

# The Life of Plato of Athens

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Plato died in the first year of the hundred and eighth Olympiad in the thirteenth year of the reign of Philip of Macedon – 347 BCE by contemporary reckoning – and was buried at the Academy.<sup>1</sup> So venerable and so widespread was the philosopher's reputation that mythologizing was inevitable and prolonged: Plato was sired by the god Apollo and born to the virgin Perictione; he was born on the seventh of Thargelion, Apollo's birthday, and the bees of Mount Hymettus dripped honey into the mouth of the newborn babe. Renaissance Platonists celebrated Plato's birth on the seventh of November, the same day his death was commemorated. Woodbridge's 1929 *The Son of Apollo* begins, "The demand of history that we be accurate contends with the demand of admiration that we be just. Caught between the two, biographers of Plato have written, not the life of a man, but tributes to a genius." Genius he certainly was, but he deserves better than a tribute and better than the standard *vita* cut to fit the pattern of the Alexandrian librarian Apollodorus who divided ancient lives into four twenty-year periods with an *akmē* at age 40.<sup>2</sup> By this scheme, Plato is duly born in 427, meets Socrates at age 20 (when Socrates is 60), founds the Academy at 40, voyages to Sicily at 60, and dies at the age of 80. Ample evidence belies the neat fit.

Plato of Collytus, son of Ariston – for that was his full legal name, under which he had rights of Athenian citizenship and by which his name will have been recorded on the Aegis tribal lists – was born in 424/3, the fourth child of Ariston of Collytus, son of Aristocles, and Perictione, daughter of Glaucon; Ariston and Perictione had married by 432. Leaving aside remote divine origins, both parents traced their ancestry to Athenian archons of the seventh and sixth centuries and, in Perictione's case, to kinship with the sage legislator, Solon (Ti. 20E1). Ariston and his young family were probably among the first colonists retaining Athenian citizenship on Aegina, when Athens expelled the native Aeginetans in 431 (Thucydides 2.27). When Ariston died around the time of Plato's birth, Athenian law forbade the legal independence of women, so Perictione was given in marriage to her mother's brother, Pyrilampes, a widower who had recently been wounded in the battle of Delium. Marriages between uncle and niece, as between first cousins, were common and expedient in Athens, preserving rather than dividing family estates. Plato's stepfather, Pyrilampes, had been Pericles' intimate friend (Plutarch, *Per.* 13.10) and many times ambassador to Persia (*Chrm.* 158A2–6); he brought to the marriage at least one son, Demos (*Grg.* 481D5, 513C7),

whose name means “people”: a tribute to the democracy under which Pyrilampes flourished in public life. When Pyrilampes and Perictione had another son, they did the more conventional thing, naming him Antiphon for his grandfather (*Prm.* 126b1–9). Thus Plato was reared in a household of at least six children, where he was number five: a stepbrother, a sister, two brothers, and a half brother. Pyrilampes died by 413, but Ariston’s eldest son, Adeimantus, was old enough by then, about 19, to become his mother’s guardian (*kurios*).

## Plato’s Youth in Athens

When Plato was a boy and old enough to be paying some attention to affairs of state affecting his family, Athens was embroiled in the Peloponnesian War, causing and enduring a horrifying sequence of disasters. In 416, when Plato was about 8 and the Peace of Nicias signed between Athens and Sparta in 421 had unraveled completely, Athens behaved with unprecedented cruelty toward Melos, using the might-makes-right arguments to be echoed by Thrasymachus in *Republic* I (Thucydides 5.84–116). The following year, as the city embarked on her catastrophic Sicilian campaign, an oligarchic political club smashed the city’s herms one night, insulting the god of travel and setting off a superstitious hysteria that led to the summary execution, imprisonment, or exile of citizens accused of sacrilege, including members of Plato’s family. One of the fleet’s three commanders, the charismatic Alcibiades, was among the accused, and a terrible consequence of Athens’ mass hysteria was Alcibiades’ abandonment of the expedition and his betrayal of the city. With Athens’ utter defeat in Sicily in 413, Sparta renewed the war. Plato would have been 12 when Athens lost her empire with the revolt of the subject allies; 13 when the democracy fell briefly to the oligarchy of the Four Hundred and when the army, still under the democrats, persuaded Alcibiades to return and lead it again; 14 when democracy was restored; 15 when his older brothers, Adeimantus and Glaucon, distinguished themselves at the battle of Megara (R. 368A3).

Despite the war and unrest, Plato and his male siblings would have received a formal education in gymnastics and music, but by “music” we are to understand the domains of all the Muses: not only dance, lyric, epic, and instrumental music, but reading, writing, arithmetic, geometry, history, astronomy, and more. A boy’s informal induction into Athenian civic life was primarily the responsibility of the older males of his family. As illustrated in *Laches* and *Charmides*, a young male was socialized by his father, older brothers, or guardian, whom he accompanied about the city – while women remained discreetly indoors. In the company of his brothers, Plato was thus probably a young child when he became acquainted with Socrates. Both *Lysis*, set in early spring, 409, when Plato would have been 15, and *Euthydemus*, set a couple of years later, provide insight into Plato’s school-age years since the young characters of those dialogues were Plato’s exact contemporaries in real life. *Lysis* of Aexone, about whom we are lucky to have corroborating contemporaneous evidence independent of Plato’s dialogues, probably remained an intimate of Plato’s, since he is known to have lived to be a grandfather, at the very least 60 when he died.

Set at the time Plato would himself have been considering his educational prospects, *Euthydemus* illustrates the educational fashion of the day: the purported transfer of excellence (*aretē*, also translated “virtue”) from teacher to student. Higher education in Athens in the late fifth century was dominated by sophists, foreign residents who achieved fame and wealth by professing techniques of persuasion and exposition, platitudes dressed up in high rhetorical style, the kind of skills that could help young men to become excellent *qua* successful in public life by speaking effectively in the Athenian Assembly (*ekklēsia*) and courts of law. Even the more respectable of these – Gorgias of Leontini and Protagoras of Abdera, who appear in dialogues named for them (cf. Socrates’ impersonation of Protagoras in *Theaetetus*) – are represented as having done a poor job of transferring whatever excellence they had, however, for their students seem always to have trouble retaining and defending what their professors professed. In *Euthydemus*, two sophists of questionable character claim to be able to make any man good by calling him to philosophy and excellence (274d7–275a1), but their display is little more than a hilarious use of fallacies to abuse their respondents. The dialogue’s denouement (from 304b6) is a serious reminder that, at the time of Plato’s coming of age, Athenians were increasingly suspicious of sophists, rhetoricians, orators, and philosophers *alike*.

These were the closing years before Athens’ surrender to Sparta in 404, when the Assembly was paying less and less attention to its written laws, and acting ever more irrationally, emotionally, and in vengeance. An older Plato would distinguish the lawful from the lawless democracy (*Plt.* 302d1–303b5) with good reason. Traditions were maintained, however, at the level of voting districts or demes, of which Athens had 139. Citizenship was passed strictly from father to son, so the sons of the deceased Ariston, each in his eighteenth year, would have been presented to the citizens of Collytus at *dokimasia* ceremonies, after which they would have been fully emancipated. It was in the year after Plato’s *dokimasia* that Socrates attempted unsuccessfully to prevent the Assembly from unconstitutionally trying and executing six generals, including the son of Pericles and Aspasia, for failure to ensure the collection of casualties after winning the naval battle of Arginusae in 406. In the two years following his ceremony, Plato would have mustered with his fellow demesmen in the citizen militia, although confined to service within the borders of Attica. Afterwards, when called up, he would have served elsewhere. By both law and custom, greater maturity was required for participation in various other aspects of civic life. A citizen had to be 20 to enter public life without making a laughing-stock of himself, and 30 before his name was entered into the lotteries that determined the Athenian Council (*boulē*), juries, and archons, before he could be elected general, and before he was expected to marry.

As Plato came of age, he naturally imagined for himself a life in public affairs, as he says in a letter written in 354/3 (VII.324b9). The letter’s authenticity was once much discussed, but even its detractors concede that its author, if not Plato, was an intimate of the philosopher with first-hand knowledge of the events reported. Many of its details are augmented and corroborated by contemporaneous historians of Greece and of Sicily, and its style – unlike other letters in the series – is that of *Laws* and *Epinomis* (Ledger 1989: 148–51).<sup>3</sup> Plato’s extended family already included two men in Socrates’ orbit, characters of the dialogues *Protagoras* and *Charmides*, who featured prominently in Athenian public life: Critias, Plato’s first cousin once removed (Perictione’s

first cousin); and Critias' ward Charmides (Perictione's younger brother). Both were among fifty-one men for whom Plato had high hopes in 404 when, after the debacles and excesses of the sometimes lawless democracy, the Spartan defeat of Athens led to the election of the Thirty, charged with framing a post-democratic constitution that would return the city to the governing principles of the *patrios politeia*, the Athenian ancestral constitution. Critias was a leader of the Thirty, and Charmides was one of the Piraeus Ten municipal managers; the Eleven municipal managers of urban Athens completed the total of fifty-one. Although Plato was invited right away to join the administration, he was still young, he says (VII.324d4), and delayed, attending closely, and hoping to witness Athens' return to justice under the new leadership.

The Thirty disappointed him grievously, however, by attempting to implicate Socrates in their seizure of the democratic general Leon of Salamis for summary execution. Plato says of their oligarchy that it made the rule of the previous democracy appear a golden age by comparison (VII.324d6–325a5). According to Xenophon of Erchia, the constitutional framing was continually delayed (*HG* 2.3.11); and Isocrates of Erchia describes the Thirty as having quickly abused and exceeded their authority, summarily executing 1,500 citizens and driving some 5,000 more to the Piraeus during nine months in power (*Areopagiticus* 67). But the democrats in exile were able to regroup in Phyle whence, in 403, they re-entered the Piraeus and met the forces of the Thirty in the battle of Munychia, where both Critias and Charmides were killed. After months of further upheaval, the democracy was restored. Despite an amnesty negotiated with Spartan arbitration in 403–2 to reduce instances of revenge in the immediate aftermath of the civil war, the turmoil simmered. A provision of the reconciliation agreement was that all remaining oligarchic sympathizers would be allowed their own government in Eleusis, which they had earlier secured for themselves by putting to death the population on charges of supporting democracy (Xenophon, *HG* 2.4.8–10; Diodorus Siculus 14.32.5). The agreement was short-lived: as soon as the Spartans were distracted by a war with Elis, the oligarchs began hiring mercenaries; Athens retaliated by annexing Eleusis and killing all the remaining oligarchic sympathizers in the early spring of 401.

As in other revolutions spun out of control, the general level of disorder had made acts of retribution easier to perpetrate, violence easier to inflict without punishment. Yet the returned democrats, in Plato's account, showed seemingly restraint during that period of revolutions (VII.325b1–5). Indeed, if the dialogues with dramatic dates from 402 to 399 (especially *Meno*, *Theaetetus*, *Euthyphro*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*) can be counted as sources for the kinds of conversations Plato, in his early twenties, experienced in the company of Socrates, then at least some things about Athenian life were back to normal. That may be why Plato describes it as "by chance" (VII.325b5–6) that Anytus and Lycon, whose friend Leon Socrates had earlier refused to hand over to the Thirty, managed successfully to prosecute Socrates for impiety and to succeed in their proposed penalty of death. For Plato, this devastating event, together with his surmise that Athenian order was deteriorating into chaos, put an end to the desire to become politically active that had been rekindled briefly in him with the restoration of the democracy (VII.325a7–b1). Although continuing to contemplate how he might yet be able to effect an improvement of the laws and public life generally, at length he realized that every existing state suffered both bad governance and almost incurable laws

and was forced in his mid-twenties to admit that without “right philosophy,” one would be unable

to determine what justice is in the *polis* or in the individual. The evils suffered by humanity will not cease until either the right and true philosophers rule in the *polis* or the rulers in the *poleis*, by some divine turn of fate, become truly philosophical. (VII.326A5–B4; cf. R. V.473c11–E2)

Then, or soon after, Plato determined to make his contribution to public life as an educator. He was, in that role, to supplant the itinerant sophists and rhetoricians who had for so long been at the forefront of Athenian higher education.

### Plato's First Visit to Sicily and the Founding of the Academy

After Socrates' execution, Plato remained in Athens for perhaps three years. During this time he associated with the Heraclitean Cratylus and with Hermogenes, bastard half-brother of the well-known Callias of Alopecce, who had spent a fortune on sophists (see *Cra.*, *Prt.*, and *Ap.*). Then, from age 28 in 396, Plato resided for a while in Megara, half a day's walk from Athens, with Euclides and other Socratics in the pursuit of mathematics and philosophy (Hermodorus, quoted in Diogenes Laertius 3.6.2–6). Dubious hints of other travels appear only in late sources.

Turning 30 in 394, Plato would have been expected to set himself up as a householder and, although there is no hint that he did, to marry (despite *Laws* IV.721A–E and VI.772D). He was never among Athens' wealthiest citizens, but the agricultural income from his properties outside the city walls seems to have been adequate for his personal needs and for such familial obligations as dowries and funerals. Funding for operations of the Academy, still in the future, was probably supplemented by endowments; that Academic finances were distinct from Plato's personal accounts is witnessed by the absence of any mention of the Academy in Plato's will. Plato owned property in the deme of Iphistiadae, about 10 kilometers north-northeast of the ancient city wall, and 2 kilometers from the banks of the Cephissus river, a property he probably inherited (his will mentions no sum paid for it). The land can be precisely located because Plato describes it as bounded on the south by the temple of Heracles, a boundary stone for which was found in 1926. Plato was eventually to purchase another plot, in the deme of Eresidae, from an otherwise unknown Callimachus, a named executor in Plato's will; its location was roughly 3 kilometers north of the city wall, on the eastern bank of the Cephissus river. Plato's nephew, Eurymedon, another executor, owned the adjacent properties to the north and east. Although Plato's deme was Collytus, within the city walls, there were three brothers to divide Ariston's estate, and the laws of succession worked to preserve properties intact. Normally, the absence of a will required an initial apportionment of the assets of the estate (land under cultivation, structures, herds, precious metals, cash etc.) into equal portions; when these were agreed to be equal, the brothers might draw lots or choose their inheritance (MacDowell 1978: 93).

At about the same time that he was establishing himself, Plato and the mathematicians Theaetetus of Sunium, then 19, and dead five years later; Archytas of Tarentum,

a Pythagorean, musical theorist, and enlightened political leader, who would remain close to Plato throughout his life; Leodamas of Thasos, and perhaps Neocles (Proclus, quoted in Euclid, *Elements* 66.16) began congregating northwest of urban Athens in the grove of the hero Hecademus, between the rivers Cephissus and Eridanus, to pursue their studies. Speusippus of Myrrhinus, son of Plato's sister Potone, joined the group in about 390. The number of names of mathematicians that survives from a list originally compiled by Eudemus late in the fourth century BCE is a strong indication that the group of fellow students grew steadily in the early years. It is not until Eudoxus of Cnidos arrives in the mid-380s that Eudemus recognizes a formal Academy. The grove that would later become the Academy, however, had a gymnasium and commodious open spaces frequented by young intellectuals – not schoolrooms or lecture halls.

Plato had earned a reputation abroad by about 385, when he was invited to the court of the Sicilian tyrant, Dionysius I, who regularly asked notable Athenians to be his guests in the fortified royal compound on Ortygia, the peninsula jutting out into the harbor of Syracuse. This is a compelling indication that, apart from his mathematical and philosophical studies, Plato had begun writing dialogues that were copied and distributed. There is substantial evidence that a proto-*Republic*, comprising most of Books II–V of our current text of *Republic*, was published before 391 when Aristophanes' bawdy *Ecclesiazusae* parodied its central elements (Thesleff 1982: 102–10). *Apology*, an early draft of *Gorgias*, and what is now *Republic* I were likely also among the dialogues that were published in this early group. From time to time, both *Phaedrus* and *Lysis* have been thought to count there as well – especially in traditions outside Anglo-American analytic philosophy since the 1950s. There is abundant evidence of revision in several of the dialogues, an insuperable obstacle to definitive computer analysis of Plato's style, and thus to certainty about the order in which the dialogues were written, except for the very last ones (Ledger 1989: 148–51). Nevertheless, the impression of three major periods of productivity, edges blurred, persists in most interpretive traditions (Nails 1995: 97–114).

Plato says he was nearly 40 when he voyaged to Italy, where he probably visited Archytas in Tarentum, and to Sicily, where he was the guest of Dionysius I, tyrant of Syracuse. The journey was memorable despite Plato's disgust at both the tyranny and the decadent sensuality he encountered. He had no truck with the tyrant (strikingly like the tyrant in *Republic* IX), but met Dion, the tyrant's young brother-in-law. Here was an admirable if rather straight-laced youth of 20, quick to learn whatever Plato thought could help him achieve "freedom under the best laws" for the people of Sicily (VII.324B1–2). Their friendship – renewed by Dion's visits to Greece – was to last thirty years (VII.324A5–7). Late sources (Diodorus Siculus, Plutarch, Diogenes Laertius) offer varying details about the end of Plato's first trip to Sicily, though they agree that Plato's frank speaking so angered the tyrant that he was shipped off and sold into slavery. When he was purchased and set free by Anniceris of Cyrene, in Diogenes' account, Plato's friends tried to return the money, but Anniceris refused it and purchased for Plato a garden in Hecademus' grove.

The Academy, an Athenian center for advanced study including men and women from throughout the Greek-speaking world, the dialogues that were its textbooks, and the philosophical methods illustrated in them, are Plato's brilliant legacy. Founded after Plato's return from Sicily in 383, and with unbroken succession until about

79 BCE, the Academy is sometimes said to be the progenitor of the modern university, though Isocrates had established a permanent school for rhetoric in Athens in 390. The Academy's curriculum, grounded in mathematics and the *pursuit* of scientific knowledge – rather than its packaging – made it the first of its kind. Yet what can “founding” mean? Presumably, the Academy would publicize its readiness to welcome students, though no fees were charged. Members who had studied together for some years were perhaps ready now to share what they had learned, and to apply their knowledge in new areas. The Academy continued to attract sons of political leaders who were more interested in ruling than in the mathematics that was its prerequisite, but the beginnings are murky and it is difficult not to impose current categories (teacher, student) anachronistically – as in other centuries “master” and “disciple” were imposed. In any case, Plato appears to have spent the period from 383 to 366 in relative quiet, studying, discussing, writing, and contributing generally to Academic education. It is to this period that Plato's greatest productivity of dialogues is attributed; and it was during this time that the Academy's members and activities began to be spoofed on the Athenian comic stage. One might note the arrival in 367 of Aristotle of Stagira, the fragments of whose dialogues suggest that it was typical of academicians to write in that genre.

### Plato's Sicilian Expeditions for Dion and Philosophy

In Letter VII, Plato minutely details his subsequent trips to Sicily. The brief summary below may be of interest if one keeps in mind the image of the philosopher of *Theaetetus*, an object of derision for being so perfectly inept at practical matters (172c3–177c2); Plato shows himself an innocent abroad, outmaneuvered at every turn, utterly incompetent to help his friend, much less to make the ruler a philosopher.

Plato was not eager to return when summoned back to Syracuse by Dionysius II in 366. The old Dionysius had died in 367, soon after hearing that his play, *The Ransom of Hector*, had won first prize at the Lenaeon festival in Athens. Despite his reputation for learning and culture, he had not looked after the education of his son and heir. As a child, Dionysius II had been mostly kept out of sight, occupied with making wooden toys, but when he was called before his father, he was strip-searched for hidden weapons, like anyone granted an audience by the tyrant. An adult of about 30 by the time he summoned Plato, the younger Dionysius had married his paternal half-sister, Sophrosyne, with whom he had a son, and had recently been made an honorary Athenian citizen. Dion, meanwhile, had married his niece, Arete, daughter of the old tyrant, and had a son of 7, so Dion was brother-in-law and sometime adviser to the new tyrant.

Dion, at whose behest the summons had been issued, had difficulty overcoming Plato's reluctance to sail to Syracuse. He urged Plato on several grounds, including the young tyrant's passion for philosophy and for education generally. If Plato remembered the adolescent Dionysius from his first visit, he does not mention it, saying only that the passions of the young are apt to change radically. Dion persisted, exhorting Plato to help him influence Dionysius II, arguing *inter alia* that the death of the old tyrant might be that “divine turn of fate” required for the people's happiness in

freedom under good laws to be realized at last; that there were already a few others in Syracuse who had come to the right views; that his young nephews likewise needed training in philosophy; and that the new tyrant might be led by Dion with Plato's help, as Dion had been led by Plato, to true philosophy, thereby effecting reforms and putting an end to the evils long suffered by the people. Besides, Dion added, if Plato did not come, worse men were waiting to undertake the young tyrant's education. Trusting more in Dion's steadfast character and intentions than in any hopes for success with Dionysius, fearing for Dion's safety, feeling a debt to his former host outweighing his present responsibilities at the Academy, a double reason finally proved decisive: it would be shameful in Plato's own eyes and a betrayal of philosophy if he proved after all to be a man of words who cowered at deeds. Plato finally embarked, in the first sailing season of 366, on a second trip to Sicily.

Factions in the royal court were suspicious of Dion and Plato from the start, assuming that Plato's secret aim was to put Sicily, then at war with Carthage, under Dion's rule. To check the philosopher's influence, they arranged for the savvy Philistus, an historian banished by the old tyrant, to be recalled from exile. After a few months in which both Plato and Dion attempted ceaselessly to make the life of moderation and wisdom attractive to Dionysius, whom they found not without ability (VII.338d7), Philistus gave evidence to Dionysius that Dion had been covertly negotiating peace with Carthage. Dion was summarily deported to Italy, dispossessed of his wife, son, and part of his property. Dion's friends feared retaliation, but the tyrant – mindful of both his reputation abroad and the need to placate Dion's supporters – made a show of begging Plato to stay while insuring against his escape by moving him into the fortress (VII.329d1–330a2). Plato persisted in the educational plan and even established ties between Dionysius and Archytas and other Tarentines. But Dionysius, attached to Plato, remained jealous of Plato's high regard for Dion. He desperately wanted Plato's praise, but not to work toward the wisdom that was the only way to earn it. Plato took every opportunity to persuade Dionysius to allow him to return to Athens, resulting finally in an agreement: Plato promised that, if Dionysius would recall both Dion and himself after securing peace with Carthage, both would come. On that basis, Plato took leave in an outwardly amicable way, and Dionysius removed restrictions on Dion's receipt of estate-income.

Dion had meanwhile traveled to Athens, where he had purchased an estate; the city remained his base and allowed study at the Academy and friendship with Speusippus. But he traveled widely in Greece, to a warm welcome in Corinth, and in Sparta, where he was given honorary citizenship. When Dionysius summoned Plato – but not Dion – in 361, and Dion implored him to go, having heard that Dionysius had developed a wondrous passion for philosophy (VII.338b6–7), Plato refused, angering both by pleading his advanced age. Rumors from Sicily were that Archytas, a number of friends of Dion, and many others had engaged Dionysius in philosophical discussions. When a second summons then arrived, Plato recognized in it the tyrant's jealous ambition (*philotimos*) not to have his ignorance of philosophy brought to light; and again Plato refused to return to Sicily. A third summons arrived, this one carried by a number of Plato's Sicilian acquaintances, including Archytas' associate, Archedemus, the Sicilian Dionysius believed Plato regarded most highly. Not only had they arrived by trireme to ease Plato's journey, Dionysius had written a long letter, saying that Dion's affairs,

if Plato came, would be settled as Plato desired, but that, if he did not, Plato would not like the outcome for Dion's property or person. Meanwhile, Plato's Athenian connections were urging him strenuously to go at once; and letters were arriving from Italy and Sicily, making fresh arguments – Archytas reporting that important matters of state between Tarentum and Syracuse depended on Plato's return. As before, Plato's decision was that it would be a betrayal of Dion and his Tarentine hosts not to make the effort; as for the betrayal of philosophy, this time Plato reasoned (blindfolded, he would later say, VII.340A2) that perhaps Dionysius, having now discoursed with so many men on philosophical subjects, and come under their influence, may in fact have embraced the best life. At least Plato should find out the truth.

It was clear after their first conversation that Dionysius had no interest in discussing philosophy; indeed, the tyrant announced that he already knew what was important. Moreover, he canceled the payment of revenue from Dion's estates, whereupon Plato announced in anger that he was returning to Athens, meaning to board just any boat at harbor. Dionysius, his reputation in mind, entreated Plato to stay and, seeing that he could not persuade the angry philosopher, offered to arrange Plato's passage himself. But the next day he enraged Plato further by promising that, if Plato stayed through the winter, Dion would receive excellent terms, which he detailed, in the spring. Plato, without faith in these promises, considered various scenarios overnight and realized he had already been checkmated. He agreed to stay, with one stipulation, that Dion be informed of the terms so his agreement could be sought. Not only was the stipulation not honored, neither did the terms stay fixed: as soon as the harbor was closed and Plato could no longer escape the island, Dionysius sold off Dion's estates.

A crucial event involving Dion's friend Heraclides, leader of the Syracusan democratic faction, however, changed everything. A debacle over mercenary pay was blamed on Heraclides, who fled for his life and joined Dion. An inscription of the sanctuary of Asclepius at Epidaurus honors them together (*Inscriptiones Graecae* IV<sup>2</sup> 95.39–40). Dionysius meanwhile promised another of the democratic leaders special terms for Heraclides, if he would return to face charges, and Plato happened to be on hand to swear his oath as witness to the tyrant's promise. When, the next day, the tyrant seemed already to be breaking his word, Plato duly invoked the promise he had witnessed, which the tyrant duly denied, stinging Plato yet again. Taking Plato's action as a choice of Dion over himself, Dionysius moved Plato out of the fortress into the house of Archdemus, in the area of the city housing the tyrant's mercenaries.

If Plato had been a virtual prisoner before, now he was in danger: Athenian rowers among the mercenaries told him some of their number were plotting to kill him, so he began desperately sending letters for help. Through the intercession of Archytas, a Tarentine ship was sent to the rescue. But Plato did not return to Athens. He disembarked at Olympia and caught up with Dion at the games, delivering the news of the tyrant's further intransigence: in effect, the news that Plato had failed to accomplish anything worthwhile for Dion or for philosophy in seven years of Sicilian misadventure (VII.350D4–5). Dion's first reaction was to call for vengeance; and he wanted Plato's friends, family, and the old philosopher himself to join him. Plato refused on several grounds and offered instead his assistance in the event that Dion and Dionysius should ever desire friendship and to do one another good. That was never to be, although Dion's later actions show that his desire for revenge had been extinguished

before the liberation of Syracuse, a mission he pursued “preferring to suffer what is unholy rather than to cause it” (VII.351c6–7).

Plato kept himself informed of his friend’s efforts and continued to offer advice during the three years required to garner the necessary financial backing and to hire mercenaries covertly before Dion could finally set sail in 357, making a gift of his estate in Athens to Speusippus. Members of the Academy appear to have had high hopes for a philosopher-ruler: Plato had described them as “pushing” him into the third trip (VII.339d8–e1), and at least one member, Timonides of Leucas, went along to record Dion’s operations for Speusippus and history. Heraclides remained behind to bring additional troops and triremes. Because Dion’s contingent, including thirty Sicilian exiles, arrived while Dionysius’ army was out of the city, Dion entered unopposed and was hailed as the liberator of the Sicilian Greeks. He was elected general-in-chief and enjoyed the support of all Syracuse – except the tyrant’s fortress on Ortygia where Dion’s wife and son were being held.

Dionysius feigned abdication, but sent his army to stealth-attack while negotiating the details; there were other deceptions, and military skirmishes that earned Dion a reputation for heroism. When Heraclides arrived with twenty additional triremes and 1,500 mercenaries, there was initial cooperation. The amity deteriorated, however, over Heraclides’ official appointment as general, the tyrant’s escape by sea on Heraclides’ watch, and because Heraclides was more popular than Dion, causing strife among their respective followers. Heraclides and Dion had to make repeated attempts to bring their supporters together in common aims. Two turbulent years passed before Ortygia was finally open in the summer of 354, Dion’s eleven-year separation from his family ended, and the citizen Assembly could debate domestic issues: redistribution of land and property, and whether there should be a Council. Within months, however, Heraclides was assassinated by some of Dion’s supporters, and Dion was assassinated by an Athenian, Callippus, who had befriended him, hosted him in 366, and accompanied him to Sicily. Callippus, who, Plato insists, had no connection to the Academy, immediately declared himself tyrant. Plato, writing some six years after the meeting in Olympia, and some weeks or months after Dion’s death, compares his friend of thirty years to a pilot who correctly anticipates a storm but underestimates its capacity for destruction: “that the men who brought him down were evil, he knew, but not the *extent* of their ignorance, their depravity and their greed” (VII.351d7–e2).

### Plato’s Final Years

After 360, Plato remained in Athens where there had been a number of changes in his family, and in the flourishing Academy. One of the letters with a small claim to authenticity mentions that two nieces had died, prompting Plato in about 365 to accept partial responsibility for four grandnieces ranging in age from not-yet-one to marriageable – which in Athens meant a year past puberty. The eldest was in fact on the verge of marrying her uncle Speusippus, then in his early forties and in line to be second head of the Academy (XIII.361c7–e5). Plato’s mother had died some time after 365, but his sister Potone and at least one of his brothers had married and produced children and grandchildren. A “boy” Adeimantus, probably the grandson of Plato’s

brother of that name, was the recipient of Plato's estate. The elderly Plato was surrounded also by colleagues at the Academy: many names of his associates are extant. There was detailed record-keeping in the last decade of Plato's life, and the succession of Academy heads is preserved, so it is reasonable to suppose that rosters of students were drawn up from time to time during the nearly forty years of Plato's leadership. Besides those mentioned already – Aristotle, Eudoxus, Timonides, and Speusippus – notables in the late days include two women, Axiothea of Phlius, and Lasthenia of Mantinea; Heraclides of Pontus, historian; Hermodorus of Syracuse, biographer; Philippus of Mende, aka Philip of Opus, likely editor of Plato's late works; and Xenocrates of Chalcedon, who would succeed Speusippus.

We should reject the standard image of the old Plato, devoting his halcyon years to squinting with his stylus over *Timaeus-Critias*, *Sophist*, *Politicus*, *Philebus*, *Laws*, and Letter VII, for the image is as unrealistic as it is unnecessary. Although those works share statistically incontrovertible stylistic features that argue for their having been written or edited by one individual, *Epinomis* was uncontroversially written and published after Plato's death, yet it has the unmistakable, turgid prose of the others, suggesting that Plato enjoyed the assistance of a scribe whose responsibility it was to reformulate Academic productions into the approved Academic style. I say "productions" because there is good reason to suppose that Plato's Academy was like other ancient institutions (e.g., Hippocrates' and Aristotle's schools, Hellenistic Pythagoreans) in undertaking collaborative writing projects. *Laws* is almost certainly such a collective effort, with sustained dialectical argument confined primarily to Books I–II, and incomplete when Plato died (Nails and Thesleff 2003). A small number of brief passages in *Republic* appear to have suffered under the editor's hand too, suggesting that that great dialogue achieved its present form only very late in Plato's life.

Similarly, we should reject the image of a Plato who instructs initiates orally or gives doctrinal lectures (though Aristoxenus attributes to Aristotle an anecdote about a lecture on the good, *Harmonics* 30–1). In extant fragments, Plato's colleagues make no appeals to what the master *said*, though they engage in healthy disagreement about the nature of reality and knowledge, and about the meaning of obscure claims made by characters in dialogues (Cherniss 1945). We should reject these images for a strong epistemological reason. Plato

remains convinced throughout that anything taken on trust, second-hand, either from others or from books, can never amount to a worthwhile cognitive state; knowledge must be achieved by effort from the person concerned. Plato tries to stimulate thought rather than to hand over doctrines. (Annas 1996: 1190)

## Notes

All translations are the author's unless otherwise noted.

- 1 Most readers resist being buried in the exceptions, qualifications, citations, and asides that are necessary for a complete account; for more nuanced and more comprehensive arguments, and assessments of sources, see Nails 2002, including entries for Plato and all other persons mentioned herein.

- 2 Taylor's *Plato the Man and his Work* appeared first in 1927, sticking close to the Alexandrian model. Ryle (1966) and Randall (1970) challenged Apollodorus' just-so story, but did not reassess available evidence.
- 3 The letter is addressed to Dion's family and friends. Only if other letters, the will, and a few epigrams attributed to Plato are genuine is there additional autobiographical information about him.

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