magistracies or official honours, but from the beginning I was seized with passionate desire to become one who contemplates the nature of things. And this desire brought me to Athens and made me the friend of Plato, and I have still not had enough of him. I had thus such a natural bent for a quiet life the even as a young man I despised everything that could lead to an active and disturbed life... The very first precept of his [Plato's] was: seek stillness. For that

18 Düring 1951: 106 has some more quotations, i.a. the famous scene in the *Crito* 50b where the Laws confront Socrates in a dream, just as Dike confronts Clearchus (see n. 8) and ‘a beautiful woman’ appears to Chion in the farewell letter to Plato (*Ep.* 19).

19 *Ep.* 16.

is the light of philosophy, whereas politics and meddlesomeness wrap it in gloom and make the way to philosophy hard to find for those who search.

His verbose and utterly mendacious letter goes on expounding his eagerness to acquire knowledge about God, who surveys all things, and about the state of the world, contemplating the principles of nature, learning to honour justice and whatever else philosophy teaches:

... This is what I longed for and endeavoured to learn, but as to politics (you will excuse my speaking frankly) I did not even consider it worth while to remember. However, I learnt particularly some lessons which I now intend to apply in my relations with you, namely to honour a man who does no wrong, to prefer to requite with good a man who does wrong, and, if this is not possible, to keep quiet... Do you really consider me at treacherous person, when I know this? God forbid! Let the arts of peace and war be reserved for you, set apart for me just so much of your tyranny as seems fit to allow a man of inactive disposition to lead a tranquil life... It is clear, then, that you have nothing to fear from me, for my tranquillity does not want to be disturbed by your affairs.

In his farewell letter to Plato, he explains his real plans:<sup>20</sup>

... at the Dionysia I intend to make an attempt upon the tyrant's life." Like a genuine martyr he looks forward to his own death, and is certain that he will obtain joy and happiness after his death, having killed Clearchus... "I myself have seen a sight, clearer than in a dream. I saw a woman of marvellous beauty and stature who crowned me with wild olive and headbands. After a while she showed me a very beautiful tomb and said: 'Now when your work is done, Chion, go and find rest in this tomb.' After this dream I am in good hope of meeting an honourable death... Farewell, Plato, and may you remain happy until your old age. I am sure that I now speak to you for the last time.

20 *Ep.* 17.

Here the novel ends without a clear conclusion. The reader may know that the assassination was of no consequence: After the murder of Clearchus his brother followed him as a tyrant and Heraclea was not rid of tyrants for decades. This ambiguity has led to all kinds of speculation as to whether the text is a *roman à clef*, but at least we can conclude that the inventive author has given Chion no less than three Socratic fathers: his own biological father Matris (this character is probably created by the author himself), and the two well-known Socratics, Plato and Xenophon, the latter being the more influential ideal for the young man. Unfortunately for the author, Xenophon never founded a school in Athens, but his *persona* was too well suited for the purpose at hand to be excluded from the gallery of characters.

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