

SIMON
THE
SHOEMAKER



John Sellars



1399 3RD AVENUE
-MANHATTAN-
SIMON SHOE REPAIR



The name “Simon the Shoemaker” is not one immediately familiar to specialists in ancient philosophy, let alone to students of philosophy in general.¹

This may well be due, in part, to the tendency of many scholars both past and present to deny his historical reality altogether. Ancient sources refer to a Simon who, it is said, was an associate of Socrates and who ran a shoe shop on the edge of the Athenian agora where Socrates used to come to engage in philosophical discussions with Simon while he worked.² However, the fact that neither Plato nor Xenophon mentions Simon has often been cited as an argument against his very existence. Moreover, it is reported that the Socratic philosopher Phaedo wrote a dialogue entitled *Simon*, and thus it has been suggested that the later “Simon legend” derived ultimately from a literary character created by Phaedo.³ The situation has somewhat changed since the discovery of the remains of a shop near the Tholos on the southwestern edge of the agora, the floor scattered with hobnails, containing a base from a pot with the word “Simon’s” inscribed upon it.⁴ Archaeologists commenting upon this discovery have been keen to identify its owner with the Simon mentioned in the literary sources as a companion of Socrates, but scholars primarily concerned with ancient philosophy have tended to remain doubtful.⁵

Simon’s reputation relies principally upon the claim made by Diogenes Laertius that Simon was the first to write “Socratic dialogues.”⁶ Diogenes reports that these were also known as “shoemaker’s dialogues” or simply “shoemaker’s.” These, Diogenes says, were notes of actual conversations that Simon had had with Socrates rather than literary compositions. A total of thirty-three are named, and it is reported that they all fit into a single volume or roll. As with Simon himself, the reality of these lost works has also been doubted, but the lack of any order in Diogenes’s list, and the repetition of some titles, points against it being a later fabrication.

Xenophon notes in his *Memorabilia* that because youths were not allowed to enter the agora, they used to gather in workshops surrounding it, and that Socrates used to frequent these shops to converse with them. Shops such as Simon’s appear to have functioned as informal classrooms for Socrates. It is tempting to speculate that Socrates enjoyed the company of Simon because, as a craftsman, he was one of the few individuals that Socrates could find who possessed some form of secure knowledge. Simon’s mastery of the art of shoemaking would have been just the sort of expertise that, in Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates held up as the only example of genuine knowledge that he could find. Thus Simon would have been a living example of a form of knowledge analogous to the form of knowledge that Socrates was searching for, namely the art of taking care of one’s soul.

The name “Simon the Shoemaker” came to be associated with a certain way of life, a specifically philosophical way of life. For later philosophers, Simon’s way of life was considered to be exemplary of what it meant to be a follower of Socrates. By examining the ancient traditions surrounding Simon, it might be possible to learn something about the nature of Socrates’s philosophical project. What those traditions tell us is that Simon embodied the Cynic ideals of free speech and autonomy. It is reported that when offered financial support from the famous Athenian statesman Pericles, Simon refused to accept it on the grounds that it might compromise his ability to speak freely—much better to remain an autonomous and self-employed artisan, beholden to no one. In a series of ancient letters, generally agreed to be a later fabrication, Simon takes sides with the Cynic Antisthenes against the hedonist Aristippus, both of whom claimed to be followers of Socrates.⁷ In the letters, Aristippus mocks Antisthenes for his poverty; by contrast, Aristippus lives a life of luxury in his role as court-philosopher to the tyrant Dionysius. Antisthenes responds by suggesting that for the sake of material comfort Aristippus has, in effect, sold his autonomy and his ability to speak freely. In other words, he has done precisely what Simon refused to do when courted by Pericles. As the correspondence continues, Simon himself writes a letter attacking Aristippus for thinking it possible to combine this restricted and decadent lifestyle with being a genuine Socratic philosopher. To follow Socrates is to engage in open discussion, to question insistently, to answer frankly, and to continue relentlessly, even to the point of public accusation, trial, and ultimately execution. How can anyone do that while at the same time depend on a patron, such as the rich and powerful Dionysius, or indeed the respected statesman Pericles? Much better to live the life of an autonomous artisan—the life of a shoemaker.

NOTES

¹ This piece draws on material previously published in John Sellars, “Simon the Shoemaker and the Problem of Socrates,” *Classical Philology* 98 (2003), pp. 207-16, where readers will find full references to the ancient and modern literature on Simon.

² All of the ancient evidence for Simon can be found in Gabriele Giannantoni, *Socratis et Socraticorum reliquiae* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1990), VI B, sec. 87-93.

³ See, for example, Charles Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 10.

⁴ See D. B. Thompson, “The House of Simon the Shoemaker,” *Archaeology* 13 (1960), pp. 234-40.

⁵ Compare, for example, Kahn and Thompson, cited above.

⁶ See the Diogenes Laertius, “Life of Simon,” in *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, ed. and trans. Robert Drew Hicks, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1925), pp. 250-53.

⁷ These letters can be found in Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Cynic Epistles* (Missoula, Mont.: Society of Biblical Literature, 1977), pp. 217-307.