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Aristotle's Lyceum

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We owe the very idea of a university to the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. The Lyceum he set up at Athens in 335 BCE was the first institution we know of in world history to combine systematic research activity into every branch of knowledge with a huge library, teaching at what we would call tertiary and postgraduate levels, and even public lectures bringing intellectual ideas to the general Athenian public.[i] In 1996, an archaeologist named Effie Ligouri discovered a site to the east of the old Athenian city walls which must be part of the ancient Lyceum complex. It was one of the three main places where philosophical activity was centred, the others being Plato's Academy to the north-west of the city, and the sanctuary and gymnasium of Cynosarges, to the south. You can visit the excavated part of the Lyceum today. But who was Aristotle? Why does he matter? Where else had he lived, besides the near-legendary Lyceum he founded when he was fifty years old?[ii] And just how much can we reconstruct about its activities and importance?

In a small town perched on the twin peaks of a craggy peninsula jutting into the northern Aegean, exactly twenty-four centuries ago, a baby boy was born. His mother, who came from Chalkis, much further south in Greece near Athens, was named Phaestis; his father was a doctor named Nicomachus. On the tenth day after the baby's birth, Nicomachus will have invited his relatives and closest friends to the party at which he formally acknowledged the baby as his son and announced his commitment to raising him as a freeborn citizen. He will have performed the customary ritual of running naked round the domestic hearth, cradling the baby, to seal this promise. He will also have announced the baby's name, *Aristoteles*, which we shorten in English to Aristotle. The *aristo-* element in the name means 'best'; the *-teles* ending means 'bringing to completion or fulfilment'. Aristotle was given a name which anticipated his most revolutionary idea: that everything and everyone has a purpose or end (*telos*) or potentiality (*dunamis*) which they may or may not fulfil.

Aristotle grew up to realise magnificently his own vast potential, which happened to be intellectual. There is scarcely an area of knowledge, whether in material sciences or humanities, which he did not significantly advance. He was a walking encyclopaedia. He wrote scores of treatises on numerous topics. He laid the foundations of logic and systematic argumentation. But he would have been the first to point out that his potential as a human, which happened to be academic rather than, for example, practical, musical or political, was provided with everything it needed to mature. He was born into a relatively prosperous family. It also seems to have been a loving one: he remained close to his sister, commissioned a portrait of his mother from the excellent painter Protogenes to remember her by, and took scrupulous care of his surviving relatives in his will.

As a physician, Aristotle's father Nicomachus will have been able to introduce the boy to the most advanced scientific ideas and methods known to the Greeks: curiosity about life—living organisms, plants, humans and other animals—was to underlie almost everything Aristotle was ever to achieve. In the ancient Greek world, medicine was a hereditary profession, and Aristotle could have followed in his father's footsteps; he remained convinced throughout his life that medicine and philosophy were affiliated. The concept of human potentiality could well have been a topic Nicomachus discussed with his little son as they walked, gathering medicinal plants, in the woods which stretch inland into Chalkidiki from Stagira. Perhaps the topic arose when Nicomachus began a 'what do you want to be when you grow up?' kind of conversation.

Aristotle's ancestry will also have given him ambition and aspiration through the idea that he had a family reputation to maintain. Nicomachus was one of a long line of doctors, who claimed they were descended from Machaon, one of the Greeks' legendary healers at Troy. Machaon was the son, no less, of Asclepius, the god of medicine; Asclepius had been given special medicinal herbs from Cheiron, the original Centaur-doctor himself. Aristotle's father also wrote six books about medicine and one on natural philosophy, setting an example to his clever son that writing down the results of brain work was a constructive thing to do. Aristotle certainly immersed himself in the treatises by the fifth-century Greek doctor Hippocrates, whom he admired.

Dr Nicomachus seems to have excelled at his profession; at any rate, he was hired as personal physician by the King of Macedon, Amyntas III. In ancient Greece, male children passed from the women's quarters to be looked after by their male relatives and tutors around the age of seven; Aristotle's father may well have taken his son to the dazzling court at Pella when he went to treat members of the royal family. Perhaps they stayed there for days at a time, allowing the quick-witted boy to see at first hand the elegant buildings and recreational activities of the rich and powerful Macedonians.

In later life Aristotle remained loyal to his childhood hometown of Stagira. In 348 BCE, the then King of Macedon, the terrifying Philip II, conquered it and destroyed some of its buildings in 348 BCE. He enslaved all the surviving inhabitants. But he relented when Aristotle later begged him to rebuild it and restore the citizens' freedom. Stagira today is a beautiful archaeological site, off the beaten track and visited by few tourists. In Aristotle's childhood it was surrounded by a high, thick fortification wall about two kilometres in circumference, cunningly built and faced with marble. It is little surprise that architecture and construction work—building—are two of Aristotle's favourite sources of image in his philosophy. There are remains of the type of house where Aristotle will have lived as a child still standing, separated by narrow roads, either paved with stone or cut into the bedrock itself. In the town centre are the remains of a marble colonnade, with an inbuilt bench, where the Stagirites including Aristotle's father gathered for debate; there is a complex of classical shops where we can imagine the young Aristotle watching the merchants engaged in lively barter. The marble lintel of the main gate by which Aristotle entered his little city after his country walks has been excavated; it was ornamented with relief sculptures depicting a boar and a lion confronting one another. The boar was the symbol of Stagira, also depicted on its silver coins; the single island just off the coast, named Kapros ('Boar Island'), looks just like a boar in profile.

In Aristotle's childhood there was a shining Ionic temple, a hundred feet long; it was encrusted with sculptures of gods and heroes, and ornate cornices. Overlooking the sea at the top of the north hill was another sanctuary, for a female divinity, and a circular temple, probably belonging to Demeter. Fragments of pottery and terracotta figurines on display at the Polygyros Museum represent the type of objects Aristotle would have handled as a boy; there was a local pottery in ancient Stagira, and Aristotle's fascination with craftsmen and their techniques probably began when he observed the workshops near his childhood home.

Aristotle grew up to be a naturalist as well as a philosopher. His childhood environment provided the stimuli he needed in order to grow up to realise his full potential. Rich flora and fauna adorn the surrounding countryside; it is touching to find Aristotle, many years later, writing about things he observed in the area where he was first raised. In his *History of Animals* he talks about the black lambs born to sheep near the river Psychrus (so-called from its coldness), which flows through the district of Assyritis in the Chalkidiki Peninsula, on the coast of Thrace, and of 'the cows of Torone (Chalkidiki) where cows run dry for a few days before calving'. He remembers that the boars of Mount Athos, in the same peninsula, are fiercer and bolder than those nearer the sea, 'for a lowland boar is no match even for a mountain sow'. In his *Politics*, too, he cites information about a lawgiver amongst 'the people from Chalcis who live in Thrace', perhaps an anecdote he had heard from a member of his mother's ancient Chalcidian family.

But Aristotle's childhood was disrupted when both his father and mother died, perhaps when he was about thirteen years old. We cannot be sure exactly what happened to him. But he was certainly too young to exert much influence over his fate. The mid-teens of this intellectual son of the prematurely deceased physician Nicomachus were spent watching adults, whom he may not have fully trusted, make executive decisions about his future. And this was against a backdrop of ever-increasing military strife in the Greek-speaking world. It is to these years that I believe we can trace his profound interest in ethics (how people make decisions to act or not to act) and in politics. His thinking about ethics evolved and grew ever more sophisticated and nuanced over the course of his eventful life. But it is useful to convey a sense of the ethical quagmire which Aristotle witnessed and survived in his teens. He is an inspiring example of someone who succeeded in behaving ethically in a time and a place where standards of moral conduct were often shockingly low. He turned the problem into an opportunity and spent much of his life refining his findings on human behaviour.

A man named Proxenus welcomed the brilliant orphan into his own family and took charge of his education. Proxenus was married to Aristotle's older sister Arimneste, who may have been instrumental in her husband's adoption—whether it was formalised or not—of her little brother. Proxenus was a citizen of Atarneus, one of several important Greek cities in north-west Asia Minor, close to the coast opposite the island of Lesbos. But all eyes, politically, were upon the rising kingdom of Macedon. In 370, when Aristotle was about fourteen, the death of King Amyntas brought instability to the region. Aristotle must have been struck by the ease with which Amyntas' (relatively) calm autocracy turned into a murderous cesspool of infighting. Amyntas was succeeded by

his son Alexander, who was very young. Affairs descended into chaos. The juvenile King Alexander was assassinated in 368 by order of a scheming aristocrat named Ptolemy, who may have been having an affair with Amyntas' widow; Ptolemy was appointed regent.

The autocratic but stable kingdom of Amyntas turned into a textbook vice-ridden royal court, where power struggle, murder and no doubt paranoia marked every relationship. Aristotle must have watched this crisis with trepidation. With the murderous regent Ptolemy in power, Aristotle must have been relieved to go to Athens and enrol in Plato's Academy. The most brilliant student Plato had ever taught, Aristotle threw himself into every branch of study available, as well as several in which Plato himself had little interest—the natural sciences, such as astronomy. Athens itself was a colourful, bustling hive of activity. What Aristotle will have had more access to than ever before was theatrical, poetic and musical entertainment. We can imagine him walking at dawn with Plato and other colleagues to attend the tragedies and comedies in the city centre sanctuaries and theatres of Dionysus, and excitedly analysing them as he strode back home to the Academy at nightfall.

After two apparently happy decades in democratic Athens, studying as a bachelor member of the Academy, in 348 BCE Aristotle faced a crisis. His teacher Plato died in his eighty-second year. Although Aristotle was Plato's most stellar student, he was not named Plato's successor. The Academy was placed in charge of the dull philosopher Speusippus. Aristotle sometimes criticises Speusippus' ideas acerbically. They anticipated those of the Epicureans. Speusippus believed, for example, that pleasure was the highest good (a proposal which Aristotle thought preposterous) and that the ideal life was free from disturbance of any kind. But he had two advantages over Aristotle: he was Plato's nephew and an Athenian.

A major political event the same year added to Aristotle's sense that he no longer belonged in Athens. Philip of Macedon, after years of flexing his muscles across northern Greece, set his sights on absorbing into his empire the city of Olynthus, which Athens was supporting, just north of the western prong of Chalkidiki. Anyone from that part of Greece, especially a man whose father had worked for Macedonian royalty, would now have felt vulnerable at Athens. There were even improbable rumours that Aristotle had been involved with the conspiracy to betray Olynthus to Philip. We do not know how far Aristotle felt spurned by the Academy's preference for Speusippus as Head; perhaps his own intellectual differences with Plato were so apparent that he would never have been chosen. He must, however, have recognised that a light had gone out of the world, which Speusippos could never replace. He must have felt disappointment and envy. He knew that it was time to move on.

The friendship of a fellow student in Athens came to centre place in Aristotle's life. The man was Hermias, the ruler of a kingdom based at two cities in north-west Asia Minor, Atarna or Atarneus, and Assos, a cliff-top citadel with curving rock-cut pathways leading to a large Hellenistic theatre with a view of the turquoise sea. Aristotle accepted Hermias' invitation to join him there, and later sealed the friendship by marrying Hermias' daughter or niece, Pythias. Hermias was fascinated by philosophy: he was later described by Theophrastus, another close friend of Aristotle, as 'an ideal student'. He thought that surrounding himself with outstanding thinkers might help him become an exemplary ruler.

When he was nearly forty, Aristotle sailed across from Hermias' kingdom on the Anatolian mainland to the island of Lesbos. Aristotle went to Lesbos most likely on the invitation of Theophrastus, a native of Eressos. Theophrastus' statue stands there on the esplanade today, splashed by the waves and blinking into the sun. The two became inseparable friends. There is on Lesbos an exceptional diversity of natural habitats supporting an enormous range of plants and animals—more than fourteen hundred types of flora, including colourful orchids and species of rhododendron found nowhere else on earth. The island's woods and glades throb and rustle with the movements of small animals—squirrels, foxes, butterflies, rare bats and grasshoppers, tortoises, stripe-necked terrapins, frogs, lizards, snakes and dragonflies. Lesbos is a bird-spotter's paradise, with its pink flamingos, grey heron and yellow wagtails. And cutting deep into the long southern coast is the bay and lagoon of Pyrrha (now called Kalloni). Porpoises, seals, and an extraordinary variety of fish, crustacea and cephalopods—cuttlefish, squid and octopus—all have their home in its dark blue waters.

More than a century ago, a Scottish polymath called Wentworth D'Arcy Thompson, in true Aristotelian fashion an expert in both Classics and Biology, suggested that the frequency of references to the Pyrrha lagoon in Aristotle's zoological works must mean that he had conducted a good deal of his research into marine life there. And the importance of Lesbos to Aristotle's scientific discoveries has been celebrated in a wonderful recent study of his achievements in biology, *The Lagoon*, by Armand Marie Leroi, Professor of Evolutionary Developmental Biology at Imperial College, London.

Theophrastus, twelve years Aristotle's junior, had also studied in Athens. When Aristotle died, he left his own writings to Theophrastus and decreed that he should be his successor as head of the Lyceum. Both men were

polymaths who worked on moral philosophy and logic, but their great shared passion seems to have been the natural world. Theophrastus specialised in plants and is often called the Father of Botany; Aristotle also wrote books (now lost) on botany but is remembered as the Father of Zoology. Over the course of his life he also studied astronomy, physics, geology, and geography. Most importantly, as 'the greatest observer' who had ever lived, he was the undisputed originator of our modern scientific view of life in general, and in particular of 'empirical science'.

In 343 BC, after three years on the scenic island of Lesbos, Aristotle was summoned by Philip to Macedon. When he wanted a world-famous intellectual to teach his son Alexander, who was already showing great promise, there was a frontrunner in the field: Aristotle, Plato's most brilliant student, the son of the Macedonian royal family's one-time physician. According to one source, Plutarch, Philip had a school built for Aristotle at a sanctuary of the nymphs—which means somewhere with a fresh-water spring—at Mieza, thirty miles south of Pella. There are remains of buildings of the right date there, along with a spring and tinkling rivulet.

The years 343-342 BCE were relatively peaceful for Aristotle. But things began to change rapidly in 341 and 340 BCE. Athenian hostility to Philip was consolidated and made official when the Assembly denounced a peace treaty signed in 346 BCE. Philip suddenly had to march north to defend Macedonian interests against the Scythians on the Danube. For Aristotle, this meant that his comfortable situation, as tutor to a junior crown prince in a quiet seminary in the countryside, was well and truly over. Still in his mid-teens, Alexander was now appointed regent, moved to Pella, and found himself at the epicentre of serial international diplomatic and military crises. Although there is no concrete confirmation, Aristotle almost certainly accompanied him. Most scholars assume that his position as 'tutor' changed into that of counsellor and diplomatic adviser. But in Aristotle's writings, it is puzzling how little the events of the game-changing years between 339 and 336 features. The poet Heinrich Heine expressed the frustration of all of us when he lamented that Aristotle dissected plenty of animals and birds, but 'unfortunately overlooked and failed to study the great beast in front of his nose, whom he had himself educated, and who was far more curious than all the rest of the world's menagerie. In fact, he left us completely uninformed about the nature of the youthful king whose astounding life and deeds still appear wondrous and enigmatic. Who was Alexander? What did he want? Was he a madman or a god?'

In 336 Philip was assassinated and Alexander, who was only twenty years old, declared King. Whatever Aristotle had taught Alexander about moderation and justice, the young king looked all set to continue the Macedonian tradition of brutal monarchical authoritarianism, and soon developed a reputation for heavy drinking and dissipation. Presumably he no longer wanted to spend too much time discussing virtue.

What was going to happen to Aristotle? By this stage in his career, when he was nearly fifty years old, he must have longed for a more independent lifestyle which would allow him to complete all the books he had been working on for years. He could not go back to the Academy; Speusippus had recently died, and been succeeded by Xenocrates, a loyal but dull Platonist interested in number theory. Aristotle will also have been all too aware that the Macedonians were seriously unpopular with many Athenians. If he went back south, he would be leaving the security of Macedonian protection for a volatile democratic community which had turned against its best philosophers before. This was the biggest decision of his life. He was not a young man and he had been in one way or another at the beck and call of others—whether Plato as the Head of the Academy or his rich royal patrons Hermias and Philip—since he was a teenager. His time had come, and he knew it. Aristotle wrote that humans arrive at their physical prime in their thirties and their mental at the age of precisely forty-nine. I have often wondered whether he was thinking of his own moment of critical decision, which took place not long before his fiftieth birthday.

As soon as Aristotle arrived in Athens in 336/5 BCE, he founded his Lyceum. While his former student Alexander was changing the political map of the eastern Mediterranean and Asia, Aristotle set about fulfilling his own personal dream. He did, however, receive regular updates from Alexander's campaign, almost certainly including information and samples of flora and fauna.

From the external point of view, the Lyceum, like the Academy and what we know about the Stoic school at Cynosarges, would have been associated with an ancient religious site and function. Parts of the Lyceum were densely wooded, and others irrigated by channels dug from the Ilissus and Eridanus rivers to keep the area verdant and lush. Theophrastus in his *On Plants* observes one enormous plane tree in particular that "sent out roots a distance of 33 cubits" (Theophrastus, *On Plants* 1.7.1).

The groups of philosophers who assembled in them would have seemed to the outside world to be carrying on the work of the bands of priests, or *thiasoi*, who attended the divinities traditionally worshipped in these sanctuaries. At Plato's Academy, the original deity had been Athena, the goddess of wisdom. At the Lyceum, it

had been Apollo, god of the lyre, prophecy, archery and medicine, in his particular form as Apollo Lykeios, Lycian Apollo. This meant both Apollo in his prehistoric form as a wolf, Apollo Wolf-God, and Apollo from Lycia, the area of south-west Anatolia from which his worship was thought to have been imported to Greece. No more suitable divine patron could have been chosen for an institution dedicated to all branches of learning than the cerebral divine god of poetry, medical science, and the omniscience which made him the source of the truest prophecies. But Apollo was also closely associated with the nine Muses, and they were intimately tied to the poetry which contained all the wisdom of the Greeks before they invented philosophy. Libraries in the ancient world usually took the form of a *Mouseion*, or temple of the Muses, for example in the famous library at Alexandria. The Lyceum itself was a sanctuary to Apollo, but it also contained a cult of Hermes in its grounds and a shrine to the Muses that housed many dedications and a portrait bust of Aristotle. In his *Meteorology*, he shows that he was used to studying maps and geographical works: a special stoa in the grounds contained maps of the earth displayed on tablets on the walls.

The Lyceum area had long been significant in Athenian civic life. It was the only substantial gymnasium, or athletics training ground, we hear of in Athens in the classical period. It was probably founded as such by Pisistratus, the tyrant who set up the drama competitions in the sixth century, or Pericles, the great statesman and man who authorised the building of the Parthenon in the fifth century. The head of the army kept his office there, and the wide flat spaces were used for military exercises and marshalling troops. There was a gymnasium for the young men to train in. It was also the place where the Athenian democratic Assembly met until these gatherings were moved to the Pnyx Hill. Aristotle himself tells a story of how a poor vagrant might go to the Lyceum in the hope that a friendly citizen would give him a mat to sleep on there. But philosophers had gathered there long before Aristotle as well. Socrates held meetings there: Plato's dialogue *Euthydemus* takes place at the Lyceum in the presence of a large crowd. Socrates' coevals Prodicus and Protagoras all used the Lyceum for debate and teaching in the last third of the fifth century BCE. Rhapsodes—the expert harp-players and reciters who specialised in performing the Homeric epics—gave lessons in the Lyceum, as did Isocrates, the famous professor of rhetoric.

But from the moment when Aristotle rented rooms there and founded his own institution, the name of the Lyceum has always been inseparable from Aristotle's. We happen to know that there was rebuilding there during Aristotle's residency. An honorary decree for the Athenian statesman Lycurgus states that this building was repaired in the 330s BCE.

The Lyceum had its own gardens, where Aristotle's friend Theophrastus seems to have created a collection of interesting plants; the grounds were large enough for the Peripatetic philosophers to walk as they talked and also to accommodate the ordinary people who gathered there in the afternoons to hear the celebrated scholar's popular lectures. Behind the colonnades were teaching rooms and study areas as well as an increasing number of papyri. Aristotle must by this time have already amassed a substantial part of his famous personal library, which will have formed the nucleus of the research resources available to his students. He sometimes recommends books by name to which his students can refer if they want to take their interest in a topic further: 'Charetides of Paros and Apollodorus of Lemnos have written about both agriculture and fruit-farming.' His library was also destined to become one inspiration behind the great library which the first Macedonian King of Egypt, Ptolemy I, founded at Alexandria with a Lyceum alumnus, Demetrius of Phalerum, as resident consultant.

Aristotle had always been said to be an avid reader. He accumulated a huge personal library, buying all of Speusippos' collection when he died. In his own work the *Topics* he explicitly writes that it is essential to read all relevant written sources, compile notes and assemble previous opinions in order to be able to state and if necessary, refute them. And in *Nicomachean Ethics* he gives us insight into why he started from received opinions, many of which he must have encountered in books. Some views, he says, have been held by many people. Others by fewer people, but wise ones. It is reasonable to assume that neither view will be mistaken in all respects.

The very idea of the universal library and the community of full-time scholars cooperating on research projects, which subsequently came to such magnificent fruition at Alexandria and has subsequently been imitated in thousands of colleges and learned institutions the world over, can be traced to Aristotle's visionary Lyceum. He encouraged its members to conduct collaborative research projects in every branch of knowledge, and always to consult previous authorities in depth and detail. Several important works by his students have survived, revealing how painstakingly his methods were absorbed and applied to a vast range of topics, from mechanics, music and diving technology to psychology and aesthetics. Many of their projects had direct public and civic applications, and often preserved invaluable information from ancient archives. The *Constitution of Athens*, for example, researched and written by a Peripatetic using methods very similar to Aristotle's comparative discussion of constitutions in his Politics, and found on a papyrus in the late 19th century, transformed our understanding of the

workings of the Athenian Council (*Boule*) as well as other aspects of the democracy. The text was probably researched and written, under Aristotle's supervision, as one of the—no fewer than 170—constitutional histories of individual city-states which the Lyceum is said to have produced. The Lyceum thus put not only political theory, but local history, on an unprecedentedly rigorous scientific level.

Aristotle's achievement in finally separating himself from Macedonian patronage, becoming his own man and running his own show, is all the more impressive because he was by no means young when he got there. His determination to realise his own full potential, and the speed and efficiency with which he created the first recognisable research university, are examples to everyone whose dreams have ever been frustrated in early life. Although he had of course been reading, investigating, thinking, theorising and debating since his teens, most scholars think that it was only in the golden twelve years of his mature life as the Head of the Lyceum that he wrote the treatises which survive, in addition to all the others—at least one hundred and thirty—which do not.

His prolific output at this time was facilitated by his sudden ability to devote himself full-time to intellectual labour of his choice. He also found personal happiness, after years of widowhood, with a woman named Herpyllis from his old hometown of Stagira. He did not marry her, which suggests she may have been a slave or of low non-citizen class. But he made generous provision for her in his will and he did father her son, Nicomachus, to whom he addressed or dedicated his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle was perhaps repelled by the exhausting struggle going on in the court at Pella between Alexander's mother Olympias and the man who acted as regent for Alexander during his extended absences, Antipater; he must have been relieved to find himself far away from the murderous in-fighting, emotional dramas, paranoia, superstition and bizarre superstitions and mystery cults which characterised Macedonian palace life. The man in charge of Athens, on the other hand, was now Lycurgus, a wise and experienced elderly statesman. Although he was one of the influential Athenians who had opposed the Macedonian conquest, Lycurgus maintained the fragile peace, imposing the laws strictly. He was also, like Aristotle, a former pupil of Plato and sympathetic to philosophical pursuits.

In order to write and supervise the flood of books which issued from the Lyceum, Aristotle needed to call on his considerable skill in putting words and arguments together in cogent prose. This is the art—or science, since the same Greek word *techne* is translated by both English words—of rhetoric, which entails persuading people through speech. It is a power which bestows on its possessor a huge capacity, or potential—in this case, the potential to persuade other people to agree with you, or at the very least to consider your arguments as set out in the most persuasive and lucid manner. In the first chapter of his famous treatise *Rhetoric*, which is still read as an instruction manual both by politicians' speechwriters and by students on essay-writing courses in American Liberal Arts Colleges, he uses his favourite word *dynamis* to define rhetoric. It gives the individuals who acquire it potency in their future lives. Lycurgus of Athens, its peace-loving ruler during Aristotle's least years there, was himself an outstanding orator. One his speeches, delivered in 330 BCE, survives to be read today. I like to imagine the two former students of Plato, Aristotle and Lycurgus, strolling together around the open-air lawcourts of classical Athens as they discussed rhetoric, its uses, and abuses.

After Aristotle's death, Theophrastus became head of the Lyceum and added to its buildings and land. From then until 86 BCE, the school flourished as a prestigious university for young men between eighteen and twenty, who came from all over the Mediterranean and Black Sea worlds. It was run by a long succession of philosophers. But the Roman general Sulla, when he sacked Athens in 86 BCE, ruined the Lyceum complex and even chopped down the trees in its grounds. But the Lyceum recovered eventually, and the philosophy-loving emperor Marcus Aurelius appointed teachers to it in the second century CE. The Aristotelian school or philosophy mainly flourished for the next three centuries away from Athens in other centres of intellectual activity. If there was still a functioning Lyceum in Athens in 529 CE, it would then finally have been closed down by the Christian Emperor Justinian

But what happened to Aristotle after he founded the Lyceum? In 323 BC, Alexander, King of Macedonia and much of the known world, died in Babylon more than a thousand miles from Athens. Rumours abounded that Alexander had been murdered by one or more of his ambitious generals. These rumours will have reached Aristotle. The death of his former student will have shaken the philosopher personally; it may also have made it easier for his enemies to persecute him without fear of reprisals. And it was his beliefs in regard to the gods which came into focus now. Aristotle was not an atheist, but he did not think that 'God' took any interest in human affairs or responded to human requests. Aristotle was committed to explaining the world as he and other humans apprehend it, scientifically and without recourse to any mystical or supernatural explanations. This made him vulnerable to prosecution on religious grounds. With Alexander was dead, his enemies seized their opportunity.

Although not himself a Macedonian, Aristotle had long been identified with the Macedonian supremacy. And when the Athenians heard about the premature death of Alexander, those who had never accepted Macedonian interference in their affairs saw their opportunity to rebel. Hostilities were increased by hunger, since there was a grain shortage at the time. There was a fiery debate in the democratic Assembly, with the poorer citizens urging rebellion against Macedon rule, and it was decided to go to war. This must have alarmed Aristotle. He and his family were in serious danger in Athens. At some point during that momentous year after Alexander's death he had left Athens for his mother's ancestral city of Chalcis on the island of Euboea. He died there in 323. He must have been anxious, and he must have missed the life of the Lyceum and the friendship of Theophrastus desperately.

The persecution of Aristotle by some top Athenians seems to have taken a similar form to that posed to Socrates nearly eight decades previously. Aristotle was denounced for impiety before the Court of the Areopagus by an Athenian priest named Eurymedon. The main charge seems to have been that he held beliefs which were in conflict with the Athenians' religion; there may also have been a rumour that his memorials to his dead wife Pythias and his dead friend Hermias—he was said to have set up statues and composed poems in their honour—overstepped what was appropriate in honour of mere human beings.

His response to Eurymedon's accusation was *not* to court execution as Socrates had done. Socrates had the opportunity to escape from Athens and stay alive but preferred to stay and martyr himself. Aristotle, on the other hand, was not the kind of man to give up on life. He took refuge at the estate, with a garden and a guest cottage, belonging to his mother's family in Chalcis. Aristotle is reported to have drawn a direct parallel between his own plight and that which Socrates had faced, saying 'I will not permit the Athenians to commit a second crime against philosophy'. One source, a Byzantine encyclopaedia known as the Suda, even claims that he committed suicide by taking hemlock, as Socrates had done, but this is likely to be a late and novelistic invention.

Aristotle had long suffered from a stomach complaint, probably cancer and the more prosaic likelihood is that he died of it. The stress of his Euboean exile and isolation from his Lyceum friends may have exacerbated this pre-existing medical condition. One moving fragment, written toward the end of his life, says that he enjoys the old myths increasingly 'the older and more isolated I become.' On the other hand, Chalkis was and still is a healthful, breezy seaside town of which the philosopher may have been fond and which he had probably visited many times. It is cheering to think that in his last illness, he will have taken his last walks along the long sunny promenade, perhaps with Herpyllis and his children Nicomachus and Pythias, to discuss how best to face the prospect of his death and their future without him.

The death tradition with most resonance in cultural history claims that Aristotle committed suicide, either by taking poison or leaping into the waves of the narrow straits at Euripus between Euboea and the Greek mainland to drown himself. The suicide was allegedly motivated by frustration that he could not understand scientifically the violent tides there, which reverse direction violently every six hours and cause spectacular churning and eddying directly beneath the old bridge connecting the island to Boeotia, the region surrounding Thebes. The tidal phenomenon, although partially solved in an article published by a Greek astronomer named Dimitrios Eginitis in 1929, is still not fully understood. But Aristotle's suicide never happened. It was an invention of his early Christian detractors. He is the first in a long line of individuals who do not think there is divine involvement in human affairs but for whom Christians have fabricated a death-bed conversion: similar rumours have spread in Christian circles about famous atheists and agnostic scientists, philosophers and writers including Charles Darwin, Bertrand Russell and even Christopher Hitchins.

The place of his burial is not known for certain. Some said that his remains were claimed by the Stagirites and were interred in the vicinity of his craggy northern Greek hometown. From time to time Greek archaeologists claim that a tomb they have excavated near the Stagira marketplace was originally built for Aristotle. The medieval travelogue of Sir John Mandeville, first printed in 1499, stated that he had seen a tomb and Christianised hero cult in Stagira:

> In this country was Aristotle born, in a city that men clepe Stagyra, a little from the city of Thrace. And at Stagyra lieth Aristotle; and there is an altar upon his tomb. And there make men great feasts for him every year, as though he were a saint. And at his altar they holden their great councils and their assemblies, and they hope, that through inspiration of God and of him, they shall have the better council.

The Anglo-American archaeologist Sir Charles Waldstein, on the other hand, claimed in the early 1890s to have excavated the tomb of Aristotle, complete with his personal writing styluses and a portrait statuette, in Euboea

near Chalcis. I am not really convinced by either claim. I prefer to celebrate this great philosopher in the place where he lived while he accomplished his life's work, at the site of the Athenian Lyceum.

[i] See my online essay at https://aeon.co/essays/how-aristotles-example-can-help-public-philosophy-today.

[ii] See further the short documentary film I made with Sarah Poynder about the life and residences of Aristotle at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-moYjtCmV8Q.