

## Plato's Historical Myths and Athenian Social Memory

The “historical myths” found in Plato’s *Republic*, *Timaeus*, and *Critias* have often been seen as stepping stones meant to illustrate Plato’s philosophical points within these dialogues. This paper intends to examine the relationship between Plato’s “historical myths” and the philosopher’s attempted reconstruction of Athenian social memory. Prior scholarship comments more so on the feasibility and morality of Plato’s “Noble Lie” than the true aims of Socrates’ telling of the lie to Glaucon (Dombrowski, 1997; Schofield, 2007; Williams, 2013). Scholarship on the *Timaeus* and *Critias* (Naddaf, 1994; Brisson, 2012; Stegman, 2017) has also elected not to spend much thought on the concept of social memory. Much can be said about how Plato’s myth of Atlantis in the *Timaeus* and *Critias* takes advantage of fabricated holes in the social memory of Athens related to their long distant past. Plato does this to achieve his own aims, providing the city with a needed boost of patriotism along the way.

I will argue that Plato employs historical myth in certain dialogues in an effort to reconstruct or modify the social memory of Athens in an attempt to guide it propaedeutically towards the ideal *Kallipolis* introduced in the *Republic*. In the *Republic*, the “Noble Lie” (3.414d-415c) will be examined, highlighting the way in which Plato modifies the existing tradition of Athens with the *Kallipolis* without removing it. The ways in which he manipulates long held social traditions, such as the autochthonous genealogy that he grants to the *Kallipolis* (414d-e) and the addition of the oracle to the conclusion of the “Myth of the Metals” (415c) will also be discussed. This “Myth of the Metals,” I will argue, is historical in the sense that it is a myth of the *Kallipolis*’s origins, so while not based in reality, it would be passed off as such in a hypothetical situation. These manipulations make the Noble Lie a falsehood that, while not

immediately effective, could be effective for future generations (415d). The discussion of the *Timaeus* and *Critias* centers mainly on a dichotomy established by Plato between memory and forgetfulness. Solon, the great Athenian statesman, is the vehicle through whom Plato's morally denigrated and contemporary Athenians are reminded of their exemplary and long-distant ancestors. The role of Critias as the one who continues to pass the myth down (*Tim.* 21a-d) is discussed as a clear example of the process of social memory in action, with Critias stating that the myth's original tellers felt the deeds of the war with Atlantis were great enough to memorialize (20e-21a). It also draws parallels between not only the two versions of Athens, ancient and Plato's, but also between Plato's Athens and Atlantis. The line of argument is that the myth of Atlantis, while being a tale of patriotic value to the Athenians within the context of the dialogue (20e-21a), can also be a cautionary tale about resting on one's laurels and becoming complacent.

This paper's contribution to scholarship surrounding Plato's myths lies in its discussion of the manipulation of memory that underlies the considered myths. While Plato's myths may not have gained enough traction to actually modify Athenian social memory, the exercise in manipulation contained within the myths suggest a realization on Plato's part that perhaps social memory could be manipulated for the betterment of the city. This paper hopes to open a new avenue of interest in Plato's historical myths and their relationship with social memory.

## Works Cited

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