

The Man Who Died: An Analysis of the Chronological Discrepancy in Plato's *Euthyphro*

In this paper, I propose a new solution to an old problem in the chronology within Plato's *Euthyphro*. The dialogue is clearly set in 399BC, as Socrates approaches his own hearing and meets Euthyphro preparing to take his father to court for the murder of a servant. Near the opening of the dialogue, Euthyphro makes a statement that suggests he lives on the island of Naxos:

ἐπεὶ ὁ γε ἀποθανὼν πελάτης τις ἦν ἐμός, καὶ ὡς ἐγεωργοῦμεν ἐν τῇ Νάξῳ, ἐθήτευσεν ἐκεῖ παρ' ἡμῖν. παροινήσας οὖν καὶ ὀργισθεὶς τῶν οἰκετῶν τινὶ τῶν ἡμετέρων ἀποσφάττει αὐτόν.¹

Since the island of Naxos was lost to Athens in 404BC, the island was not under Athenian control when Euthyphro made his statement. Thus, while the *Euthyphro*'s dramatic date is definitively 399BC, the common translation and interpretation of the text implies that the trial is for a murder that could have occurred no later than 404BC. This raises an issue regarding the time-frame of the dialogue. Here, I set out to discuss systematically this chronological discrepancy within the *Euthyphro*, the different possible explanations proposed to resolve it, and to propose my own solution.

Scholars have come up with many interesting ways to attempt to resolve this issue. Some believe that Euthyphro and his father could have still owned land on Naxos in 399BC, years after Athenian control over Naxos was relinquished: this is proven highly unlikely. Others believe Plato employed a deliberate anachronism, drawing two temporally unrelated stories together to create a meaningful theme: this may be true, but it seems unlikely based on how rough the edges are. A third set of scholars theorizes that there was a five year delay between the murder and the trial: either the end of the war delayed the entire Athenian court systems for a span of five years

¹ Plato, *Euthyphro*, 4c.

or Euthyphro waited five years to bring the trial to court. Both of these explanations of a delayed trial are unlikely, whether an entire judicial system failed for five long years or a man waited those five long years to bring up charges for a murder trial about which he is so passionate.

To these three methods of resolving the chronological discrepancy, I have added a reading of the passage in 4c that suggest that the murder did not occur on Naxos. Grammatically, Plato's sentence in 4c does not necessitate that Naxos is where the murder occurred. The combination of ἐπεὶ and γὰρ in the sentence can be taken concessively as *although*. If the following καὶ is translated as “even,” the sentence can be taken as, “Although the man who died was a πελάτης of mine, even when we were working on Naxos he was a θῆς for us there.”² With the sentence rendered this way, there is not even an implication that the murder occurred on Naxos. Combining this information with the fact that there is a conflict in meaning of the words πελάτης and θῆς within the sentence, the clauses of sentence must be referring to two separate time-frames within the lifetime of the man who died.

Works Cited

Aristotle. *The Athenian Constitution* in Greek. 4 May 2013. <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>>.

Burnet, John. *Plato's Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates, and Crito*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1964: 25-26.

Cooper, John M. *Plato: Complete Works*. Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1997: 2-16.

Denniston, J.D. *The Greek Particles*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1959.

Friedlander, Paul. *Plato : The Dialogues... The First Period*. Vol. II. Translated by Hans

² Plato, *Euthyphro*, 4c.

- Meyerhoff. Pantheon Books: 283.
- Furley, William D. *The Figure of Euthyphro in Plato's 'Dialogue.'* Phronesis, Vol. 30, No. 2. Brill, 1985:201-202. <http://www.jstor.org>.
- Guthrie, W.K.C. *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Vol. IV. Cambridge University Press, 1975.
- Heidel, William Arthur. *Plato's Euthyphro*. American Book Company, Chicago, 1902: p 43.
- Hoerber, Robert G. *Plato's "Euthyphro."* Phronesis, Vol. 3, No. 2. Brill, 1958: 96-7. <http://www.jstor.org>.
- Klonoski, Richard J. *The Portico of the Archon Basileus: On the Significance of the Setting of Plato's 'Euthyphro.'* *The Classical Journal*, Vol. 81, No. 2. CAMWS, 1986: 130-137.
- Nails, Debra. *The People of Plato: A Prosopography of Plato and Other Socratics*.
- Plato. *Euthyphro*, in Greek. 05 May 2013. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>.
- Rosen, Frederick. *Piety and Justice: Plato's 'Euthyphro,'* Phronesis Vol. 43, No 164. Cambridge University Press, 1968: 105-7.
- Taylor, A. E. *Plato: The Man and His Work*. London: Methuen, 1960.
- Walker, Ian. *Plato's Euthyphro*. American Philological Association, Chico, CA, 1984.