

THE ANONYMOUS OF SOLA AND THE SCHOOL OF NOSIAI

1. INTRODUCTION: AN ALMOST FORGOTTEN POET

In 2003, Marc Lauxtermann drew attention to a series of poems which had been edited by Giuseppe Sola about a century ago¹ but condemned to oblivion ever since.² This corpus of eight poems is found in the manuscript *Vaticanus graecus 753*, dated to the eleventh century.³ Both Sola and Lauxtermann assume that the poems were written by one and the same poet. Following Lauxtermann, I refer to this poet here as ‘Anonymous of Sola’. Most poems can be dated to the reigns of Romanos III (1028–1034) or Michael IV (1034–1041), while one seems to have been composed in the years 980–992.⁴ Anonymous of Sola was therefore active in the decades around, and certainly after, the year 1000. Most of the poems are dedicatory epigrams on icons or churches. The first one, in contrast, is a curious narration of an enchanting boat trip.

This paper concentrates on item 7 of this corpus (following the numbering of Sola), which consists of a series of seven short poems, each ranging from two to four lines. While these can arguably be grouped together as a single entity, they form seven distinct texts, each one with its own purpose.

I propose a reading of these poems in the light of the highly competitive school life of this period. I also argue that a particular word play is present in these poems, which reveals details about a hitherto unknown school. This contribution therefore serves two purposes: first, an interpretation and contextualization of these poems, and second, the addition of another school to the small number of eleventh-century Byzantine schools of which we already know.

¹ G. SOLA, Giambografi sconosciuti dell'XI secolo. *Roma e oriente* 11 (1916) 18–27, 149–153.

² M. LAUXTERMANN, Byzantine Poetry and the Paradox of Basil II's Reign, in: *Byzantium in the Year 1000* (ed. P. MAGDALINO). Leiden 2003, 199–216. See also M. LAUXTERMANN, *Byzantine Poetry from Pisides to Geometres*. Vol. 1: Texts and Contexts. Wien 2003, 327–328.

³ See R. DEVRESSE, *Codices Vaticani Graeci. Tomus III: Codices 604-866*. Città del Vaticano 1950, 268–269.

⁴ For the dating see LAUXTERMANN, *Paradox* 199–200.

Since Sola's edition is not widely accessible and the poems have never been translated, I here reproduce the Greek text of item 7 as edited by Sola,⁵ followed by a literal translation into English. This translation may appear somewhat enigmatic upon first reading, but it will become clear, I hope, by the interpretation that follows.

1. Σειρήνες ἄδέτωσαν, οὐδέν μοι μέλει·
οὐ κηρὸν ὡσὶν, ἀλλὰ σαγίον μέγα
βαλῶ πρὸς ὦτα καὶ διαδράσω μέλη.

1. Let the Sirens sing — I do not care!
I will not put wax in my ears, but I will put a large *sagion*
Over my ears, and I will flee the songs.

2. ὦ φθέγμα κυκλώπειον, ἔρρου⁶ πρὸς πέτρας·
ἐν νοσιαῖς ἄδουσιν ἀλλ' ἀηδόνες.

2. Oh, Cyclopean voice, away with you to the rocks!
In their nests, however, the nightingales sing.

3. Τὸ φῶς θεάσῃ τῆς ἐκεῖθεν ἡμέρας,
ἐν ὡσὶ λάμπεις ἡλίου πολλῶ πλέον
τὸν Χριστὸν εὐρῶν καὶ τὸ φῶς τῆς Τριάδος.

3. You will see the light of yonder day,
And in your ears you will shine much more than the sun
Having found Christ and the light of the Triad.

4. Νείλου καταρράκται με βάλλοιεν πλέον
ἢ Νικολάου ῥήτορος μελωδίαι.

4. May the cascades of the Nile hit me more
Than the melodies of Nicholas the rhetor!

⁵ SOLA, Giambografi 151.

⁶ So the manuscript, but Sola emends to ἔρου.

5. Ἐν νοσιαῖς, ὦ θαῦμα καὶ πάντων πλέον,
ὁ στρουθῆος οὗτος, ἀλλὰ παῖς Ἀλωάδων.

5. In the nests — what a marvel, surpassing everything! —
Is this creature, a sparrow but also a child of the *Aloadae*.

6. Ἄθριξ, ἀπώγων, καὶ βαρύγδουποι κτύποι·
ἄδεις ἀληθῶς οἷα δέρμα τυμπάνου.

6. Bald, beardless, and loud-thundering bangs:
You truly sing like the skin of a kettle-drum.

7. Ὅρη, πέτραι, φάραγγες οὐ φέρουσί σε,
φεύγουσι θήρες, δαίμονες φρίσσουσί σε,
οἱ δ' ἄγγελοι μισοῦσι· πῶς οἴσω μόνος
φωνὴν βιαίαν παντὸς ἐχθρὰν τοῦ βίου;

7. Mountains, rocks and gorges cannot bear you,
Animals flee from you, demons shiver at you,
Angels hate you; how can I alone then
Endure your violent voice, hostile to anything that lives?

The satiric tone of these poems is clear at first sight, but there are some interpretative problems that make immediate comprehension difficult.

The first piece obviously refers to the story of Odysseus and the Sirens in the *Odyssey*. Instead of putting wax in his ears, as Odysseus had done, the poet declares he will don a ‘sagion’. A *sagion* is an over-tunic worn by the emperor and high-ranking court officials.⁷ The point of mentioning this *sagion* is not entirely clear to me. Is the poet claiming a connection to court circles? Be that as it may, the poet does not want to hear the songs of the ‘Sirens’. Notable in this poem is the pun on the homophony of μέλει and μέλη.

The second poem also contains an allusion to the *Odyssey*: someone is compared to a Cyclops, a proverbial example of stupidity in Greek-speaking culture. In the

⁷ E. PILTZ, *Middle Byzantine Court Costume*, in: *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204* (ed. H. MAGUIRE). Washington DC 1997, 39–51, here 45.

first verse, Sola's solution ἔρῳ does not make any sense and, moreover, constitutes a visible infringement of the prosody of the iambic trimeter, while this poet otherwise avoids such transgressions in non-technical words. It is true that the form ἔρρε would be more usual, but a medio-passive use of the verb is not unattested. Hence, I think that the reading ἔρῳ in the manuscript is preferable. I have translated ἀλλά with "however"; the curious use of ἀλλά in the middle of the sentence occurs elsewhere in this corpus (see poem 1.32), and might serve as another argument for attributing all poems of this corpus to one poet.

The third poem apparently speaks about an "enlightening" experience. The addressee will see the light of the Day of Judgment; that is, he will be filled with wisdom. He will do so by hearing something, for it is "in his ears" that he will shine. It is the only poem in this series without any apparent polemic argument.

In the fourth poem, a certain rhetor, Nicholas, who is otherwise unknown, is the target of a stinging jibe. The possibility cannot be excluded that this is a playful allusion to Nicholas of Myra, the late Antique rhetoricist also known as Nicholas the Rhetor. In view of the abundant use of word play in other poems, Νείλου might also refer to an actual person named Neilos, someone who is in favour with our poet.

The fifth poem concerns someone who combines the features of a sparrow and those of a "child of the Aloadae". The two Aloadae, Otus and Ephialtes, were mythological giants, especially famous for their extraordinary height. They appear quite frequently in sophisticated Byzantine rhetoric when the author alludes to particularly tall or large persons.⁸ Sola believes that their appearance here points to the cultivation of poetry, because of the story of the Aloadae founding Askra and introducing three Muses there.⁹ However, in contrast to their height, this story about the Aloadae, which is found in Pausanias,¹⁰ remained fairly abstruse. Moreover, this verse clearly intends to achieve a paradoxical antithesis between two seemingly incongruous properties of one person: someone who is reminiscent of a small bird (by 'singing' beautifully), and is yet extraordinarily tall. The sparrow is not especially renowned for its beautiful singing.

⁸ By way of example: Theophylact of Ochrid (ed. P. GAUTIER, *Theophylacti Achridensis epistulae* [CFHB XVI/2]. Thessaloniki 1986), ep. 96, l. 72.

⁹ SOLA, *Giambografi* 152.

¹⁰ Ed. F. SPIRO, *Pausanias Graeciae descriptio*. Leipzig 1903, 3, 62 (book 9, ch. 29, §1–2).

However, Christopher Mitylenaios, a contemporary of Anon. Sola, composed a poem to express his admiration at the musical qualities of this bird.¹¹

The sixth poem derides a bald and beardless man (a eunuch?), whose dull voice and physical features are likened to the sound and skin of a kettle-drum. The last poem, finally, is pervaded by feelings of animosity towards someone with an “unbearable” voice.

2. NOSIAI: A *JEU DE MOTS*

The second and fifth poems, when literally translated, make hardly any sense. The ‘nests’ that are mentioned are a totally superfluous addition. Especially in poem 5, it is difficult to see the relevance of the specification ‘in the nests’ (plural) for this single ‘sparrow’.

Apart from that, there is a problem with the spelling of the word. The spelling νοσία with one sigma is in fact incorrect. The usual form is either the Attic νεοττία, the more frequent νεοσσία, or, in later Greek, νοσσία (still with double sigma). Moreover, this spelling with one sigma creates a problem for the prosodic structure of both verses. In all poems of Anon. Sola, the prevailing rules concerning the quantity of syllables are observed; thus, the quantity of vowels is generally respected, with exception of the so-called *dichrona* (α, ι, and υ) and proper names. This pattern is consistent in all of the poems of Anon. Sola.¹² As a result, although the correct spelling of the word for ‘nests’ would fit very well within the prosodic pattern, the poet retains this deviant form, committing a mistake normally reserved for proper names.

It therefore seems likely that the word νοσιά contains a pun. The signification of ‘nests’, together with the comparisons to birds, does have a sense, but a very simplistic one: that birds will sing in their nests. The word likely implies another, more specific, meaning that makes up the core message of the poem; one that would be easily understood by the readers in the immediate reading context of the poems.

The form νοσιά, with one sigma, is in fact a geographical proper name. This also explains the prosodic infringement. It was the name of a little harbour on the coast

¹¹ Christopher Mitylenaios (ed. E. KURTZ, *Die Gedichte des Christophoros Mitylenaios*. Leipzig 1903), poem 48.

¹² This is also observed by LAUXTERMANN, *Byzantine Poetry* 327.

of the Sea of Marmara.¹³ Our knowledge of this place is scant and almost exclusively concerns a monastery situated there, founded by the emperor Leo VI in 912 for his *parakoimoumenos* Constantine the Paphlagonian.¹⁴ Its foundation is recorded in several chronicles, nearly all of which, significantly, spell the name with one sigma.¹⁵ The most extensive account is to be found in the chronicle of pseudo-Symeon Magister, which also narrates a legend about the establishment of the monastery.¹⁶

The monastery, subsequently known as τῶν Νοσιῶν after the place of its foundation, certainly still existed in the time of Anon. Sola, as attested by two seals of *hegoumenoi* of the monastery dated to the eleventh century.¹⁷ The first, dated to the middle of the century, belonged to Philotheos, *synkellos* and *kathegoumenos* of the monastery.¹⁸ The other belonged to a certain John, *hegoumenos*, and at the same time *presbyteros* and *koubouklisios*. This seal refers to the monastery as ‘the imperial monastery of Nosiai’ (Βασιλική μονή τῶν Νοσιῶν). On both seals, the name is spelt with one sigma. The monastery is also mentioned in the tenth-century manuscript *Athens Ethn. Bibl.* 57.¹⁹

The history of the monastery *ton Nosion* can be traced until the twelfth century. The *typikon* of the monastery of Pantokrator from 1136 states that John II Komnenos

¹³ See R. JANIN, *Les églises et les monastères des grands centres byzantins*. Paris 1975, 59. See also K. BELKE, art. ‘Nos(s)iai’ in: *Tabula Imperii Byzantini*, vol. 13. Bithynien und Hellespontos (forthcoming). I thank dr. Klaus Belke for sending me the article in preview.

¹⁴ For the historical circumstances of this foundation, see S. TOUGHER, *The Reign of Leo VI (886-912): Politics and People*. Leiden 1997, 201.

¹⁵ See Theophanes Continuatus (ed. I. BEKKER, *Theophanes Continuatus, Ioannes Cameniata, Symeon Magister, Georgius Monachus* [CSHB 31]. Bonn 1838), 376, and the very similar passages in John Scylitzes (ed. H. THURN, *Synopsis Historiarum* [CFHB 5]. Berlin 1973), 191, George Monachos, PG 110, col. 1121B, and Symeon Logothete (ed. S. WAHLGREN, *Symeonis Magistri et Logothetae chronicon* [CFHB 44]. Berlin 2006), 293 (l. 432).

¹⁶ Pseudo-Symeon Magister (ed. I. BEKKER), 713–714 (§25).

¹⁷ V. LAURENT, *Les sceaux de l’empire byzantine*. Paris 1965, V, 2, 191–193; seals nrs. 1273 and 1274.

¹⁸ J. NESBITT – N. OIKONOMIDES, *Catalogue of Byzantine Seals at Dumbarton Oaks and in the Fogg Museum of Art*. Vol. 3: West, Northwest, and Central Asia Minor and the Orient. Washington DC 1991, 109–110, nr. 60.1.

¹⁹ See A. MARAVA CHATZINICOLAU – Chr. TOUFEXI-PASCHOU, *Catalogue of the Illuminated Byzantine Manuscripts of the National Library of Greece I. Manuscripts of New Testament Texts 10th–12th Century*. Athina 1978, 108–117, and 109 for the Greek text, and S. KOTZABASI, *Βυζαντινά χειρόγραφα από τα μοναστήρια της Μικράς Ασίας*. Athina 2004, 39–41. See also BELKE, art. ‘Nos(s)iai’.

annexed the monastery of Nosiai (ἡ μονὴ τῶν Νοσσιῶν) as a dependency.²⁰ It is specified in this document that the organization of the monastery was coenobitic. John stipulated that the number of monks was to be reduced to twelve. In this document, the name is spelt with two sigmas.

Laurent points to another document from the early thirteenth century relating to Nosiai, namely, the travelogue of Nikolaos Mesarites,²¹ who describes Nossiai (with double sigma) as a seaport at some distance from Chalcedon.²²

Unlike Laurent, I would hesitate to translate ‘Nosiai’ literally as “of the Nests” (“des Nids”).²³ The spelling with one sigma that we encounter in earlier sources and on the seals indicates that the place name was somehow disconnected from the word for “nests”, although of course this similarity is exploited by the Anonymous of Sola.

In addition, I believe that Laurent incorrectly equates the monastery of Nosiai with that of Hosia,²⁴ among which the *Vita Eutychii*.²⁵ It is true that some manuscripts of Symeon the Logothete confuse the two names, but only the later codices.²⁶ Moreover, the monastery of Hosia, according to the *Vita Eutychii*, was situated *in* Chalcedon, whereas Mesarites had to walk several hours from this city to arrive at Nosiai.

Piecing these few bits of information together, we can surmise that Nosiai was a place at some distance from Chalcedon, on the coast of the sea of Marmara, and was especially known for a monastery of the Saviour *ton Nosion*, founded in 912, and still thriving in Anon. Sola’s time.

²⁰ P. GAUTIER, Le typikon du Christ Sauveur Pantocrator. *REB* 32 (1974) 1-145. Text: p. 69–71, with a note on the monastery on p. 68, n. 18. See also J. THOMAS and A. CONSTANTINIDES HERO, *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents*. Washington DC 2000, II, 730, 752 and n. 55.

²¹ LAURENT, *Sceaux* V, 2, 191.

²² A. HEISENBERG, *Neue Quellen zur Geschichte des lateinischen Kaisertums und der Kirchenunion (Sitz. der Bayerischen Ak. der Wiss. Phil.-Hist. Klasse 2 Abt.)*. München 1923, 44, I. 29.

²³ This designation is adopted in GAUTIER, *Typikon* 68 and P. MAGDALINO, *Constantinople médiévale : études sur l'évolution des structures urbaines*. Paris 1996, 61.

²⁴ See JANIN, *Centres* 424 (who distinguishes clearly between the two monasteries).

²⁵ *Vita Eutychii* (ed. C. LAGA, *Vita Eutychii patriarchae Constantinopolitani [CCSG 25]*. Turnhout 1993), 36 (l. 1081), and 38 (l.38).

²⁶ In the edition of Symeon Magister et Logothetes (ed. S. WAHLGREN), p. 293 (l. 432), the best manuscripts give *νοσσιαῖς*, whereas more recent ones have *Ῥσῖαις*, which is the reading the editor adopts. The text of other chroniclers is unmistakably *νοσσιαῖς*. The two names are of course easily confused when the name is preceded by the preposition *ἐν*.

3. POETRY AND SCHOOL COMPETITIONS

Given the evidence presented, we can conclude that our poet was connected with Nosiai in some way. However, the particular content of the series of poems by Anon. Sola can only be linked with this place if we suppose that a school was located there, perhaps associated in some form with the monastery. We do not have any other source that confirms the existence of an educational institution in this locality, nor in its monastery. It is a fact, however, that other schools in this period, without really being monastery schools, were connected to monasteries in some way. The monastery *tou Narsou*, which probably provided basic education for the young Psellos, is one example;²⁷ the law school attached to the monastery of St. George in Mangana is another.²⁸ The precise connection between monasteries and schools remains unclear, however. It must also be said that we do not know of any educational institution outside Constantinople in this period.

The supposition that Nosiai refers here to a school, will be plausible, I hope, by relating these poems to similar poetic pieces that are likewise connected to an educational context.

In the first half of the eleventh century, there were several small schools in the capital, all with more or less the same organization and outlook.²⁹ Lemerle lists six schools, of which five were contemporaneous with Anon. Sola (St Paul of the Orphanotropheion was founded later). These were ‘private’ schools: while the emperor and the patriarch seem to have reserved the right to appoint teachers (although this is by no means certain), the schools functioned independently. Grammar and rhetoric were the most widely taught subjects.

Rivalry and competition between these schools and their teachers are regularly mentioned in texts about education. We need to take into account the fact that teachers depended for their income on the pupils they could attract, while these pupils could always choose to go to another teacher. From the late tenth century, we have the ample testimonies of the so-called Anonymous Professor, who is forever attempting to keep

²⁷ See P. GAUTIER, Précisions historiques sur le monastère de Ta Narsou. *REB* 34 (1976) 101-110.

²⁸ See W. WOLSKA-CONUS, Les écoles de Psellos et de Xiphilin sous Constantin IX Monomaque. *TM* 6 (1976) 223-243.

²⁹ The most comprehensive information about these schools can be found in P. LEMERLE, *Cinq études sur le XIe siècle byzantin*. Paris 1977, 227-235.

his pupils at his side. He repeatedly expresses fears that they might be attracted by rival teachers, who are incessantly vilified.³⁰

This rivalry seemed to have crystallized into contests in which pupils of one school competed with pupils of another school, or in which teachers measured themselves against each other. Eleventh-century texts connected to education frequently refer to a phenomenon called ἀγών τοῦ λόγου or ἀγών λογικός in reference to contests between schools. Michael Psellos, in one of his writings addressed to his pupils, urges them to stop attacking each other with aggressive writings, and to prepare themselves for the ‘battle’ against the enemy, probably a rival school, under the guidance of their ‘general’ Psellos.³¹ In the funeral oration for John Xiphilinos, Psellos recalls how his deceased friend and he himself excelled in these τῶν λόγων ἀγῶνες.³² Constantine Leichoudes too is said by Psellos to have excelled in ‘the battle over words’ (ἡ περὶ τοῦ λόγου πάλη) when he was a student.³³ John Mauropous, another famous man of letters and teacher, writes in a poem about his house, where he educated the youth and ‘presided over the disputes between students and between teachers’ there.³⁴ The existence of specialized ‘judges’ is also attested in other sources concerning rhetorical contests.³⁵

One specific kind of inter-school contest is emphatically present in poetic texts: the contest in the composition of *schede*. The *schedos* is known as a popular grammatical exercise; in one form of it, pupils reconstructed a correct text from a riddle-like text given to them by their teacher.³⁶ In eleventh-century sources, it mostly comes up as the basis for competition between schools. Christopher Mitylenaios’ corpus contains several poems that were composed within the context of such competition.³⁷ Poems 9 and 10 of this corpus defend the teachers of the school of St Theodore in Sphorakiou, prais-

³⁰ The Anonymous Professor (ed. A. MARKOPOULOS, *Anonymi Professoris Epistulae* [CFHB 37]. Berlin 2000).

³¹ Michael Psellos (ed. A. R. LITTLEWOOD, *Oratoria minora*. Leipzig 1985), or. 20.

³² Psellos, *Oratio in Xiphilinum* (ed. K. SATHAS, *Μεσαιωνικὴ Βιβλιοθήκη*. Paris/Athina 1874), V, 433.

³³ Psellos, *Oratio in Leichoudem* (ed. K. SATHAS), V, 392.

³⁴ John Mauropous (ed. P. DE LAGARDE, *Iohannis Euchaitorum Metropolitae quae in Codice Vaticano Graeco 676 supersunt*. Göttingen 1882), poem 47, v. 26: κρίνων μαθηταῖς καὶ διδασκάλους ἔρις.

³⁵ See for instance Psellos (ed. G. T. DENNIS, *Orationes panegyricae*. Leipzig 1998), or. 4, l. 21–23, and or. 2, l. 826–7.

³⁶ H. HUNGER, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner* (Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft, 12. Abt., 5. T.). München, 1978, 1, 24–29; a more precise definition can be found in I. VASSIS, *Graeca sunt, non leguntur*. Zu den schedographischen Spielereien des Theodoros Prodromos. *BZ* 87 (1994) 1–19.

³⁷ Christopher Mitylenaios (ed. E. KURTZ), poems 9, 10, and 11.

ing their excellence in *schede* contests. Poem 11 attacks a rival teacher from the school of Theotokos in Chalkoprateia, who is derided for his greed in selling *schede*. These poems are particularly interesting for our purpose because they come closest to the motives and tone of Anonym Sola's poem.

Some of Mauropous' poems also need to be set against the background of *schedos* contests. Mauropous' poem 68, 'on the *schedos*', is written in defence of the school of the Forty Martyrs. It exhorts the help of these numerous saints to win the day against the opponent in a *schedos* contest. Another partisan of the school of Forty Martyrs is an anonymous poet whose poems are difficult to date, but which might be from the eleventh century.³⁸ The first and longest of these works is intended to boost the morale of the pupils before the *schedos* contest begins, and derides rivals from other schools.

Other poems from Anonymous Sola's period, although they do not refer clearly to an organized contest, can also be read against the backdrop of competing teachers. Poem 23 of Christopher satirizes a grammarian, George, who had composed a technical showpiece, while a rhetor called Menas, better at drinking than at convincing, is the victim of poem 37. One anonymous poem, which ended up in a manuscript just after a text of Psellos in defence of his grammarian,³⁹ scoffs at a grammarian, presumably the same one, for writing an incorrect *spiritus* on the word ἐνδεκάτην.

It is significant that poetic texts are so often concerned with these contests. Nearly all our eleventh-century sources on the subject of *schedos* contests are written in verse. Poems such as those mentioned above encourage pupils and extol the virtues of a teacher, while adversaries are vigorously attacked and derided. It is not always clear, however, whether the poems were written on the occasion of an institutionalized contest, or just during a 'casual' dispute with colleagues.

Poetry appears to have been the ideal medium to express opinions and to voice reactions, especially negative ones. One aspect for which the poetic form seems to be chosen is its acuity. These poems are short, are frequently built upon a pun and involve a personal element by targeting physical shortcomings or moral faults. They can be seen as jibes, hurled by one side at the other and provoking another taunting riposte. They testify to a strong sense of partisanship in defence of schools or teachers, and a remarkable animosity towards other schools.

³⁸ G. SCHIRÒ, La schedografia a Bisanzio nei sec. XI–XII e la scuola dei SS. XL Martiri. *BollGrott* 3 (1949) 11–29.

³⁹ Psellos, *Oratoria minora* (ed. LITTLEWOOD), p. 65 (after or. 17).

4. SEVEN POETIC INTERMEZZI TO STIR THE MIND

The series of poems in Anon. Sola's poem 7 perfectly fits the pattern of poems written in the context of school contests. The poet defends the pupils from the school 'in Nosiai', and attacks its opponents, among whom a certain Nicholas the rhetor. The birds sitting in the Nests, or, rather, in Nosiai, sing beautifully, while their adversaries have unbearable voices.

It is possible that each of these poems was intended for a particular moment in an organized inter-school contest. The references to 'songs' or 'singing' throughout (1.1 ἄδétωσαν, 1.3 μέλη, 2.1 φθέγμα, 2.2 ἄδουσιν, 4.2 μελωδίαι, 6.2 ἄδεις, 7.4 φωνήν) seem clearly to refer to oral demonstrations of rhetorical (or grammatical or poetical) competence, performed by either pupils or teachers. The future tense used in most of these poems suggests that they were performed just before the students or teachers, either from the poet's home school or its competitors, began their demonstration. The impression may be gained that on these occasions, the teacher (or the students?) had a short moment between declamations to boost morale, vent competitive emotions and perhaps influence the jury of judges. The poems might even have been improvised on the spur of the moment.

In any event, this perspective permits a more concrete interpretation. In the first piece, our poet declares that he will not listen to the display of his rivals, even if they were Sirens. In the second poem, it is asserted that the students of the school of Nosiai will put on a charming display; its enemies are debunked through a comparison with the Cyclops. The poem may have been recited after the declamation of the opponents and before the rebuttal by the students of Nosiai. The third poem is the one that has the least evident agonistic tone; it perhaps advertises the almost mystical experience everyone will enjoy upon hearing these students. The fourth poem refers to a demonstration of Nicholas the rhetor alone, obviously a teacher from the opponents' school. The fifth can only be meaningful if we assume that it is a poem in praise of a student, presumably a student of Nosiai who was of exceptionally tall stature but most eloquent, for he sings like a sparrow. The piece might have been pronounced before this student's display, to commend him to the judges. The last two poems are intended to intimidate opponents who are about to begin their declamations.

Alternatively, Sola suggests that these poems might have been exchanged among friends, in a game of verbal sparring.⁴⁰ It is certainly conceivable that they were elements of such an exchange. Such a ping pong of poetic jibes is also conducted by John Geometres, roughly contemporary with our poet, and a certain Stylianos.⁴¹ Each of this latter set of poems, however, more clearly responds to the preceding poem than is the case in those of Anon. Sola. The seventh poem refers to the ‘violent voice’ (r. 4: φωνὴν βιάϊαν) of his opponent; this seems a reaction to similarly hostile (poetic?) texts in which the opponent has attacked our poet. Nevertheless, it seems that this particular series is written from the perspective of one and the same poet promoting the school of Nosiai. Moreover, I am convinced that the bitterness between rival teachers was real enough to surmise that the aggression voiced in these poems was not merely the outcome of playful jest among friends, but rather that of feelings of partisanship and rivalry.

5. CONCLUSION

This intriguing series of poetic texts, together with a number of similar, more well-known poems from the early decades of the eleventh century, is to be situated in the context of contests between schools, in which successive declamations by pupils and teachers were exchanged in a collective performance. Poetry, by virtue of its power to express satire in a pointed way, was an ideal medium to voice feelings of partisanship. These seven short poetic pieces could be used to stir the mind and vent competitive emotions during a contest. Moreover, it is through these texts, and then only through a pun on the similar word for “nests”, that the school of Nosiai, otherwise totally unknown, has left its traces.⁴²

⁴⁰ SOLA, Giambografi 152.

⁴¹ This series of eight short poems is edited in Ch. GRAUX, Rapport sur les manuscrits grecs de Copenhague. *Archives des missions scientifiques et littéraires* III, 6 (1880) 133–242, esp. 185–186, repr. in : IDEM, Les articles originaux publiés dans divers recueils. Paris 1893, 225–336, esp. 277–278.

⁴² I would like to thank dr. Klaus Belke for sending to me the article on Nossiai for the upcoming volume of the *Tabula Imperii Byzantini*. I also thank the two anonymous referees, who have made very valuable suggestions and corrections.