

- 1 -

THE QUEST FOR HISTORICAL ELEMENTS

IN PLATO'S "CRITIAS"

Based upon the writings of ancient Greek authors it is shown that Plato has mixed historical elements with fiction in his "Critias". By comparing Plato's description with our knowledge of the ancient Athens one finds that Plato has used historical elements 1200 B. C.

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### 1. The Meaning of "Critias" for Plato

In his "Politeia" Plato provided a picture of his ideal state with its government, social structure, and system of education. As he clearly expressed (Tim. 17:a) he planned a trilogy of the following dialogues. In "Timaios" (Tim.) he described the creation of the universe and men, and in "Critias" (Crit.) he planned to describe the rise and fall of his ideal state. However, "Critias" remained unfinished. The third dialogue has never been written. Eventually, "Nomoi" was a new attempt for his trilogy. But this cannot be said with certainty, because up to now it is not clear how much of "Nomoi" was really due to Plato and not his pupils or other authors.

At the beginning of "Timaios" Plato let Socrates summarize the concept of the ideal state. It consisted of three classes: the farmers and manual workers, the soldiers, and the philosopher kings. Moreover a small number of soldiers, maybe only 1000 (Plato, Politeia 4.423:a), should have been enough to defend the state even against a great superior strength which, however, did not obey the laws of the state (Tim. 17:c - 19:a).

After this summary Socrates wished to have the ideal state described "in action," i. e. in the case of war (Tim. 19:b - c). This happened by Critias' report on Athens' fight against far-western intruders (Tim. 20:d - 26:e, Crit. 108:e - 121:c). In fact the ancient Athens as described by Plato had been similar to the ideal state. The class of the manual workers had been divided from the classes of the soldiers and the priests (Tim. 24:a - b). The laws and orders had been very well (Tim. 24:d). And a number of 20,000 soldiers (Crit. 112:d - e) had been able to defend the state against a superior strength of over a

million soldiers (Crit. 119:a - b), whereat Athens had won (Tim. 25:b - c).

## 2. Fiction and Historical Elements in Critias' Report

There is much debate on the question whether Critias' report is only based upon Plato's phantasy or whether he has reported on historical events.

At first I would like to present those arguments and passages which argue for "fiction" as has been suggested by many authors /1/.

(1) Plato considered wise men as the best and tyrants as the worst. Interestingly, the provided description should have been based upon a report the wise man Solon had heard in Egypt (Tim. 21:c, 22:b, 22:d, 25:e, Crit. 110:a) and of which he had spoken in his family (Tim. 20:e - 21:b), so that the tyrant Critias (the younger) was able to tell it Socrates. Should one of the "worst men" have given the "best historical description" (Tim. 26:e) of the ideal state? Or has this whole tale to be accounted to Plato's irony? This is possible, because Plato let Critias say that he had still had Solon's script (Crit. 113:b), but at another passage he was quoted as saying that he had had to remember what he had heard as a child (Tim. 26:a - b), where no reference on Solon's script was made. So the reader may ask: Was Critias able to read the script once again to remember the forgotten passages or not? Eventually Plato wanted to express that Critias had told lies.

(2) Critias the younger lived from about 460 to 403 B. C. and Socrates from 470 / 469 to 399 B. C. Thus, if the dialogue has ever taken place this must have been 403 B. C. or before.

On the other hand "Critias" was the latest of Plato's dialogues (except from "Nomoi," but see above) and must therefore have been written around 350 B. C., because Plato lived from 427 to 347 B. C. However, neither in his early nor in his median dialogues has Plato written anything about the ancient Athens and its war. Nor did any of Socrates' other pupils.

(3) Athens' reported political, social, and military elements (Crit. 110:b - d, Tim. 24:a - b) have not existed - neither in Mycenaean, geometric, Archaic, nor classical Athens. However, this might become explainable by Critias' words that he wanted to transform the people of the ideal state (of the "Politeia") to Athens by assuming that the ideal state had been Athens (Tim. 26:c - d).

(4) The described great plain of Athens' opponents (Crit. 118:a - c) has not existed. There is and has not been any rectangular plain of 2000 x 3000 stadies which lies on an isle, is surrounded by high mountains, and has a southern coast. Also it is impossible that living free elephants (Crit. 114:e - 115:a) exist on an isle, because they cannot have been immigrated there from the continents over the sea.

(5) The ancient Egyptian records we have knowledge of have not described foreign countries, but the presence and history of Egypt. Therefore Critias' report can be based upon Egyptian records only where the war against Egypt, as mentioned in (Tim. 25:b), was "described." So Plato's tale can be compared only with possibly existing Egyptian records on a war against far-western intruders.

(6) According to Plato Poseidon's first son was named Atlas for whom the (Atlantean) sea was named (Crit. 114:a). However, the expression "Atlantean sea" was used the first time by

Herodotus (History 1.202) and had therefore not been known at Solon's time. Instead of this Homer wrote of "the Ocean" (Od. 4.568, 5.275, 10.508, 10.511, 11.13, 11.21, 11.158, 11.639, 12.19, 12.434, 20.65, 22.198, 23.244, 23.348, 24.11).

(7) According to Plato Athens' war was one of the oldest tales known by the Egyptians (Tim. 22:a, 23:c). It shall have occurred 9000 years before Solon's visit (Tim. 23:e, Crit. 108:e). However, in "Nomoi" the Stranger also told that the Egyptians had records going back for 10,000 years (2.656:e).

(8) Astronomical explanations for myths have not been used by the Egyptians, but by the ancient Greeks. An example can be found in Plato's "Politicus" (270:c - d). So the reported (Tim. 22:c - d) explanation of the myth of Phaethon by the Egyptians becomes unlikely.

(9) That several cataclysms have occurred in men's history is claimed not only in Critias' report (Tim. 22:c, Crit. 109:d), but also in Plato's other dialogues (Politicus 268:e - 274:d, Nomoi 3.679:d) and by Hesiod (Works and Days 106 - 201). The suggestion that the reversals have their cause in disruptions of astronomical orbits (Tim. 22:d - e) was also made by Herodotus (History 2.142).

(10) The Egyptian priest was quoted as saying to Solon that "the Greeks are all children" (Tim. 22:b). Comparable quotations of Egyptians can also be found by Herodotus (History 2.143) and Plato himself (Theaetetus 175:a - b). So Plato has either copied from Herodotus or himself heard so from Egyptians - Plato, too, was in Egypt (Plutarch, Life of Solon 32).

(11) The priest was quoted as saying that the Mediterranean sea is like a bay with a small opening (Tim. 25:a). This finds its parallel in Plato's "Phaidon" where he regarded the Medi-

terranean sea as a pond (109:a - b).

(12) According to Plato the isle of Athens' opponents had sunk into the Atlantean sea and where it had been there were now mud (Tim. 25:d, Crit. 108:e - 109:e). Indeed, the existence of shoal water in the Atlantic was believed by Plato's contemporaries /2/, but not by the Egyptians at Solon's time.

(13) Neither the Egyptians nor those Greeks who have visited Egypt have reported on numerical values for the sizes of buildings and other constructions. On the other hand Plato had a high opinion of geometry (Tim. 52:d - 55:c). This may account for the reported numerical values for the sizes of the constructions of Athens' opponents (Crit. 115:d - 116:a, 118:a - d).

(14) Pindar (Paeon 4.27 - 44) described an ancient war between Zeus and Poseidon, where Poseidon had plunged a land and a whole host down to Tartarus. The similarity to Critias' report (Crit. 121:b -c) was pointed out by Herter /3/.

(15) Kluge and Vidal-Naquet /4/ pointed out the similarities between the Phaeacia of Homer's Odyssey (Od. 6 - 13) and the description of Athens' opponents. So has Plato copied from Homer, are the similarities just chance, or have both authors described the same land? The last possibility, however, is unlikely, because (i) there are nearly no identities, but several differences, and (ii) Odysseus' voyage is only a myth - otherwise the tales on the sirens (Hom. Od. 12.39) and Skylla (Hom. Od. 12.85 - 126, 12.245 - 246, 23. 328) cannot be explained.

(16) Vidal-Naquet pointed out that the holy isle of Athens' opponents was described similar to the Athenian Acropolis /5/. So let us compare them.

The holy isle (Crit. 113:d -e, 116:a - b) was a flat hill

(Crit. 113:c - d). On it there were a temple of Poseidon (Crit. 116:c - d), two springs (Crit. 113:e, 117:a), and the kings lived there (Crit. 116:c, 117:d, 117:e). The holy centre was a castle (Crit. 116:a, 116:c) which was surrounded by a wall (Crit. 116:a). In its neighbourhood there were caves for ships (Crit. 116:b). Finally, the holy isle was about 50 stadies, i. e. 9 kilometres from the sea (Crit. 113:c, 115:d, 117:e).

The Athenian Acropolis was built on a steep, but flat hill. On it there were a temple of Athena and Hephaistos, several springs (or fountains), and the kings lived there. In Mycenaean times the Acropolis was a castle which was surrounded by one or more walls. In its neighbourhood there existed three caves. Finally, the Acropolis is about seven kilometres distant from the sea.

(17) As Corbato /6/ argued, Plato may have derived the idea of circular basins (Crit. 113:d, 115:c - 116:a) from the cothons of Carthage.

Now I would like to present those passages and arguments which indicate the use of historical elements by Plato.

(1) Plato argued that something can be very well only if it is a mixture of beauty, proportionality, and truth (Philebos 64:d - 65:a). He considered the intentional lie as bad. It be allowed only when one talks to children in order to simplify things /7/. The tale of which Critias reported be a logos (Tim. 20:d, 21:a, 21:c, 21:d, 26:e, 27:b, Crit. 108:c). It is known that "logos" was considered as the opposite to "mythos", where the story uses Gods, heroes, and ghosts. Nevertheless, Critias reported on the division of the Earth by the Gods (Crit. 109:b), the creation of the first kings of Athens' opponents by Poseidon (Crit. 113:d - 114:c), and how Zeus planned to punish Athens'

opponents (Crit. 121:b - c). Also Critias was quoted as saying that what had been told on their land (Athens) be trustworthy and true (Crit. 110:d).

(2) Plato wrote that the tale had been heard by Solon during his visit in Egypt (Tim. 21:c, 22:b, 22:e, 25:e, Crit. 110:a). That Solon had been in Egypt was also stated by Herodotus (History 1.30, 2.177), Plutarch (Life of Solon 26, 32 - 33, Moralia 146:E, 354:E), Proclus (Commentary on Plato's Timaios 24:a - b), Aristotle (Constitution of Athens 11.1), Diodorus Siculus (World History 1.69, 1.96 - 98), and Ammianus Marcellinus (Roman History 22.16). Crantor of Soloi shall even have seen Egyptian inscriptions which confirmed Critias' report (Proclus, Commentary on Plato's Timaios 24:a - b).

(3) During the period Mykene III b/c, at the end of 13th century B. C., a spring (or better: fountain) was used for only 20 to 25 years on the Athenian Acropolis which was after this buried by an earthquake /8/. Interestingly, Broneer /9/ argued that it might be the spring described by Plato (Crit. 112:d). Also Plato described the Acropolis as follows: There had been a temple of Athena and Hephaistos, and the flats of the soldiers had been in the north of the Acropolis (Crit. 112:b). In fact these buildings had been built around 1400 B. C.

(4) According to Plato the natural catastrophes which hurt Athens severely were survived only by those people who were not able to write, so that the knowledge of writing became lost (Tim. 23:c). In fact the language of the Linear B used by the Mycenaeans until 1200 B. C. was an early Greek /10/. After this the Greeks have not had any script for about 400 years.

One can see that Plato's description (Crit. 110:d - 112:e) agrees with our knowledge of the ancient Athens apart from the



story of the ideal state (Tim. 24:a - b), for which the claim of credibility and truth (Crit. 110:d) has not been made. But the dating has not to be 9000 years before Solon (Tim. 24:e, Crit. 108:e), but around 1200 B. C., because of the reports on the lost of script and the destruction of a spring on the Acropolis by an earthquake.

For other "impossible" data consider the 17,000 years from Heracles to Amasis (Herodotus, History 2.43), the 345 Egyptian generations (Herodotus, History 2.143), the 15,000 years from Dionysos to Amasis (Herodotus, History 2.145), that Methusalem became 969 (1. Mosis 5.27), and that according to the Sumerian kings' lists the first kings have lived for 34,000 years. Maybe these exaggerated dates led Diodorus assume that the Egyptians have used moon years (World History 1.26).

(5) Athens' opponents pursued mining at the to-all-sides flat hill (Crit. 113:c), so that an underground harbor arose (Crit. 116:b). This, however, is impossible, because such a construction requires a steep coast which cannot exist at a "to-all-sides flat hill." Here, Plato might have misunderstood an earlier report.

(6) According to Plato on the isle of Athens' opponents there had existed forests, marshes, ponds, and rivers. There had lived wild and domesticated animals and also elephants. Moreover there had existed oil trees, fruit trees, and other plants. Finally, there had been built temples, kings' houses, harbors, and shipyards (Crit. 114:d - 115:c). After this description Plato continued by stating that "they had economized the rest of the land. First they had built bridges onto the rings of water which had surrounded the metropolis" (Crit. 115:c). Hence, Plato wrote that all these buildings, animals, plants, forests,

and so on had been in this metropolis which had been identical with the to-all-sides flat hill (Crit. 113:c - d) and the holy isle (Crit. 113:d - e, 116:a - b) of five stadies diameter (Crit. 116:a). Clearly, on such a small territory there cannot have existed all the things above. Maybe the explanation is that Plato misunderstood an earlier report where the great isle (Tim. 24:e, Crit. 108:e, 118:a - b) with the plain (Crit. 118:a - e) had been meant.

(7) According to Plato the Gods divided the Earth not by a battle, but by drawing lots. Athena obtained Athens and Poseidon the land of its opponents (Crit. 109:b). Furthermore, the father of the first king, Atlas (Crit. 114:a - b, 114:d), was Poseidon (Crit. 114:b). This contradicts the Greek mythology: Athena and Poseidon fought for Athens, Atlas was a God, and his father was Japetos (Hesiod, Theogony 746). Was that heresy? Certainly not, because Plato wrote that we do not know divine things with certainty (Crit. 107:d) and therefore indicated that he himself did not really believe in it. An alternative is more probable: Plato reported on a foreign religion, where the names had been translated into the Greek language (Crit. 113:a).

### 3. Dating of Athens' Opponents

We have seen that Plato had certainly used historical elements of 1200 B. C. in his "Critias." If this was indeed the case, the description of Athens' opponents has to fit this dating, too. So let us regard Plato's report on them.

Athens' opponents had knowledge of script (Crit. 119:c). They had horsemen (Crit. 119:a) and chariots pulled by horses (Crit. 119:a). They built navigable channels (Crit. 115:d) and built

these (Crit. 118:c) and temples (Crit. 116:d) in gigantic sizes. Their buildings were decorated with gold, silver, tin, ivory, and "oreichalcos" (Crit. 116:c - d).

Script was invented in Sumer around 3100 B. C. The first horsemen lived around 4000 B. C. in the Ukraine /11/. In the Mediterranean, however, horsemen and chariots pulled by horses were not known before 2000 B. C. And the first navigable channels were built around 1900 B. C. in Egypt. Gigantic temples decorated with precious metals were constructed not before 2000 B. C. Therefore the culture of Athens' opponents cannot be dated before 2000 B. C. Thus, its description is agreeable with the date 1200 B. C.

#### 4. Similarities with the Sea Peoples

If the dating 1200 B. C. of Plato's described Athens is correct and if he has really used historical elements for his "Critias," the war between Athens and its opponents should have had occurred. Also there should exist Egyptian reports on this war as Plato (Tim. 21:c, 22:b, Crit. 113:a) and Proclus (Commentary on Plato's Timaios 24:a - b) have stated it. The only peoples which can fit this date and Plato's description of the war are the Sea peoples, as has already been suggested by Marinatos /12/. Therefore I will now compare these peoples with Athens' opponents.

(1) Plato wrote that Athens' opponents had lived on an isle (Tim. 24:e, 25:a, 25:d, Crit. 113:c) and ruled over several other islands (Tim. 25:a). According to the inscriptions of Medinet Habu /13/ written by Ramses III the Sea peoples came from isles (Pls. 37.8 - 9, 42.3, 46.16). It is likely that the Sherden and Seped have come from Sardinia, the Tkry and

Shekelesh from Sicily /14/, and the Weshesh from Corsica.

(2) According to Plato they ruled in Europe from Gibraltar to Tyrrhenia and in Africa from Gibraltar over Libya to the frontier to Egypt (Tim. 25:a - b). In accordance it is assumed that the Tursa came from Tyrrhenia, the Hylees from Yugoslavia, the Peleset and Dardana from the Northern Greek, the Lukka and Aqajwasa from Asia Minor, and the Meshwesh and Qhq from Northern Africa /15/. Moreover the Lebu, Tehenu, and Temeh came from Northern Africa and the Nubians from the Sudan.

(3) According to Plato they fought against Europe and Asia (Tim. 24:e) and "every land within the mouth", i. e. the east Mediterranean countries (Tim. 25:b). The Sea peoples fought against Hatti, Kode, Carchemish, Yereth (Crete), Yeres (Cyprus) (Pl. 46.16 - 17), and Egypt.

(4) In the case of war Athens' opponents had over one million soldiers (Crit. 119:a - b). Ramses III wrote that he had beaten hundred thousands of enemies (Pls. 18.16, 19.4 - 5, 27.63, 32.10, 79.7, 80.36, 80.44, 101.21, 121:C:7). Sometimes he even spoke of millions (Pls. 27.64, 46.4, 46.6, 79.7, 101.21) and myriads (Pl. 27.64) of enemies, who were numerous like locusts (Pls. 18.16, 80.36) or grasshoppers (Pl. 27.63).

(5) According to Plato they had 1200 war ships (Crit. 119:b). With their ships the Sea peoples entered the Nile mouths (Pl. 42.5), and with their fleets they destroyed Cyprus, territories in Asia Minor and the Near East /16/.

(6) Athens' opponents had chariots pulled by horses (Crit. 119:a). Also the Meshwesh had horses (Pl. 75.37) and chariots (Pls. 18.16, 75.27), which were, however, pulled by oxes (Pictures to Pls. 32 - 34).

(7) According to Plato Athens was not conquered, but able

to liberate all the other Mediterranean countries (Tim. 25:b-c). In fact Athens was not conquered by the Sea peoples. Athenian soldiers also contributed to the victory of the Egyptians over their opponents.

(8) Athens' opponents became bad (Crit. 121:a - b). And Ramses wrote about the Sea peoples that "They had spent a long time behind them, a moment was before them. (then) they entered upon the evil period." (Pl. 80.16 - 17).

(9) During "one day and one night" the isle of Athens' opponents sank by an earthquake into the sea (Tim. 25:c - d). Analogously, Ramses wrote that "I cause them to see the majesty as the force of Nun, when he breaks out and lays low towns and villages in a surge of water." (Pl. 102.21) and that "the mountains are in travail" (Pl. 19.11). These statements sound as if earthquakes and floods have taken place. However, the following passages show that Ramses wanted to express his power by them. He wrote that he had destroyed the foreign people and their towns (Pls. 23.55, 88.9, 98.6 -7), burned up (Pl. 17.13 - 14) and destroyed (Pl. 13.4) the Nine Bows. Also the lands of the Asiatics had been desolated (Pl. 117.8), the land of Amor had been destroyed (Pl. 27.16 - 17), the "land of Meshwesh was devastated all at once" (Pl. 80.48), and the land of Kush had been made into something non-existent (Pl. 9.7 - 8).

(10) According to Plato the isle of Athens' opponents was in front of the steles of Heracles (Tim. 24:e), in the Atlantean sea (Tim. 24:e, Crit. 114:a). The Sea peoples, however, came from the Mediterranean (see above). Eventually, this contradiction becomes explainable. According to the Greeks the "Great Circuit" was the sea around Europe, Africa, and Asia, whereas it was the Mediterranean and the Red sea according to Ramses'

contemporaries. A confusion by Plato is therefore possible. Especially, because the God Nun was personified as the sea around the three continents. However, at one passage Ramses wrote that "Nun shall encircle the Great Circuit" (Pl. 109.8), thus the Mediterranean and the Red sea. A further hint for the location of the land of Athens' opponents is given by the reference on oil trees (Crit. 115:b). As Anagnostopoulos has shown they had existed only in the Mediterranean during the Bronze age /17/.

##### 5. Conclusion

The arguments above lead to the following model. Plato wanted to describe his ideal state in the case of war. As the state should have been Athens itself he used Greek traditions on the ancient victory of Athens over foreign intruders. When he was in Egypt he may also have learnt about the Sea peoples and that they had fought against the whole east Mediterranean. But he has obviously not found any description of their land. As he might have misunderstood the meaning of the "Great Circuit" he interpreted the isle to have had been in the Atlantean sea. Certainly Plato knew the Odyssey and perhaps assumed that Sheria was identical with the land of Athens' opponents. As there was no detailed description of the culture, Plato may therefore have written his own imagination of how the land of Athens' opponents could have been. So he may have used his knowledge on Carthage (cothons), Athens (Acropolis, flat hill), Egypt (navigable channels), and eventually other states, too. By combining the different descriptions he might have made the inconsistencies (Solon's script, the mining at the to-all-sides flat hill, and the confusion of the small holy isle with the great plain and further territories).

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T. G. Rosenmeyer, "Plato's Atlantis Myth: Timaios and Critias," *Phoenix* 10, 1956, pp. 163 - 172.
2. W. A. Heidel, "A Suggestion Concerning Plato's Atlantis," *Proc. Amer. Acad. Arts and Sciences* 68, 1933, pp. 189 - 228.
3. H. Herter, "Altes und Neues zu Platons Kritias," *Rheinisches Museum* 92, 1944, p. 242.
4. Fr. Kluge, "De Platonis Critia," *Rheinisches Museum* 75, 1910, p. 283,  
P. Vidal-Naquet, "Athènes et l'Atlantide," *Revue des Études Grecques* 77, 1964, pp. 420 - 44.
5. Vidal-Naquet, 1964 (footnote 4 above).
6. C. Corbato, "In margine alla questione atlantidea. Platone e Cartagine," *Archeologia Classica* 5, 1953, pp. 232 - 37.
7. Gauss, 1952 - 1967 (footnote 1 above).
8. O. Broneer, "A Mycenaean Fountain on the Athenian Acropolis," *Hesperia* 8, 1939, pp. 317 - 429,  
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9. Broneer, 1939 (footnote 8 above).
10. M. Ventris and J. Chadwick, "Evidence for Greek Dialect in the Mycenaean Archives," *JHS* 73, 1953, pp. 86 - 103.  
J. Chadwick and L. Baumbach, "The Mycenaean Greek Vocabulary," *Glotta* 41, 1963, pp. 157 - 271.
11. J. M. Diamond, "The Earliest Horsemen," *Nature* 350, 1991, pp. 275 - 6.

12. Sp. Marinatos, "Peri ton thulon tes Atlantidos,"  
Kretika Chronika 2, 1950, pp. 195 - 213.
13. W. F. Edgerton and J. A. Wilson, Historical Records of  
Ramses III (Chicago 1936).
14. G. A. Lehmann, Die mykenisch-frühgriechische Welt und der  
östliche Mittelmeerraum in der Zeit der "Seevölker"-Invasionen  
um 1200 v. Chr. (Opladen 1985), pp. 42 - 62.
15. Lehmann, 1985 (footnote 14 above), pp. 31 - 57.
16. Lehmann, 1985 (footnote 14 above), pp. 25 - 33.
17. P. Anagnostopoulos, Praktika Acad. Athen 26, 1951.