

Plato: Biography

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The main biographical source about Plato, according to the testimony of the Neoplatonic Simplicius (Aristotle 2021), was written by the disciple Xenocrates, but unfortunately it has not reached us. The earliest biography of Plato (Riginos 1976) to date, *De Platone et dogmate eius*, is by a second-century Latin author, Apuleius (Apuleius 100AD). All of Plato's other biographies were written more than five hundred years after his death. The Greek historian Diogenes (2nd and 3rd centuries) is the author of a series of biographies of Greek philosophers (*The Lives of Philosophers*) in which he refers to the life of Plato (Laertius 2018). He also wrote a funeral praise for Plato. Other early biographers of Plato are Olympiodorus the Younger in the sixth century (Grotius 1826) (Filippi 2017, 5-12 (I)) and an anonymous source (Westermann 1964, 388–96). An important source about Plato's life is his philosophical dialogues, thirteen letters (possibly false though, with the possible exception of Letters VII and VIII), the writings of Aristotle, an excerpt from the Epicurean Philodemus of Gadara's *History of Philosophers (Syntaxis ton philosophon)*. 1st century BC (Dorandi 2016, 186–87), Prolegomena's anonymous writings on Platonic philosophy traditionally attributed to Olympiodorus, *Suda*, 10th century (Adler 1967) and Plutarch's *Life of Dio*, 1st-2nd Century (Boas 1948, 439-457 (57)) (Plutarch 102AD).

Apollodorus of Athens, in the *Chronology*, dates Plato's birth to the Eighty-eighth Olympics, on the seventh day of the month of Targelion, and the end of May, 428 BC (Laertius 2018, 26, 72) (Helios 1960) (Nails 2002).

Plato has aristocratic origins (Robin 1935). He was born in Athens. His father, Aristone, is said to have been one of the descendants of Codro (Filippi 2017) (Hutchins 1952), the last legendary king of Athens. Plato's real name was Aristocle, after his grandfather. The mother, Perictione (Platon and Brisson 2020), descended from the famous legislator Solon (Laertius 2018,

122 (III,1)) (Kirchner 1901, vol. I) (Guthrie and Guthrie 1986, vol. 4). Perictione is also the first cousin of Critias and the sister of Charmides, two of the Thirty Tyrants of Athens in 404 BC.

According to Diogenes Laertius (Laertius 2018, vol. 3), Speusippus refers in *Plato's Funeral Feast* to a legend that Plato was in fact the son of the god Apollo and the brother of Asclepius, "physician of the body, as is Plato of the immortal soul" (Laertius 2018, vol. 1) (Guthrie and Guthrie 1986, vol. 4). Thus, as in the Bible, Plato's mother, Perictione, had a vision with Apollo after which she became pregnant (Bazzarini 1837, vol. 5 p 912). This version is contradicted by the unknown author of *Prolegomena* (Motta 2014, 126–28). It seems that through the legend of Apollo, Speusippus, being the son of a sister of Plato, actually tried to promote the myth of the philosopher after his death (Motta 2014), the deification of Plato continuing in the Neoplatonic era according to Porphyry and Proclus. (Motta 2014, 61)

Plato had two brothers, Adimanto and Glaucone (Croiset 1922, 2), about whom he speaks in *The Republic* (Plato and Jowett 1991, sec. Book 2, 368), and a sister, Potone, whose son, Speusippo, will be a student. and Plato's successor, taking over the leadership of the Athens Academy on Plato's death (Robin 1935) (Apuleius 100AD) (Laertius 2018). Plato's mother, after the death of her father, remarries her maternal uncle, Pyrilampus, giving birth to a son, Antiphon, Plato's half-brother (Guthrie and Guthrie 1986, vol. 4).

The name Plato was given to him by his gymnastics teacher, Ariston, a fighter from Argos, due to his very broad shoulders (from the Greek *πλατύς*, *platýs*, meaning "wide"). Seneca mentions the meaning of Plato's name: "His very name was given to him because of his broad chest" (Laertius 2018, vol. 3 p. 4). Others consider the same etymology of the word, but with reference to the width of its forehead or the grandeur of its literary style (Notopoulos 1939, 135–145) (Weischede 2021, vol. VI 58:29–30).

Plato practiced pancrazio (a kind of fight) and boxing. Also, according to the references of Diogenes Laertius to Apuleius (Laertius 2018, vol. I, 2), Olympiodorus (Laertius 2018, vol. II, 3) and Eliano (Laertius 2018, vol. II, 30), Plato would have cultivated painting and poetry, writing dithyrambs, verses and tragedies that will later help him write his dialogues. Speusippo praised the sharp intellect and prodigious memory that Plato showed as a child, and his dedication to study in adolescence (Tarán 1981, 236–37). Plato is said to have been a pupil of Theodore of Cyrene, a disciple of Protagoras, Socrates, and Theaetetus, who taught him mathematics. According to Plutarch (Plutarch 1892), Plato was well versed in music science, being a student of Dracon and Metellos of Agrigento. He was a training colleague of Isocrates, who was six years older than him (Laertius 2018, vol. III, 1).

Plato had close ties with the oligarchic party of that time (Juignet 2015). He considered politics a duty of honor of every citizen (Platon and Brisson 2020), but he gave up politics early on, disgusted by the excesses and rage of the parties (Croiset 1922, 2).

”In my youth I went through the same experience as many other men. I fancied that if, early in life, I became my own master, I should at once embark on a political career. And I found myself confronted with the following occurrences in the public affairs of my own city. The existing constitution being generally condemned, a revolution took place [...] As I observed these incidents and the men engaged in public affairs, the laws too and the customs, the more closely I examined them and the farther I advanced in life, the more difficult it seemed to me to handle public affairs aright. For it was not possible to be active in politics without friends and trustworthy supporters; and to find these ready to my hand was not an easy matter, since public affairs at Athens were not carried on in accordance with the manners and practices of our fathers.” (Plato 2021, 324)

Plato drew on the philosophical work of some of his predecessors, especially Socrates, but also Parmenides, Heraclitus, and Pythagoras, to develop his own philosophy, which explores most important fields, including metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, and politics. with his teacher Socrates and his student Aristotle, he laid the foundations of Western philosophical thought (Mondin 2022, vol. I, 139) (Whitehead 2010, 39) (Colli 2014, 13) (Hegel 1995, 154)

Pythagoras and his followers exerted a strong influence on Plato (Brisson and Fronterotta 2019). Aristotle, in *Metaphysics*, states that Plato's philosophy closely follows the teachings of the Pythagoreans (Aristotle 1991, vol. 1)(Aristotle 1991, bk. 1). These influences are later confirmed by Cicero (Cicero 1886, 1, 17, 39) (McFarlane 1998), and Bertrand Russell in *A History of Western Philosophy* (Russell 2013, 122–24). R. M. Hare states that Plato was influenced by Pythagoras in at least three points: Plato's republic resembles the community of thinkers that Pythagoras had established at Croton; Plato would have taken from Pythagoras the idea that mathematics and abstract thinking in general are the foundation of philosophy, science, and morality, and both had a mystical approach to the soul, possibly influenced by Orphism (Taylor, Barnes, and Hare 1999, 103–189) (Russell 2013, 122–24).

Plato died in 347 or 346 BC, according to Seneca at the age of 81 on the same day he was born (Riginos 1976), being buried at the Academy. Neanthes claims to have died at the age of 84 (Benson 2008, sec. The Life of Plato of Athens).

Plato is considered one of the most important and influential philosophers in human history (Kraut 2017), being considered one of the founders of Western religion and spirituality (Whitehead 2010). The philosophy he developed, known as Platonism, is based on the theory of Forms known by pure reason as a solution to the problem of universals.

As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it:

”You find in him that which you have already found in Homer, now ripened to thought,—the poet converted to a philosopher, with loftier strains of musical wisdom than Homer reached; as if Homer were the youth and Plato the finished man; yet with no less security of bold and perfect song, when he cares to use it, and with some harp-strings fetched from a higher heaven. He contains the future, as he came out of the past. In Plato you explore modern Europe in its causes and seed,— all that in thought, which the history of Europe embodies or has yet to embody.” (Emerson 2007)

Alfred North Whitehead argued that "the whole history of Western philosophy is but a series of secondary notes about Plato" (Whitehead 2010)

Theophrastus, speaking of philosophers, said of Plato that he was the first in fame and genius, and at the same time the last in chronology.

Travels

According to Plutarch (Plutarch 2018), Plato made a trip to Egypt (Obenga 2005, 101–21), about which Diogenes Laertius writes that: “At the age of twenty-eight, according to Hermodor, he [Plato] went to Megara, to Euclid, accompanied by a few other students of Socrates” (Laertius 2018, bk. III, 6). But his travels in Egypt are controversial (Mathieu 2013, 24–106).

Plato, according to Diogenes Laertius (Laertius 2018, bk. III, 8) which relates the testimony of Aristoxenus, is said to have participated in three military expeditions during the Peloponnesian War to Tanagra, Corinth and Delio, from 409 BC, until 407 BC. In Delio he will also receive a reward for his contribution (Rees 1953, vols. 2, 74). In fact, at the Battle of Tanagra in 457 BC. and Delio from 424 B.C. it is impossible that Plato took part, being born around 427 BC. (Nails 2002) (Grote 1867, vol. 1). But Socrates would have fought at Delio (Plato 1999, 29e), where he is said to have stood out (Plato 2003, 219e–20), so it is possible that there was an overlap of the two figures (Boas 1948, 439–57).

Around 390 BC, Plato traveled to Magna Graecia where he met the Pythagorean Archytas of Tarentum (Cosenza 1977, 245).

In 388/387 B.C. he went to Sicily to study the volcano Etna, according to Diogenes Laertius (Laertius 2018, bk. III, 18), Athenaeus (Di Naucrati 2001, vol. I, 12) and Apuleius (Apuleius 100AD, 1, IV).

He was invited by the tyrant Dionysius I to come to Syracuse, where he met the tyrant's brother-in-law, Dione, who became one of his closest disciples (Laertius 2018, bk. III, 46) (Plato

2021). Fallen into the misfortunes of Dionysius due to his speeches, he flees aboard a ship led by the Spartan Pollide (Plutarch 2018, 5, 3–7) (Laertius 2018, bk. III, 19).

Arriving in Aegina, an enemy island of Athens, he was taken prisoner and enslaved. It was redeemed by the Socratic Annicerides of Cyrene (Laertius 2018, bk. III, 19, 20) (Sordi 1992, 83–91) (Amit 1973, 54–59).

In 367-366 BC Plato reached Syracuse again where Dionysius the Younger had taken power, invited by Dione to implement the political reforms proposed by Plato. The tyrannical faction opposes (Plutarch 2018) (Muccioli 1999, 201), eventually reaching the exile of Dione. Plato remained in Syracuse for a while, in the "hope of doing all the best he could" (Bonacasa, Braccesi, and Miro 2002, 15), but at the outbreak of a war conflict he left Sicily with the promise of Dionysius II that the end of the war will recall him and Dione (Plato 2021, 338a).

In 361 B.C. he travels to Sicily for the last time, but Plato's attempts to defend Dione led to the rupture of relations with the tyrant, being expelled from the acropolis and transferred to the house of Archedemus (Plato 2021, 348a-e; 349a-e).

"I, an Athenian citizen, a friend of Dio, his ally, went to the tyrant to change a hostile relationship into a friendship; I fought against slander, but I was defeated by them. However, as much as Dionysius with honors and riches tried to pull me to his side to use me as proof of the legitimacy of God's exile, he failed miserably. " (Plato 2021, 333d)

In 360 BC he manages to leave Sicily with the help of Archita and the Pythagoreans of Taranto. He arrives at Olympia where he meets Dione for the last time. He succeeded in 357 B.C. to take power in Syracuse, but was killed three years later (Laertius 2018).

In the last thirteen years of his life, between 360 and 347, Plato does not seem to have left Athens.

Socrates

Plato frequented the Heraclitus Cratylus and the Parmenidean Hermogene, but it is uncertain whether the information is true or just to justify his later doctrine, influenced by the ideas of his two great predecessors, Heraclitus and Parmenides, whom he considered the true founders of philosophy.

According to Elien the Sophist, Plato met Socrates around 407 BC, when he persuaded him to devote himself to philosophy, with Plato destroying all his works of art (Elien 1772, bk. II, 30).

Plato's meeting with Socrates was fundamental. After the oligarchic and pro-Spartan government of the Thirty Tyrants, which included Plato's uncle, Critias, Socrates was accused by the new democratic government of impiety and corruption of young people and sentenced to death in 399 BC. In *Apology of Socrates*, Plato describes the process in which he acted as Socrates' defender, denouncing the falsity of the accusations, calling on several witnesses, including "Adimanto, son of Aristone, whose brother is Plato, present here." (Plato 1999, 34a) But Plato was not present in the last hours of Socrates' life. (Plato 1993, 59b) (Epictetus 1928, bk. I, 8, 13) It is assumed that thus Plato may wish to state that dialogue will not be an opportunistic chronicle of Socrates' death but a literary reconstruction in accordance with the dialogical spirit of the master. (Plato 1993, 200), or that he does not want to compromise by sharing the accusation of atheism that led to the death of Socrates.

In five dialogues Plato prefigures the process: *Theaetetus* (Plato et al. 1992), *Euthyphro* (Plato 2020c) (Plato 1999, 33d–34a), *Meno* (Plato 1999, 38b) (Plato 2020b), *Gorgias* (Plato 1864) (Plato 1993, 59b), and *The Republic* (Plato and Jowett 1991) (Plato et al. 1992, 210d). Socrates' trial is addressed by Plato in the dialogues *Apology of Socrates* (Socrates' defense speech) (Gaiser 1980), and in *Crito* (Plato 2020a) (Aristotle 1991, 987b) and *Phaedrus* (Plato 1993) (Ryle 1931,

119–124) (after the death sentence of Socrates). The only passage in which Plato speaks of Socrates in his own name is *Letter VII*, the authenticity of which is generally admitted:

”... among other things they tried to send a friend of mine, the aged Socrates, whom I should scarcely scruple to describe as the most upright man of that day, with some other persons to carry off one of the citizens by force to execution, in order that, whether he wished it, or not, he might share the guilt of their conduct; but he would not obey them, risking all consequences in preference to becoming a partner in their iniquitous deeds-seeing all these things and others of the same kind on a considerable scale...” (Plato 2021, 27)

Aristotle attributes to Socrates a different doctrine of Forms (by investigating the natural world) than that of Plato (which exists beyond and outside the ordinary range of human understanding) (McPherran 1999, 268). But in Plato's dialogues, Socrates seems to support Plato's ideas.

C. D. C. Reeve (Plato and Reeve 2004) highlights some positive theses developed by Socrates in Plato's dialogues, constituted in a kind of ethical intellectualism (*technê*) according to which to be virtuous and happy an expert knowledge is enough: the doctrine of unity of virtues: virtues (justice, piety, courage, etc.) are all identical with wisdom or knowledge and conceived as a type of craft (*technê*) or expertise; possession of this knowledge is necessary and sufficient for happiness (Plato 2020a, 48b) (Plato 1864, 470e); and no one ever acts contrary to what he knows or thinks is better, so that the weakness of the will is impossible (Plato 2008, 352a–59).

In *Apology of Socrates*, he describes the nature of his philosophical activity in Athens:

”I shall never stop practicing philosophy and exhorting you and elucidating the truth for everyone that I meet. I shall go on saying, in my usual way, My very good friend, you are an Athenian and belong to a city which is the greatest and most famous in the world for its wisdom and strength. Are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as possible, and similarly with reputation and honor, and give no attention or thought to truth and understanding and the perfection of your soul? ... I spend all my time going about trying to persuade you, young and old, to make your first and chief concern not for your bodies nor for your possessions, but for the highest welfare of your souls.” (Plato 1999, 29d–30b)

According to Brickhouse and Smith, “Socrates, as Plato depicts him, is not a teacher at all; he is a seeker after moral wisdom who engages others to engage in the same search.” (Brickhouse and Smith 1997, 4).

Academy

In 387 BC, Plato bought a park in Athens dedicated to Academus (Thucydides and Crawley 2006, bk. ii:34), on the site where Cimon was to enclose the place with a wall (Plutarch 2018, bk. xiii:7). There he founded a school which he named the Academy, in honor of that hero, and dedicated it to Apollo and the Muses. The area where the Academy was located was decorated with oriental and olive groves (Plutarch 2018, bk. xiii:13).

Plato's Academy was a communion of knowledge in which gymnastics and cultural activities were held, often with guests, and the exact sciences were taught, preparing the study of philosophy both in itself and in its political applications. The motto of the Academy, which emphasized that geometry was a fundamental concern, was: "Let None But Geometers Enter Here" (Saffrey 1968, 67–68).

Most of the participants were part of the aristocracy (Kalligas 2020, 76) (Barnes and Barnes 2000, 31), and although Plato did not charge a participation fee (Mueller 2000, 170) (Nails 2002) (Kalligas 2020), each member had to maintain himself. There were also two women who studied with Plato at the Academy, Axiothea of Phlius and Lasthenia of Mantinea (Craig 1998).

Based on Plato's lectures on Good and Dialectics, (Zeyl 1997, 2) the teaching was conducted through discussions with the disciples, led by Plato or the older disciples, and lectures given by illustrious personalities passing through Athens. Some researchers believe that the Academy's curriculum was very similar to that discussed in Plato's *Republic* (Mueller 2000, 170–71).

Plato's Academy was a school for many illustrious personalities of the time (Guthrie and Guthrie 1986, 23) (Hornblower, Spawforth, and Eidinow 2012). The best-known disciple is Aristotle, who studied here between 367-347 BC, before founding his own school, Lyceum, but also others, such as:

- Theophrastus, until 348 BC;
- Pamphile, who will be the master of Epicurus;
- Philip of Opus, editor of *Laws* and possibly the author of *Epinomis*;
- Aminta of Heraclea, against whom Ariston of Chios will write;
- Chion; Aeschine; Hyperide; Hermodor of Syracuse; Focion; Demosthenes (Aulu-Gelle and Verger 2021, chap. XIII); Calipus of Athens; Eudoxus of Cnidus; Hestiae of Perinth; Heraclides of Pontus, Speusippus, Xenocrates, Menechmus, Menedemus of Eretria; Euphrasius of Euboea; Leon of Athens and Leon the Academician;
- Echecrate, who was the first Pythagorean;
- Hermias de Atarneus, future protector of ostracized Aristotle;
- Python and Heraclides, citizens of Enos, advisers and assassins of Cotys I in 359 BC, both citizens of Enos, a Greek city on the Thracian coast (Aristotle 2013, bk. V, X, 1311 b 21) (Laertius 2018, bk. III, 46);
- Aristonymos, legislator of the Megalopolis, in Arcadia;
- Theodectes of Phaselis, tragic poet;
- and two women: Axiothea of Phlius and Lasthenia of Mantinea.

After Plato's death, the leadership of the Academy was taken over by his nephew Speusippo. The Platonic Academy was destroyed by the Roman dictator Sulla in 86 BC (Lindberg 2008, 70) and will be temporarily closed after the death of Philo of Larissa in 83 BC. The school

will survive until the year 529 (Platon and Brisson 2020, XII), when it was permanently closed by Justinian after various periods of alternating interruptions of activity.

There have been three periods in the history of the Academy: the Old Academy, the Middle Academy and the New Academy. The main figures in the Old Academy were Speusippus (Plato's nephew), who succeeded him as head of the school (until 339 BC) and Xenocrates (until 313 BC). Both sought to merge Pythagorean speculation on numbers with Plato's theory of forms.

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