

Plato's 7th Letter

What are Plato's Letters?

Plato's letters, otherwise known as the epistles, are a series of thirteen letters that were supposedly written by Plato during his lifetime on a variety of subjects, primarily of biographical focus, but are mostly centered on his time in Sicily and Syracuse. They are a source of much controversy, as despite the fact that for thousands of years they were believed to have been written by the famous philosopher, they are now largely considered to be apocryphal documents and the work of a forger. That is, with one exception—his seventh letter.



The VII Letter

By far the longest of Plato's epistles, it is equally as controversial. By and large, this letter is the only one to be believed to have actually been written by Plato's hand. But there are still many Classicists and Philosophers who still believe the letter to be spurious. The letter itself is what most people who believe the letter to be authentic, to be an open letter to the supporters of Dion the tyrant in Sicily. It is thought that Plato actually wrote the letter as a form of public defense for his actions meant to be seen by his fellow Athenians, not as an actual communique to the supporters of Dion. Further evidence in support of the letter's authenticity is computer analysis(stylometry), a widely recognized tool used to prove the validity of authorship claims, and biographical content present in the letter that only someone intimately familiar with Plato's life would have been in a position to include in the document. Arguments against the letter's authenticity are also compelling. Many classicists claim that there are a variety of phrases in the Greek text that are glaringly unplatonic in nature, and that the philosophical content present in the letter is incompetent when compared to the rest of Plato's body of work and could only, as one passionate scholar put it, have been written by a "hack" and not the genius that was Plato.

The Letter's Content

Along with extreme, almost episodic depictions of Plato's visits to Syracuse, he famously states his belief that no serious beliefs can ever be properly preserved in the written word, and to try to do so is practically ridiculous. His reasoning for this is equally famous for its abstruse nature. But this letter, if it is indeed faithful, provides rare autobiographical information into the philosopher's life, including some of his rationale for becoming a philosopher in the first place, as well as his own personal beliefs not hidden behind the veil that is the Platonic dialogues. This is, in fact part of the reason some scholars continue to push back against the letters authenticity, with the philosopher Julia Annas saying "such an unconvincing production that its acceptance by many scholars is best seen as indicating the strength of their desire to find, behind the detachment of the dialogues, something, no matter what, to which Plato is straightforwardly committed."