

THE ORIGINS OF THE NAME 'THE OLD OLIGARCH'

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ABSTRACT

The origin of the name 'Old Oligarch' for the author of the Constitution of the Athenians has long been uncertain. This article argues that Gilbert Murray did, in fact, coin the name in A History of Ancient Greek Literature, paraphrasing an earlier remark in German by Adolf Kirchhoff, and that the name was supposed to be humorous.

KEYWORDS

Old Oligarch, Constitution of the Athenians, Pseudo-Xenophon, Gilbert Murray, Adolf Kirchhoff, Hermann Müller-Strübing

In the Anglophone world, the unknown author of the *Constitution of the Athenians* is often referred to as the 'Old Oligarch'. There is some confusion about the origin of that name. As is often noted, it is first attested in print in Gilbert Murray's *A History of Ancient Greek Literature* (1897).¹ In his 1968 Loeb edition, Glen Bowersock writes that nobody knew the origin of the name, but insists — referring to an unnamed source ('I have been assured ...') — that it predated Murray, having developed 'a certain currency in talks and lectures before its debut in print'.² Bowersock also expresses uncertainty about the force of 'Old'. At the start of their 2008 edition and commentary, John Marr and Peter Rhodes also discuss the name: they observe that i) when the name first appears in print, Murray puts it in inverted commas, perhaps implying earlier, oral use; ii) 'Old' seems to refer not to the age but the emotional strength of the author's position (e.g. 'Old Tory'); iii) the name is misleading, since (on their view) the author was young and not straightforwardly oligarchic.³ Others have been more confident that Murray

¹ Murray (1897) 167.

² Bowersock (1968) 463 n. 1. The *Constitution of the Athenians* was not in Marchant's original edition.

³ Marr and Rhodes (2008) 1–2.

introduced the name.⁴ In fact, it can be shown that this name was most likely Murray's invention, paraphrasing an earlier remark by Adolf Kirchhoff, and that it was somewhat tongue-in-cheek.

Murray's discussion of the 'Old Oligarch' in *A History of Ancient Greek Literature* spans only three pages (167–169). He introduces the author by this name, in inverted commas, before using it twice without inverted commas (167, 168), and then referring to him twice as 'our Oligarch' (169). In the chronological table at the end of the book, Murray lists 'Old Oligarch on *Constitution of Athens*' under 417 BCE.⁵ On page 169, Murray mentions Müller-Strübing and Bergk in support of this date; these are the only scholars he names in connection with the text. Murray does not give references for their work, but the pieces are clearly:

- i) Hermann Müller-Strübing, 'Ἀθηναίων πολιτεία. Die attische schrift vom Staat der Athener', *Philologus Supplementband 4*: 1–188 (1884).
- ii) Theodor Bergk, *Griechische Literaturgeschichte* (vol. 4) (1887).

The latter is a book with quite similar aims to Murray's; it briefly discusses *The Constitution of the Athenians*.⁶ Murray agrees with Bergk on several matters, including the date, but Bergk does not explore the question of authorship. The former is a much longer treatment of the *Constitution of the Athenians*, consisting of an edition, translation, commentary, and extended introductory essay. It was the best edition of the text when Murray wrote *A History of Ancient Greek Literature*; he seems to have been familiar with it.⁷ When Murray compares the 'Old Oligarch' with Critias' *Constitutions* (169), for instance, he notes the similar way both texts use *διαδικάζειν*; this parallel is also noted by Müller-Strübing,⁸ citing August Böckh, who adduced it as part of an argument that Critias was the likely author.⁹ Now, Murray is sympathetic to the

⁴ See recently, for instance, Rood (2025) 112 with n. 45, discussing a 1912 review of Alfred Zimmern's *The Greek Commonwealth* in which 'Old Oligarch' is described as the most up-to-date terminology.

⁵ Murray (1897) 412.

⁶ Bergk (1887) 238–239.

⁷ As one would expect, given Murray (1897) xi ('... I hope that comparatively few articles of importance in the last twenty volumes of the *Hermes*, the *Rheinisches Museum*, the *Philologus*, and the English Classical Journals, have escaped my attention'). On this basis, the same cannot be said for Kirchhoff (1874) (see below).

⁸ Müller-Strübing (1884) 92.

⁹ Böckh (1886) 389–393, in a massive footnote; see 390 on *διαδικάζειν*. In the first edition (1817), Böckh had defended the possibility Xenophon was the author. Müller-

possibility Critias wrote the text (169; see below); he could have found the idea in Böckh’s work himself. But we know Murray used Müller-Strübing for the date (Bergk does not cite Müller-Strübing). And when Müller-Strübing first mentions his argument about the date, he does so in the context of responding to Adolf Kirchhoff’s interpretation of the text (which included a 424 BCE date) in his 1874 paper, ‘Über die Schrift vom Staate der Athener’.¹⁰ Immediately afterwards, on the very same page, Müller-Strübing moves on to discuss Kirchhoff’s characterisation of the author; there, Müller-Strübing quotes — and essentially accepts — Kirchhoff’s summary of him.¹¹ This quote states that the author was ‘ein athenischer bürger von streng oligarchischer gesinnung und gereifter lebenserfahrung’ (‘an Athenian citizen with strong oligarchic convictions and the life experience that comes with old age’): old and an oligarch.¹² Murray, it seems, read this quote from Kirchhoff in Müller-Strübing’s work, took it as broadly representative of a German view, and paraphrased it in English as the ‘Old Oligarch’.

Therefore, we need not suppose the name was in circulation before the publication of *A History of Ancient Greek Literature*. We cannot rule that out (not least because the book itself was based partly on Murray’s own lectures). But there is a perfectly sufficient explanation for its origin in Murray’s reading. Its coinage would fit well both with the book’s wry tone, which riled some of its early readers, and with its aim of sketching something of different authors’ characters.¹³ Thus Gilbert Norwood was probably right to say, in 1930, that Murray named the author the ‘Old Oligarch’ (and Norwood might have been in a position to know).¹⁴ There is certainly no trace of anything like the name in popular nineteenth-

Strübing’s view is slightly different: he argues that the text was Phrynichus’ response to a speech by Critias.

¹⁰ Müller-Strübing (1884) 6.

¹¹ Taken from Kirchhoff (1874) 1. Strictly, these are the two details Kirchhoff thought indisputable about the writer’s identity (of course, many since have disagreed). In 1874, Kirchhoff had also published an edition of the text; in Kirchhoff (1878) he discussed the dating of the text further.

¹² The nouns are uncapitalized in Müller-Strübing’s quotation. Maybe ‘gereifter lebenserfahrung’ implies some cynicism; if so, it is lost in Murray’s ‘Old’ (‘The Jaded Oligarch?’).

¹³ Per Murray (1897) xiii. Verrall (1898) 107 — a broadly favourable review — highlights both these features. On the writing and reception of *A History of Greek Literature*, see e.g. West (1984) 70–77.

¹⁴ Norwood (1930) 373. Although the two were never colleagues, they worked on similar subjects and moved in the same circles; Murray (1913) 8 describes Norwood and his work on Euripides warmly. That said, Norwood (1925) 15 does not use the name when describing the author (‘an Athenian oligarch’).

century English translations such as *The Whole Works of Xenophon* (1832) and J.S. Watson's *Xenophon's Minor Works* (1857), even when the notes touch on questions of authorship. Nonetheless, Bowersock's source was at least partially right. While the name appears to be Murray's, it ultimately derives from Kirchhoff's earlier paper, which was itself first a lecture.¹⁵

More interesting than the name itself, though, are the ways in which Murray manipulates it. Kirchhoff's point was about the author's identity; but when Murray introduces his 'Old Oligarch', he does not start there. Instead, he leads with the text's place in the history of Attic prose:

It is, in fact, the earliest piece of Attic prose preserved to us, and represents almost alone the practical Athenian style of writing, before literature was affected by Gorgias or the orators.¹⁶

At first blush, Murray suggests the 'Old Oligarch' is old on account of his *style* — just as 'the old Herodotus', too, represented a kind of writing untouched by sophistic influence.¹⁷ Nor does Murray depict him as a passionate oligarch. Over the next three pages, the author emerges as a plain-speaking aristocrat, addressing elites from abroad in a clear, cold fashion. For Murray, the author's perspective, like his style, is simple — perhaps *old-fashioned*.¹⁸ But at the end of his treatment, Murray twists the name once more, when he finally alludes to the question of the author's age. He does so when exploring the possibility that Critias was author of the text (*italics mine*):

Nevertheless, the Critias who objected to action in the revolution of 411, who proposed the recall of Alcibiades, and the banishment of the corpse of Phrynichus, may perhaps lead us back to a moderate and *not too*

¹⁵ Kirchhoff (1874) 1 ('Gelesen in der Akademie der Wissenschaften am 11. Juni 1874.').

¹⁶ Murray (1897) 167. Kirchhoff (1874) 1 makes a similar claim.

¹⁷ Murray (1897) 178.

¹⁸ This seems to be how Murray's friend H.J. Maynard understood it, judging by a letter he sent to Murray shortly after the book's publication: 'The "Old Oligarch" and his remarks about the Athenian constitution and the inconveniences of not being allowed to strike a slave or a resident alien, charmed me immensely. It is just what an Anglo-Indian of the old school might say on coming back to the India of today' (Bodleian Libraries, MSS Gilbert Murray 5.119 (27 January 1898)). I am very grateful to Tim Rood for this reference.

youthful Critias of 417–414, the date given to our Oligarch by Müller-Strübing and Bergk.¹⁹

Even if it was a misnomer, Murray named the 'Old Oligarch' with a smile.²⁰

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¹⁹ Murray (1897) 169.

²⁰ I am grateful to *HCS*'s anonymous reviewers for several helpful suggestions.

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