

## Chapter 5: Plato: A brief life.

While the writings of Plato are vast and running to just under 1800 pages in a Complete Works edition, our knowledge of the man himself is perhaps not quite as comprehensive. Still, if we have an understanding of the chief influences in his life and their effect on his writings, it will help us to understand his contribution to our Ritual all the more.

### Early Years:

Plato was born about the year 428 or 427 BCE in Athens to an aristocratic family of some influence in political affairs.

We know that his father's name was Ariston and that his mother's name was Perictone. By and large, history has paid scant attention to poor Ariston. In fact Plato's nephew (Speusippus) went one step further in totally marginalising Ariston's significance in Plato's life by claiming that it was the god Apollo who was Plato's father, not as some people mistakenly claimed – Ariston.

By contrast, Perictone's background is far more developed. One ancient source emphasises that Perictone was reputed to have both a beautiful face as well as a stunningly attractive figure. Perictone's brother was named Charmides. This Charmides is the central character of Plato's dialogue of the same name – a dialogue dealing specifically with the study of the Cardinal Virtue of *temperance*.

Plato also had two brothers whose names were Glaucus and Adeimantes. Both these brothers appear as chief characters in *Republic*.

Ariston died when Plato was still quite young and the very beautiful Perictone remarried. The result of her re-marriage was the birth of Antiphon - a half-brother to Plato.

Plato also had a sister named Petone. When Plato passed away, it was Petone's son – Speusippus (who together with another member of the Academy named Xenocrates) took over leadership of the Academy that had originally been founded by Plato. It was during this time that Speusippus began pedalling the version of Plato's conception by Perictone through the god, Apollo.

### His Name:

For centuries there has been debate about his real name. From ancient times there has been argument that "Plato" may not have been his real name at all!

One of the chief sources that we have of Plato's life comes to us from a biography written in the third century CE, by a Roman named Diogenes Laertius. Keeping in mind that Laertius lived some 600 years *after* Plato, Laertius put together a biography of Plato (among other philosophers) basing his "facts" on stories that were current during his own life or that had been handed down by tradition. Laertius claims that Plato's real name was *Aristocles* – the name of his paternal grand-father and after whom he was named. Assuming for the moment that this is the case, why do we know him by the name of *Plato*?

Laertius suggested that Plato was actually his *nick name* but over time and by convention, the name has stuck. The Greek root of the name Plato is *platon* and means something along the lines of "breadth". Laertius provides us with the three traditional variations of the story regarding how the nick name came about. The first is that Plato was *broad* in his shoulders. The second was that he had a *broad* forehead while the last was in honour of his *breadth* of eloquence.

Modern commentators are far from convinced by Laertius' claims.

One thing aspect we can keep in mind is that “Plato” was a very common name in the 4<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE in Athens. In the same vein, the Greek name *Jesus* (or its Aramaic form *Yehoshua*) was a very common name in the first century CE in Palestine. Whichever way we look at it, Plato is the name that we have over the centuries come to know the man by and it would be pedantic for us after all this time to begin calling him *Aristocles* (...just on Laertius’ say-so).

One other point that Laertius made is that in his early life, Plato was a painter, a poet, as well as a dramatist. These claims may be more reliable. If we read his dialogues, it soon becomes evident how the dialogues themselves take on a *dramatic* form, together with a cast of characters (and even stage directions). Plato’s prose is at times poetic and makes good use of Greek word-play in sharp distinction to Aristotle’s writings which in the main are little more than “lecture-notes”.

### The Era of the Peloponnesian Wars:

The time of his birth and early life coincide with a period of Greek history known as the Peloponnesian Wars. These wars were a series of hostilities waged by the strong, disciplined Spartans against Athens. The military significance of waging these wars was designed to put a stop to Athens’ ever-expanding attempts at empire-building.

There is however, another perspective.

For the time being, all we need to keep in mind is that the Athenians were descended from a cultural group known as the *Ionians*. The customs, traditions and dialect were vastly different to the Spartans. Spartans were descended from a cultural group known as the *Dorians*. So, in effect, these hostilities may well have been marked by beliefs in cultural and racial superiority – one over the other.

We will return to a more detailed discussion of the Ionian, Dorian and Corinthian cultures a little later. In the interim, all we need to keep in mind is that *in a Freemasonic context*, the column of the Worshipful Master (who represents *wisdom*), is known as the *Ionian* column, while the column of the Senior Warden (who represents *strength*), is known as the *Doric* column.

The Peloponnesian Wars themselves lasted from 431 BCE up to 404 BCE – a period of 27 years and ended with Athens’ total defeat to Sparta. Placing Plato in this context, he was born approximately 4 years into the War and was a young adult of about 23 or 24 when it ended. The outcome of these Wars was a significant influence in his thinking – both political and mythical - and its importance to the development of his myth of Atlantis is something that affects Freemasonry from a philosophical perspective and will be discussed in the Postscript to this book.

At about the age of 20 (c. 408 BCE), he became a pupil of Socrates and remained devoted to him for the remaining 10 or 11 years - until Socrates’ execution in 399 BCE. Despite Plato’s strong attachment to the man (as well as his philosophy), it is one of those very quirky aspects of history that Plato was not a member of the party present with Socrates at his death. (On the morning of Socrates’ execution, Plato was at home, ill in bed).

While Plato lay ill, present with Socrates that morning were at least 15 people (including Xanthippe – Socrates’ wife), apart from an anonymous group of “others” including Socrates’ unnamed son who sat on Xanthippe’s knee.

Actually, neither Xanthippe nor Socrates’ son were present at his final moment. Socrates saw to this by arranging through Crito to have her taken home as she was “*crying hysterically*”.

### Mid-Life:

Following the execution, Plato decided to further his own philosophical studies. He did this by travelling extensively (for a number of years) throughout the Mediterranean. Laertius claims that

during this time, he absorbed the teachings of three principal schools of thought – that of Euclid, that of a mathematician named Theodorus in Cyrene and most of all - that of *Pythagoras* in southern Italy.

By his own admission, the writings of Plato were the chief influence that drew Augustine of Hippo to become a Christian. He wrote about these influences in two major works that most of us will have heard about (...even if only in passing). They are *Confessions* and the *City of God*. Because of his indebtedness to Plato, Augustine made a number of biographical entries relating to Plato's life in *Confessions* and *City of God*, among them:

*Realising however that neither his genius nor Socratic training was adequate to evolve a perfect system of philosophy, he travelled far and wide to wherever there was any hope of gaining some valuable addition to knowledge. Thus in Egypt he mastered the law which was there esteemed. From there he went to lower Italy, famous for the Pythagorean school, and there successfully imbibed from eminent teachers all that was then in vogue in Italian philosophy.*

Previously when we discussed the Reformation, we made the point that it was Augustine of Hippo who had introduced Platonic philosophy into Christian theology. Plato's influence appears throughout Augustine's philosophic and theological writings.

### **Plato in Sicily:**

It was in about 388 BCE that Plato visited Sicily for the first time and observed the results of the tyrannical rule of a despot known as Dionysius I (c 432 – 367 BCE). Dionysius had achieved his high office through some military successes in preventing Carthage's advances for control of Sicily. While he was unable to maintain a constant level of success against the Carthaginians throughout his life, he was able to maintain total authority over the Greeks of Sicily until his death. Whether his death was as a result of natural causes or assassination is even now disputed by historians.

The one important thing that emerged out of this visit to Sicily was Plato's meeting with a young man named *Dion* – a son of one of Dionysius I's wives. Attracted by Plato's philosophy, Dion invited Plato *back* to Sicily, 20 years after Plato's first visit. Dion's objective in the invitation was to allow Plato the opportunity to put into practice his ideal of a philosopher-ruler/king, by training Dionysius II (son of Dionysius I) to become a *thinking leader*. This son had taken the throne following his father's death in 367 BCE.

However much Plato hoped that this would prove to be a successful application of his principles of the philosopher-king, in only a short period of time, it was obvious to Plato that this attempt would be little short of disastrous. According to his account of events in the *Seventh Letter*, Plato states that Dionysius II was continually jealous of Plato's intimate friendship with Dion. It was a jealousy that stood in the way of Plato developing in Dionysius II a philosophic disposition. Developing a philosophic disposition was primary in Plato's concept of the thinking leader. Dionysius II's plan to end the friendship between Plato and Dion was almost Machiavellian. Dionysius II sent Dion into exile on trumped up charges. Plato's attempts to put into practice the principles of *Republic* unravelled quickly. All that was left to do was for Plato to convince Dionysius II to let him return to Athens. He did this by convincing Dionysius II that his focus would be better served dealing with another emerging Carthaginian threat to Sicily.

Returning to Athens, defeated in his attempts at making a philosopher-ruler of Dionysius II, the circumstances became another defining point in his life. He later reflected:

*If he had really united philosophy and political power in the same person, he might have given a light to the whole world, Greek and barbarian alike...*

In time though, Plato did return to Sicily to continue his experiment at a practical application of his leadership principles with Dionysius II.

## The Influence of Plato's Republic on Freemasonry and Masonic Ritual.

In Plato's *Seventh Letter*, he records that Dion had urged him to return to Sicily on the grounds that he had received reports that Dionysius II had "changed his spots" and become enthusiastic about applying Plato's ideas in the governing of the island. Plato states that he resisted the first two invitations. The third invitation was staged so elaborately that refusal was next to impossible.

Dionysius II had sent a trireme to Athens with instructions to collect Plato. The ambassador on meeting Plato gave him a personal letter from Dionysius II assuring him that should he accept the invitation, all matters relating to Dion would turn out to Plato's satisfaction. There was an added clause though...The clause read along the lines that if Plato refused, Dion would be made to suffer as a consequence. We can expect that the threatening nature of the "invitation" would probably have tipped off Plato to a forecast of a doomed mission, despite his decision to go.

On arrival at the court of Syracuse, Plato was scathing about the "*second-hand philosophical notions*" and "*second-hand ideas*" that occupied Dionysius II's mind. In particular, Dionysius II had written a treatise explaining the philosophical ideas that Plato had taught him. Plato was furious. He argued solidly that this was no more than an expression of Dionysius II's personal vanity. What really made Plato furious was that in its presentation, Dionysius II's book masqueraded as an attempt to express *truth*. Plato returned to Athens, never to visit Sicily again.

### The Academy:

Back in Athens, Plato founded his famous Academy. Often we think of the Academy as a building. The Academy was not a building but rather a simple grove of trees where Plato's disciples sat and discussed matters of philosophical interest.

In many respects, it will become apparent that the Lodge network that exists throughout the world is based on the principles of the original Academy.

About this same time, it becomes clear that Plato was also a member of a mysterious fraternity. Its identity is unknown. In his *Life of Dion*, Plutarch writes:

*One of Dion's companions was a man named Callippus, an Athenian who according to Plato had been an intimate friend of his, (not as a fellow student of philosophy), but because he happened to have initiated him into certain of the mysteries and was therefore regularly in his company.*

While Plato did not expressly write anything regarding his membership of any mysterious fraternity – (which was probably the fraternity belonging to the *Mysteries of Eleusis*), he does hint in *Republic* at what membership to such a fraternity may involve with respect to the conditions of *silence*.

It helps our understanding if we remember that "mystery" derives from a Greek word which means – "closed lips".

*...it's better to keep silent and if one absolutely has to speak, to make them esoteric secrets, told to as few people as possible.*

With regard to the disciples who attended the Academy, Laertius lists a number including Speusippus (his nephew, co-executor of his will and co-successor to the Chair of the Academy), Xenocrates and

Perhaps these people who have established religious initiations are not so far from the mark, and all the time there has been a hidden meaning beneath their claim that he who enters the next world uninitiated and unenlightened shall lie in the mire, but he who arrives there purified and enlightened shall dwell among the gods. You know how many involved in initiations say "Many bear the emblem, but the devotees are few". Well, in my opinion these devotees are simply those who have lived the philosophic life in the right way.

*Plato: Phaedo: (69 c-d)*

## The Influence of Plato's Republic on Freemasonry and Masonic Ritual.

Aristotle (tutor to Alexander the Great), but also the names of two women – Lasthenea of Mantinea and Axiothia of Phlius (whom he notes even went so far as to wear men's clothing).

### Plato's Death:

He died at the age of 81 and was buried in the groves of the Academy. Laertius notes that the tombstone was inscribed with the following epigram:

*Here, first of all men for pure justice famed,*

*And moral virtue, Aristocles lies;*

*And if there e'er has lived one truly wise,*

*This man was wiser still; too great for envy.*