

THE PLATONIC ART OF PHILOSOPHY

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*The Atlantis poem in the Timaeus-Critias**Mauro Tulli***Introduction**

After his archonship in 594–592 BC, Solon went to visit Amasis in Egypt and Croesus in Lydia. Herodotus (1.30.1–5) states that the purpose of the journey is to acquire learning. But learning about what? Plato, in the *Timaeus* (23d–24e), links the story about Atlantis with a noble tradition that Solon discovered within the walls of Saïs, near the Nile delta. As concrete support for this tradition, Critias, Socrates' interlocutor at the start of the *Timaeus*, points to a body of 'sacred writings' preserved by the priests of Neith as evidence of a record covering more than nine thousand years.¹ We can speak of more than nine thousand years, because the story about Atlantis tells of events that the sacred writings date and record precisely. One of the priests, a very old man, recalls these events in order to demonstrate that the memory of Solon is extremely limited and that Athens has, in fact, a very rich past and an ancient social structure shared with Egypt of which present-day Athens is ignorant. Solon listens, and recognises the great significance of the story told about primeval Athens and Atlantis. After his return to Athens, he is ready both to give an oral retelling of the story, and to prepare a poem on the topic.

Critias recalls one such oral retelling of the story on an occasion in the house of Dropides (*Ti.* 20d–21d). Solon's narration of the Atlantis story was addressed to Critias the son of Dropides. As it happens, Socrates' interlocutor, the grandson of Critias, is also the son of Dropides, both

¹ For Luce 1969: 13–44, the 'sacred writings' preserved by the priests of Neith did indeed come from Egypt, and the Atlantis story reflects ancient knowledge of Minoan Crete. For a critique of this view, see Gill 1976, 1980: viii–xii. For West 1992: 164–5, the Atlantis story derives from Eudoxus of Cnidus, who recovers the memory of the eruption of Thera preserved in Egypt. For Giovannini 1985, the story is based on a combination of an ideal image of Sparta and memory of the earthquake at Helice in the Peloponnese. Nesselrath 2002: 17–24 suggests that behind the story about Atlantis, we can glimpse the results of research in the Academy. For a critical review of attempts through the ages to find the real Atlantis and to establish its concrete basis, see Vidal-Naquet 2007.

named Critias in accordance with a custom that is both ancient and modern.² ‘Solon once said this’ (Σόλων ποτ’ ἔφη, 20e1): perhaps only one occasion is involved and we should suppose that the telling of the story really only occurred once.³ Certainly, Solon did not actually publish the story he heard about Atlantis. This is clear because both in the *Timaetus* and in the *Critias* Socrates had been unaware of it, and Hermocrates says he only heard it for the first time the day before, along with Timaeus. However, Plato refers to the preparation of a poem at various points in this context.

In the *Timaetus* (20d–21d), on the third day of the Apaturia, the initiation festival at Athens, the older Critias, grandfather of Socrates’ interlocutor, says more about Solon and the story. After Solon’s return to Athens, his general tendency to regard literary production as a secondary occupation (*parergon*), along with the political crisis and other problems, forced him to interrupt a poem about Atlantis. Hence the conversion of the story into a poem was not finished, although it was certainly started: ‘If he had completed the *logos* that he brought here from Egypt ...’ (*Ti.* 21c5–6). The fact that Plato uses the term *logos* (‘story’/‘account’/‘discourse’) does not count against the hypothesis that Solon planned to compose the story in the form of a poem.⁴ The topic of the discussion here is excellence in literary production. The older Critias stresses to the young Amynder that, if Solon had completed the poem, neither Hesiod nor Homer would have been more famous than Solon. In other words, the poem about Atlantis would have been superior to the *Theogony* or *Works and Days*, and superior to the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* – a strong claim!

In the *Critias* (112e–113b), Plato refers again to the idea that Solon was planning to write a poem about Atlantis (‘intending to use the story for his own poem’), and also suggests that the poem was to be based on a written record (*grammata*). After the description of Attica and Athens, Critias discusses the nature of the set of names he will use in his account of the people and places of Atlantis. The names emerged, we are told, as the result of an initial translation from the language of Atlantis into the language of Egypt by the priests of Neith, and also of a second translation by

² We can identify Dropides among the fragments of Solon as the addressee of an encomium (fr. 22a West). Cf. Bultrighini 1999: 273–97.

³ A hypothesis whose significance will become clear as we proceed. The story and the writings on which it is said to be based are fictional, as becomes clear in a series of ways in the course of both the *Timaetus* and the *Critias*.

⁴ The older Critias begins his report of the story by referring to the children performing various songs by Solon (21a–d): songs, in the form of a poem. See further Renehan 1976: 88–92.

Solon from the language of Egypt into Greek, on the basis of the meaning (*dianoia*) of the names. A second translation by Solon.⁵ But how can this process be documented? Critias himself does not see any problems in the alleged process of transmission, because (he says) he possesses the relevant written records (*grammata*) of Solon, which were previously the property of his grandfather, Critias, and were studied carefully by him when he was a child.

The core of the story of Solon is already present in the *Critias* (109d–110c), in the description of Attica and Athens. In the course of this account, Critias uses ancient names such as Cecrops or Erechtheus, and explains how these names survived the passage of time. Why does Plato place this stress on ancient names for both protagonists? The reference to a set of names confirms the claim that Solon was preparing a poem. Aristotle states in *Poetics* 9 (1451a36–b23) that a set of names for the key personae is indispensable to compose an epic or dramatic poem.⁶ For the author of an epic or dramatic poem, a set of names offers the best instrument to express the general sense (*to katholou*) of the poem, whether they are invented or based on history or tradition.

Thus, in both the *Timaeus* and the *Critias*, Plato refers to a poem by Solon about Atlantis which may not have been finished, but had certainly been started. He cites a key feature, the set of names, and he alludes to a written record (*grammata*), which is preserved and can be consulted – preserved by the older Critias in the sixth century and by Critias, the interlocutor of Socrates, in the fifth century. But after Plato, the text concerning Atlantis completely disappears.⁷ Should we consider the poem to be an early victim of the lamentable selection that time has made of the heritage of the classical age?

In reality, we have to deny the existence of a poem by Solon about Atlantis. Plato, the only source, provides not the slightest external

⁵ At *Timaeus* 21e–22b, the possible translation of ‘Neith’ into Greek is ‘Athena’; in the *Critias* (113e–114d), the possible translation of ‘Gadirus’ into Greek is ‘Eumelus’. Gambarara 1984: 73–5, 98–9 finds here an echo of Herodotus 4.8.1–3. For a translation from the language of Egypt into Greek, see also *Phdr.* 274c–275b: the city of King Thamus is called ‘Thebes’ in Greek and its king, ‘Ammon’, is called ‘Thamus’ in Greek. See Heitsch 1993: 188–203. Themistocles, after Solon, learned the language of the barbarians ‘as far as he could’, according to Thucydides (1.138.1–2). See further Canfora 1989: 209–20.

⁶ Aristotle draws a contrast with philosophy in this respect. Philosophy is capable of expressing a concept that a poem or a play may develop, but without the use of specific names. See further Horn 1988, Halliwell 1992.

⁷ With reference to Solon as the source of the Atlantis story, Martina 1968: 22–31 cites with Plato only Strabo 2.3.6 and Plutarch, *Solon* 26.1–4 and 31.3–32.2, both of whom explicitly depend on Plato. See also Gentili and Prato 1988: 61–126.

evidence. Plato also provides many passages that cannot be reconciled with the existence of a poem by Solon about Atlantis.

Critias indicates in the *Timaeus* (25d–26e) the efforts he made to recall the story about Atlantis, which he heard at a festival long ago at the house of his grandfather Critias. Although he mentions several details, none of them leads us to suppose that there were writings (*grammata*) left by Solon. The factor he stresses is the role of memory, and the effort he made all through the night to recall the story about Atlantis. Its recovery, he says, is not easy, but it is possible, because the things that a person learns when he is a child remain in his memory, and because of the pleasure that Critias took in listening to the story about Atlantis and the readiness of his grandfather to teach him.⁸ Why place this stress on memory, if Critias actually possessed the written record (*grammata*) of Solon? The contrast between the two accounts is undeniable.

In the *Critias* (112e–113b), in the very same sentence that mentions the *grammata* of Solon, Critias refers to the decisive role of memory. As a child, Critias studied the writings (*grammata*) of Solon, and that is why he remembers the set of names he uses.⁹ If Critias still has the writings of Solon in his possession, why does Plato make him claim to make this effort? In the *Phaedrus* (228de), by contrast, Socrates suddenly reveals the text of Lysias, which Phaedrus was deliberately hiding in order to pass the speech off as his own. This element is not used in the same way in the *Critias*, and was quite absent from the *Timaeus*. Why does Critias not produce now the relevant writings by Solon and just read them aloud?

Scholars tend to presuppose complete consistency within every text of classical Greek literature and find a problem in even the slightest variation, even if it is excusable and intelligible. Consequently, they forget the peculiar condition of the *Critias*, which seems to be an unfinished text and is, indeed, perhaps the most ancient unfinished text transmitted by the medieval tradition. In the *Critias*, for reasons explained later, Plato mentions the *grammata* of Solon, even though, as noted earlier, this cannot be reconciled with the initial outline of the origin of the story.¹⁰ However, already in the *Timaeus*, in his report of the older Critias (*Ti.* 20d–21d), Plato refers to an unfinished, but undoubtedly started, poem. In the *Timaeus*, a complete text, the poem about Atlantis is distinctly visible at

⁸ See Pradeau 1997: vii–xx. ⁹ See Nesselrath 2006: 243–8.

¹⁰ Rosenmeyer 1956 suggests that the story of Atlantis was created by Plato in two stages: the *Timaeus*, with its lengthy exordium, was created after the *Critias*, and the two works were combined with some discrepancies.

first, though in a shadowy form, but it soon disappears, and is replaced by the theme of memory. In the *Critias*, it takes on a more concrete form, as a set of writings (*grammata*), but here too it rapidly disappears, replaced by memory.

Is this a problem without any solution? In reality, even a minimal acquaintance with Plato is enough to remove any sense of awkwardness. The picture of the afterlife offered in the *Republic* cannot be reconciled with the picture offered in the *Phaedo*. We find the same phenomenon even within the same dialogue. Herodicus of Babylon (fr. 2 Düring) argued long ago that it was impossible that the encounter of Socrates with Gorgias, Polus and Callicles in the *Gorgias* could take place both immediately after the battle of Arginusae in 406 BC (472d–474c), and immediately after the death of Pericles in 429 BC (502d–503d).¹¹ In the *Menexenus*, during the funeral speech given by Socrates, Plato mentions events that take place after the death of Socrates. He does not respect chronological sequence and in this sense he makes a mistake.¹² At least, he makes a mistake if he is judged by the standards of strict accuracy and consistency. But a literary production, in particular a literary production in ancient Greece, does not need to obey the standards of absolute consistency. For example, it is not difficult to show that the picture of the afterlife is different in the *Phaedo* and in the *Republic* because the perspective changes, and the philosophical content of the dialogue changes.¹³

But if the existence of a poem about Atlantis is not plausible, why does Plato mention it in the *Timaeus* and the *Critias* alongside the repeated emphasis on the crucial role of memory? I believe that he does so to bring out the relationship between the Atlantis story and the facts of the past, between his family and the enquiry of Socrates, and between the story of Atlantis and literary tradition.

The story of Atlantis and the facts of the past

In the *Timaeus* and the *Critias*, the story of Atlantis responds to the requirement that Socrates sets out at *Ti.* 19b–20c: that of providing a picture of the ideal polis in action, the polis that Socrates had depicted the day before, and thus of going beyond simply analysing its nature to displaying its character in action.¹⁴ ‘The day before’ (χθές, 17a2, b2, c1): is this

¹¹ See Düring 1941: 46–54. Reconstruction of the relevant text of Herodicus of Babyon is difficult. See Marchiori 2001.

¹² See Tulli 2003. ¹³ See Annas 1982.

¹⁴ On the implications of this passage for Plato’s intentions in the story, see Gill 1977, 1980: xiv–xvi.

the day of the *Republic*, spent by Socrates with Adeimantus and Glaucon? Here in the *Timaeus*, Plato mentions the day spent by Socrates together with Timaeus, Critias and Hermocrates, but not with Adeimantus and Glaucon. But the rapid outline of the ideal polis that he provides immediately afterwards, apart from some significant omissions, derives from the account of the ideal polis of the *Republic*.¹⁵ In the context of the *Timaeus* and the *Critias*, the purpose of this recapitulation of the *Republic* is certainly not a straightforward one, but has a broader significance. Plato indicates that he wants to situate the ideal polis of the *Republic* in the world of 'becoming' (*genomena*), and to present concrete details in a way that can be reconciled with theoretical abstraction.

In the *Timaeus* (20d–21d), Critias claims to offer decisive support for Socrates' account in the form of the Atlantis story. He suggests that the Atlantis story deserves to be taken seriously because it was told by Solon, the wisest of the Seven Sages. Immediately afterwards, Critias mentions the similar judgement about Solon offered by the young Arynander.¹⁶ But in order to situate the ideal polis of the *Republic* in the world of becoming, and to present concrete details in a form that can be reconciled with theoretical abstraction, it is necessary to start from the basis of the kind of empirical truth that can be verified. The myth, the story about Atlantis, is offered as providing this kind of support, which is indispensable for the reconstruction of the past. It is no accident, then, that Socrates speaks positively about the efforts being made by his interlocutors to go beyond the realm of the myth and to locate the story of Atlantis in the world of concrete facts (26e–27b).

Plato thus acknowledges, in this and other ways, the importance that empirical and verifiable truth has in the reconstruction of the past. This may be a surprising feature, because Plato, the author of the ideal polis, is sometimes generally considered to have no interest in the reconstruction of the past.¹⁷ But such a view of Plato runs counter to many features of his works. In the first instance, Plato's decision to present his reflections in the form of conversations between precisely located individuals

¹⁵ See Callahan 1977. On points of difference between the outline of the ideal city in the *Timaeus* and the *Republic*, see Clay 2000: 168–72. A very striking difference is the omission of the philosopher-rulers: see Rowe 1997. But the outline can also be seen as having a proleptic function: the Atlantis story prefigures the 'second-best' polis of the *Laws* (739b–e). See Naddaf 1994.

¹⁶ Thus Socrates, wisest of human beings, according to the god of Delphi in the *Apology* (20c–23c), is the ultimate addressee of the Atlantis story told by Solon, the wisest of the Seven Sages. See Laplace 1984.

¹⁷ Romilly 1951: 297–305, following Wilamowitz 1969: 126–7, goes so far as to deny that Plato had any knowledge of the text of Thucydides. See also Giordano 2000.

such as Socrates and Protagoras, Gorgias and Alcibiades reveals an interest in the reconstruction of the past. Of course, the past here is that of philosophy, which is not always compatible with historical evidence and very often fictional. But the past of philosophy is given a precise setting, with many details about the houses of Callias and Agathon, the palaestra, the law court and the gymnasium. Also, an interest in the reconstruction of the past is central for the funeral speech in the *Menexenus* which, by frank admission, derives from that of Pericles in Thucydides, *Histories* 2.¹⁸ In addition, some scholars recognise the influence of Herodotus and Thucydides on Plato, especially on Book 3 of the *Laws*, with its perceptive analysis of constitutions.¹⁹

Plato's interest in the reconstruction of the past is also clear in the Atlantis story in a number of ways. These include his recognition of the problem posed for enquiry by discontinuities in civilisation and the need to take account of facts about land formation and ancient legends to give a plausible picture of the past. It is against this broader background that we can make sense of Critias' insistence in the *Timaeus* (22b–24c) and the *Critias* (109b–111d) on the concrete foundation of his reconstruction.²⁰ This dimension of Plato's concerns helps to explain why Critias mentions an unfinished, but undoubtedly started, poem by Solon about Atlantis. This is in spite of the importance that he attributes to memory, and even if this introduces contradictions in his story. This is surely why, when Plato mentions a key nucleus of the story, the set of names, he cites the record created by Solon (*grammata*), presented as a body of evidence that is preserved and can be consulted. On the basis of this alleged body of evidence, myth is given a solid foundation, and Socrates' vision of the ideal polis in the *Republic* is linked with the world of concrete facts in the past. Certainly, the world of concrete facts in the past guarantees the possibility of the ideal polis in the future. It is the perspective Aristotle indicates in chapter 9 of his *Poetics* (1451a36–b23).

The family of Plato and the enquiry of Socrates

But who actually possesses the poem, according to Plato? Scholars, naturally, stress the significance of Socrates' interlocutors in works such as the *Charmides* or *Symposium*, the *Parmenides* or *Philebus*. In general, within the

¹⁸ See Pradeau 2002: 14–35. ¹⁹ See Weil 1959: 42–54.

²⁰ See Gill 1980: xx–xxi. It is not easy to see, in Socrates' reaction to Critias' insistence, the 'slight curl of the lip' Broadie discovers in this volume (p. 263 above).

dialogue, the process of Socratic enquiry and its success or failure express the education, attitudes and capacities in philosophy that the interlocutors show.²¹ The treatment of the topic of rhetoric in the *Gorgias* reflects the differing qualities of Gorgias, Polus and Callicles.²² In the *Phaedo*, the discussion turns to the immortality of the soul because Socrates is engaged in dialogue with Simmias and Cebes.²³ Against this background, it is noteworthy that in *Republic* Book 2, after the inconclusive debate about the nature of justice with Thrasymachus, Socrates conducts the enquiry about the ideal polis with Adeimantus and Glaucon, the brothers of Plato. Thus, when Socrates is engaged in the boldest of his speculative endeavours, Plato finds interlocutors for Socrates in his own family, who are presented as capable of understanding the concept of the ideal polis.²⁴

In the *Timaeus* and in the *Critias*, in order to satisfy Socrates' wish to have a picture of the ideal polis in action, Plato considers it appropriate to deploy other figures – Timaeus, Critias, Hermocrates – rather than his brothers, Adeimantus and Glaucon. This is perhaps because, in the *Timaeus* and in the *Critias*, he moves from a purely abstract ideal, the best polis, to differing types of description of empirical reality, the concrete history of the Atlantis story on the one hand and the analysis of the natural universe on the other. Socrates' opening request stresses the importance of having the right kind of spokesman for the task in hand. If Plato's brothers are no longer to play this role, then what criterion should be employed to choose the interlocutors for this purpose? Socrates, commenting at *Ti.* 19b–20c on his three interlocutors, highlights aspects of their ability as well as their education and upbringing (*paideia kai trophē*, 19c6) that make them suited for this role. The sentence is both striking and unqualified, and seems to extend to Critias.²⁵ In any case, as in the *Republic*, by

²¹ See Gill 1996a: 288–9. ²² See Kahn 1996: 125–47.

²³ On the importance of Socrates' interlocutors in Plato, see Blondell 2002: 1–52.

²⁴ Should we say Plato's own family, or rather Plato himself, behind the personae of his family? The latter hypothesis, though plausible, is not straightforward and has no supporting evidence. See Stella 1998.

²⁵ On the language of Socrates' critical evaluation of the interlocutors, see Regali 2012: 43–71. Specifically, Timaeus is praised because of his noble lineage, outstanding experience in the polis and an unsurpassed knowledge of philosophy. Hermocrates is praised because he has a competence based on nature and education. But what about Critias? There is only a very brief comment on him: 'All of us here, in Athens, know that he is no amateur (*idiōtēs*) in any of these things.' Why only this brief comment? There are different possible explanations, and this question is linked with the continuing debate about his exact identity. Perhaps Plato thinks it is not necessary to explain the significance of his family background, just as this is signalled with a bare gesture as regards Adeimantus and Glaucon in the *Republic* (367e–368c).

including Critias in this group, Plato affirms the significance of his own family. But here scholars raise a serious problem. Can Plato really allow Socrates to depict in this way Critias son of Callaeschrus, the notoriously brutal member of the ‘Thirty Tyrants’?²⁶ Or should we suppose that the Critias presented here is the one who falls chronologically between the older Critias son of Dropides, and the tyrant, the son of Callaeschrus (the grandson of the former and the grandfather of the latter)? Alternatively, again, should we suppose that Plato leaves it ambiguous whether he is referring to the grandfather of Perictione, his own mother, or the tyrant, the cousin of his own mother?²⁷

On any of these interpretations, Plato links his own family with Socrates’ enquiry. Specifically Critias (whatever his precise family relationship to Plato) is presented as being an appropriate person to offer a picture of the ideal polis in action, even if it is by means of a story whose truth we cannot really accept.²⁸ But Plato’s attribution of significance to his family extends still further. His family is presented as supporting the account of the ideal polis, as in the *Republic*, but in this case with concrete evidence, embodied in the writings of Solon, which validate an allegedly concrete account.²⁹ The reference to the writings, discussed earlier, is thus not a negligible detail. From the story contained in the writings of Solon, the hope arises of an ideal polis that could be transferred from the facts of the past to the facts of the future and could thus transform the character of Athens, the city of Solon, Critias and Plato himself.

²⁶ See further Broadie in this volume, according to whom the personal and intellectual defects of Critias the tyrant form an important part of the background for making sense of the Atlantis story.

²⁷ In the *Timaeus* (21a–d), the situation is this: when he was very young, Critias heard the story from Critias son of Dropides, who was very old; Critias son of Dropides heard the story from Solon, perhaps before 558 BC. Critias the tyrant, the son of Callaeschrus, was born in 460 BC, about one hundred years later. The genealogical tree is not easy to understand. Perhaps Plato proceeds here on the basis of a forty-year generational pattern, so that Critias son of Dropides would be ninety years old when Critias was ten. See further Gill 1980: 39, Strauss 1993: 87–97, Brisson 1994: 32–49.

²⁸ It is surely no accident that Critias son of Dropides recalls Solon on the third day of the Apaturia, which is the Athenian feast of initiation into the family, in a broad sense – that is, into the *phratría*. See Nilsson 1951: 150–70. The aetiological myth linked with this feast hinges on the astuteness of Melanthus who, with the protection of a god, kills Xanthus. This may be meant as a hint by Plato about the character of the story. Gill 1980: 40 sees an indication that this is a deceitful narrative, marked by astuteness. In any case, by mentioning the third day of the Apaturia, Plato sets the *Critias* within the framework of the initiation feast of his family.

²⁹ In the *Timaeus* (25d–26e), with his story about primeval Athens and Atlantis, Critias intends to transfer the ‘guardians’ of Socrates’ ideal polis to the concrete facts of the verifiable past: ‘We shall say that those citizens that you had in mind were our true ancestors’ (ἐκείνους τοὺς ἀληθινούς εἶναι προγόνους ἡμῶν, 26d2–3). Thus, Critias places the ‘true’, ‘actual’ guardians firmly among the concrete facts of the verifiable past. See Tulli 1994.

The Atlantis story and literary tradition

At the same time, Plato discovers in his family a literary heritage. Critias possesses a literary heritage that derives from Critias son of Dropides. The writings of Solon 'in my house', though fictional, thus figure at the end of Plato's genealogical tree. In this sense, and by an exchange of roles, Plato implicitly attributes the writings of Solon to himself.

The identification of the Atlantis story with the alleged poem of Solon gives added significance to the passages noted earlier about the quality of the potential achievement of Solon. The sentence uttered in the *Timaeus* (21a–d) by the older Critias to the young Amynder can be seen as implying a specific and large ambition. There is no author more renowned than Solon – read: 'Plato'. The poem about Atlantis would have been superior to the *Theogony* or *Iliad*. Of course, the excellence of Solon is here hypothetical, an unfulfilled condition. But the content of the poem of Solon is the same as that of the Atlantis story of Plato.

There is a further implication in the parallelism that Plato establishes between himself and Solon in this respect. We might well be reminded of the myth of Thamus and Theuth in the *Phaedrus* (276b–277a). In that myth a significant motif is the relationship between what is 'play' (*paidia*) and what is 'serious occupation' (*spoudē*). Literary production is there presented as 'play' and as a relaxation from the 'serious' matters of investigation, for instance, about the nature of justice.³⁰ The attitude that the older Critias attributes to Solon is similar: literary production is treated as a secondary occupation (*parergon*) compared to more serious matters – meaning here not the theory of justice but the attempt to put this into practice, as Solon did at Athens. The parallelism is undeniable. Can it be accidental that the story about Atlantis was not completed either by Solon or Plato?

Thus, the story that Plato announces in this way, the one started in the *Critias*, is superior to the *Theogony* or the *Iliad*. In some way, it reveals the form of a poem. Perhaps this is a surprising result. After the rejection of mimesis in the *Republic*, after the ban that is placed on Homer in the *Republic*, does Plato admit here that, for the purposes of philosophy, it is worthwhile composing a poem, a form of literary production which falls centrally within the sphere of mimesis? The ambition is all the more surprising in the first section of the *Timaeus*, a text that Plato links closely

³⁰ Cf. Rowe 1988: 208–12. Occasional or marginal activity does not necessarily mean inferior activity. Erler 1994 points to a similar problem in the *Politicus* (286d–287b). See also Jouët-Pastré 2006: 139–73.

to the *Republic*. In particular, the request of Socrates for a picture of the ideal polis in action (19b–20c) echoes strongly the critique of mimesis in the *Republic*.³¹

However, scholars also point out that the rejection of mimesis in the *Republic* is not absolute. In Book 10, admittedly, Plato states that the prestige of Homer is not based on knowledge. Rather, Homer is three degrees removed from the truth, and offers pale shadows (596a–599b) or ‘appearances’ (*phantasmata*), not based on knowledge of reality (601b–607a).³² But, at the same time, Plato indicates that presenting images based on truth by means of mimesis is possible. This is, precisely, the task of the good artist (*agathos zōgraphos*), who recognises the pattern of the god (471c–473b and 484a–485a). The author who possesses this kind of knowledge offers a result that has value as a genuine reflection of the justice, the beautiful and the temperate in itself (500b–502a).³³

The good kind of mimesis is based on the knowledge that derives from the kind of education (*paideia*) and upbringing (*trophē*) that Socrates possesses. It is not difficult to find an underlying consistency between the concept of mimesis in the *Republic* and the story of Atlantis in the *Timaeus* and *Critias*. This consistency prepares the way for the definition of dialogue in the *Laws* (817a–d) as the ‘truest tragedy’ or the ‘finest drama’ for the polis.³⁴ The devaluation of the literary production of Hesiod and Homer implied in the *Timaeus* (19b–20c) means the rejection of the kind of literary production that is not based on the kind of education and upbringing that Socrates possesses. In the Atlantis story, by contrast, Plato derives its content directly from the programme that is designed to produce the best education and most complete upbringing. This is the programme of the *Republic* depicted by Socrates, in response to which Critias offers his account of the Atlantis story. It is surely no accident that in the *Timaeus* Socrates is keen to see Timaeus, Hermocrates and Critias carry out the kind of project he asks for, since he sees in them the combination of natural ability and education that provides the foundation for such mimesis.³⁵

³¹ Welliver 1977: 8–21 finds here an ironical comment on the literary ability of Critias. But on this hypothesis, see Gill 1979a.

³² See Nehamas 1982.

³³ See further Ferrari 1989: 120–41, Halliwell 2002: 37–71, Naddaff 2002: 37–66.

³⁴ Gaiser 1984: 103–23 offers strong arguments here to interpret the definition of the ‘state’ or of the ‘constitution’ as the definition of the dialogue that builds the plot of the ‘state’ or of the ‘constitution’.

³⁵ See Dalfen 1974: 231–8.

Also, it is surely no accident that Plato recalls in the *Critias* (106b–108a) the good kind of mimesis envisaged in the *Republic*. The Atlantis story is the outcome of this kind of mimesis, an outcome that is not certain to appeal to its listeners, as Critias points out, because people are highly critical when human beings are the object of mimesis. As regards the portrayal of the cosmos, the ignorance of the listeners places a limit on their expectations. But, if human beings are the object of mimesis, they can easily detect any deficiencies. Hence, there arises the need to paint human beings accurately according to the requirements of likelihood (*to eikos*) and what is appropriate (*to prepon*).³⁶

This is another respect in which Plato aims in this story at a kind of mimesis which is both based on theoretical understanding or knowledge and which also translates a general concept into concrete and specific facts (the world of ‘becoming’). In this respect, Plato in a sense combines the two approaches that Aristotle distinguishes in chapter 9 of his *Poetics* (1451a36–b23). Here, as noted earlier, Aristotle draws a contrast between the kind of discourse that remains at the level of the particular and that which aims to illustrate the general or universal.³⁷ Thucydides’ writings are taken as the exemplar of the first kind of mimesis, whereas literary production and philosophy are presented as exemplifying the second kind. If we attend only to one element of the Atlantis story, the fact that it expresses in narrative form the core programme of the *Republic*, we can see the Atlantis story as anticipating one side of Aristotle’s dichotomy, namely the portrayal of the universal.

But this leaves out of account the interest of Plato in the reconstruction of the past, and his conviction that the writings of Solon constituted the foundation for establishing factual or verifiable truth.³⁸ If, in order to situate the ideal polis of the *Republic* in the world of becoming, Plato has to choose an idiom that is that of Thucydides, what follows for the status of the Atlantis story? What follows is that the story takes on a distinctive character, between particular and general content, in a way that cuts across the dichotomy of Aristotle.

³⁶ The idea that likelihood (*to eikos*) and what is appropriate (*to prepon*) need to be achieved in accounts of the natural cosmos is a related theme in the *Timaeus*. (27d–29d), as noted by Burnyeat 2005.

³⁷ See Erler 1998. On the links between Plato and Aristotle on this point, see Halliwell 1986: 109–37, and Arrighetti 2006: 183–270.

³⁸ Gill 1993 suggests that the Atlantis story should be seen as a kind of ‘foundation myth’ for primeval Athens: the ideal polis in action.

It is perhaps for this reason that we find the story sometimes presented in a form that evokes literary codes falling between (or outside) reconstruction of the past and philosophy, namely the hymn or the encomium and the drama. It may not be accidental that the hymn to the gods and the encomium of good people are the only types of literary production explicitly exempted from exclusion from the ideal polis after the critique of mimesis in *Republic* 10 (601b–607a), a concession that is fully in line with the positive role envisaged for literary production and the other arts in *Republic* 3 (401b–403c). These are literary codes which combine in their own way particular and general content. For instance, in the *Timaeus* (20d–21d) we find indications that a prerequisite for an image of the ideal polis in action is that it takes the form of an encomium. Critias offers the Atlantis story both as a hymn to the goddess and an encomium to the city of Athens. In the *Critias* (108bc), Hermocrates also urges Critias to compose an encomium and a hymn. But, in the same context, Socrates substitutes the language of drama for that of encomium. In this respect, the good kind of mimesis that he recommends is transferred to the context of the theatre, with Timaeus and Critias presented as competing before an audience, a motif picked up by Hermocrates and Critias.³⁹

Does Plato in these respects anticipate the mixture of literary codes that is normally seen as a distinctive characteristic of the Hellenistic age? As emphasised earlier in the *Timaeus* (21a–d), the comment of the older Critias to the young Amynder invites comparison between the Atlantis story and the works of Homer and Hesiod. In the *Critias* too (108b–d), the Atlantis story has strong literary connotations as a poem: if Hermocrates urges Critias to compose an encomium and a hymn, Critias responds by also invoking Memory, the mother of the Muses. Alongside the concrete allusions built into the narrative of the Atlantis story in the *Critias*, scholars have detected also numerous allusions in the story to Homer especially.⁴⁰

³⁹ See further Gill 1977 on these allusions to Greek literary codes and their relationship to the good kind of mimesis in the *Republic*.

⁴⁰ For Friedländer 1954: 300–5, the paradigm for the picture of Atlantis is the oriental polis of Herodotus: for instance Ecbatana (Hdt. 1.98.1–6) or Babylon (1.178.1–187.5). But, behind this, Szlezák 1993 also sees the picture of Troy. The idea that the narrative is the result of the memory inspired by the Muses depends on the *Iliad* (2.484–93). The Atlantis story builds on the length of the war of Troy, nine years in the *Iliad* (2.134–8), extending the scale of the time since the war with Atlantis to nine thousand years. See further Gaiser 1968: 260–70.

Against this background, we can make sense of the symbolic function of the writings that Critias both indicates and conceals in the *Timaeus* and the *Critias*. Onto these writings Plato projects the relationship between past literary production and the new kind of mimesis that he sees as valid. The unfinished, but certainly started, poem of Solon is compatible with the unfinished but certainly started *Critias* of Plato, which is superior to the literary production of Hesiod and Homer.

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