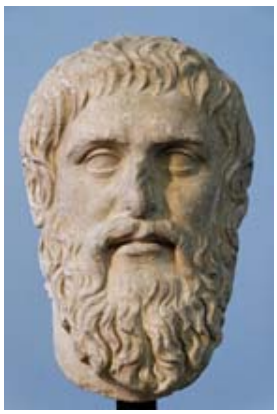
The Thiasos of Plato, Part 4



Plato sculpted by Silanion circa 370 BCE

Socrates portrait by Palermo, copied from the 4th-century original

Present-day view of a grove at Plato's Academy. PHOTO: gardenvisit.com

The creation of a *thiasos* allowed the teaching of Plato to exist. Its creation was a necessary legal condition to own a shrine on public land and to hold banquets in a public *gymnaseion*. Like the establishment of a modern church, it was primarily a financial arrangement. (*See* Supplement 6) Generally speaking, every *thiasos* in Athens was an institution organized for religious observance and for fellowship; the *thiasos* was a public construct guided by law; its duties were narrowly defined public activities; however, neither the general duties nor the organizational structure reveal the character of Plato's *thiasos*, any more than the corporate structure and by-laws of a modern church reveal its character. The duties of a *thiasos* were distinct from its functions; its legal obligations, from its formal purpose; its social standing, secondary to its religious concerns and educational purposes, as they are with a modern church. There was a multitude of *thiasoi* in Athens; they were integral to society, and they followed no uniform structure. One general principle, however, did hold: Athenian law recognized a *thiasos* not as an individual entity but as several joint owners with a common interest; and the law recognized a single individual of that association who served to hold the properties for the *thiasos* – the *archon* (or in Plato's case *scholarch*); but the law did

not recognize the privilege of that single individual to mortgage or to sell any part of a thing held in common by the *thiasos*. In this, too, Plato's Academy resembled a church. (*See* Supplement 7)

There is one other clear indication of the independent legal standing of Plato's Academy: Neither the *Mouseion* nor the Garden appear in Plato's will, which does mention two other estates. Plato did not need to bequeath the *Mouseion* or the Garden to the Academy because the *temenos*, and thus the *Mouseion*, was administered through the *thiasos*, and the Garden was owned by it.

The establishment of the *thiasos* on the public land of the Academy, instead of on private land, ensured its survival in perpetuity. This act of Plato is a testament to his wisdom. After Plato's death, a law sponsored by one Sophocles of Souion (the law was enacted in 307 BCE and repealed in 306 BCE) made it illegal, under penalty of death, for any philosopher to be appointed head of a school without the consent of the *boule* (the senatorial administrative council) and the *ecclesia* (the general legislative assembly) of Athens. For a time, that law sent all other philosophers packing. (*See* Supplement 8) The institution of Plato's Academy remained untouched for a thousand years.

This much can be said of Plato's Academy by evidence of ancient sources and of history. To go further, to find out *what* Plato taught at the Academy or *how*, requires another source of information and another approach.

Now that I have arrived at this point in my comparison, and look back over this page, it is clear to me, as it may be already clear to you, that I, too, like the other academicians before me, have recognized in Plato's Academy the one of which I am a part. I hope it is clear as well that my method is different from theirs. Where others have clouded the past with images of themselves, I have simply noted the resemblance.

Robert G. Petrovich
February 22, 2010

SUPPLEMENTS

Supplement 6:

The Sacred Academy of Plato

William Blake’s vision of Plato inspiriting a student

Plato’s Academy was a complex society within the Athenian political community, with its own obligations and privileges. A legally recognized religious-social-political organization, its relationship to the Athenian *politea* was strong, well defined, and direct. There would have been a public forum with regular meetings, elections for priest, treasurer, and other

official positions, decrees posted and voted upon, oversight of land management, shrine upkeep, recording of finances, etcetera. How like a church established in the United States of America this is, where Articles of Incorporation create a legal person and deem it a body politic with continual perpetual succession and with power to acquire and possess property, with its purpose and privileged position in society delineated with by-laws, and with rules that regulate its internal functions; there are files and records to keep on local, state, and federal levels, and there are the same concerns of management and upkeep.

Plato's Academy and a modern church even operate, in their respective societies, according to the same social design: separation from the mundane, in activity and in space. A *temenos* in classical Athens was a piece of land "cut off" and assigned as an official domain, an area reserved for worship, a territory or field of deity or divinity. A church in the United States by its nature is "exempt" from taxes; which is to say, it is kept outside the world of commerce and the everyday. The two words – *temenos* and *exempt* – have the same meaning: The word *temenos* is from the Greek verb *temeno*, "to cut"; the word *exempt*, from the Latin *exemptus*, past participle of *eximere*, "to take out." The law of the state of Nevada, where I reside, puts it succinctly enough: ". . . buildings used for religious worship, with their furniture and equipment, and the lots of ground on which they stand, . . . owned by some religious society or corporation, and parsonages so owned, are exempt from taxation" (*Nevada Revised Statutes 361.125*). In the state of California, even the real estate of a scientific organization can qualify for tax exemption if it is used for religious purposes.

The courts of California have defined worship as the formal observance of religious tenets or belief. These are the elements they have used to define religion (*Fellowship of Humanity v. Alameda County*):

(1) a belief,
(2) a cult involving a gregarious association openly expressing the belief,
(3) a system of moral practice directly resulting from adherence to the belief,
(4) an organization within the cult designed to observe the tenets of the belief.

The content of a religious belief is not of government concern. Examination of the truth or validity of religious beliefs is foreclosed by the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. The Supreme Court of the United States has ruled that government has no authority to pass judgment on the legitimacy of a religious belief or to define permissible religious belief (*Fowler v. Rhode Island*) Federal law has also left the definition of the term *church* to "common meaning and usage" (*De LaSalle Institute v. U.S.*).

The terms *church*, *religion*, *religious purpose*, *religious organization*, etcetera are found, but not specifically defined, in the Internal Revenue Code. In that code, certain characteristics have been developed by the Internal revenue Service, and by court decisions, and are attributed generally to churches. The Internal Revenue Service uses a combination of these characteristics, together with other facts and circumstances, to determine whether an organization is to be considered a "church" for federal tax purposes. These characteristics on the list describe Plato's Academy: distinct legal existence, formal code or doctrine and discipline, literature of its own, established place of worship, regular religious services, a school for the preparation of its members. The following are other characteristics on the list that may apply to Plato's Academy, but for which we have no proof: recognized creed and form of worship, definite and distinct ecclesiastical government, distinct religious history, membership not associated with any other church or denomination, organization of ordained ministers, ordained

ministers selected after completing prescribed courses of study, schools for religious instruction of the young.

Section 501(c)(3) of the United States Internal Revenue Code provides for the types of nonprofit organizations that are exempt from federal income tax. Exemptions apply to nonprofit corporations organized and operated exclusively for religious, scientific, literary, or educational purposes, to promote the arts, or to foster national or international amateur sports competition, among others. (Another federal provision provides a deduction for some donors who make charitable contributions to these types of 501(c)(3) organizations.) There is no doubt in my mind that Plato's Academy, if established in the United States of America, would qualify as a 501(c)(3) organization. You will have to judge for yourself.

There is also one more point of equivalence which I would like to bring to your attention: the question of funding, a question which gives us the opportunity to dispel another common misconception. To manage the *temenos*, and the *Mouseion* within its boundaries, together with its shrine and its banquets, the Academy *thiasos* needed funding, just as a church needs funding to carry out its liturgical and educational activities. How did Plato's Academy manage to exist financially? The answer is donations. We have this much on the word of Damascius, the last *scholarch* of the Academy: ". . . the property of Plato's successors did not come, as most think, from Plato's own fortune, for Plato was poor . . . [but rather] because many people, as they died, left their property to the School."

Supplement 7:

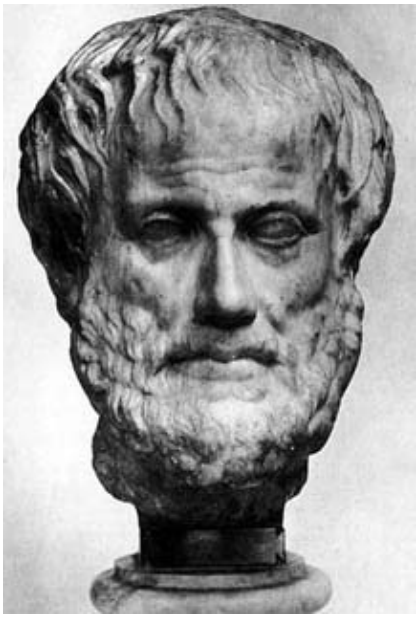
The Legal Standing of Aristotle's Lyceum

Aristotle's Lyceum by German artist Gustav Spangenberg (1828-1891)

By comparison, the legal standing of Aristotle's Lyceum bears no resemblance to Plato's Academy. If Aristotle had formed a *thiasos* to administer his Lyceum, it would have been barred from ownership or administration of the underlying property since he was a *metikos*, a foreign resident.

Supplement 8:

Aristotle, the Foreign Philosopher

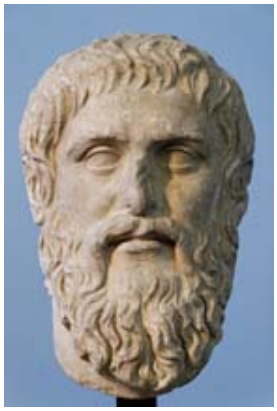


Aristotle (sculptor unknown)

Aristotle, the tutor of Alexander the Great of Macedon, fled

the anti-Macedonian sentiment of Athens in fear of his life soon after the death of his famous student in 323 BCE, and died the following year of stomach problems. Seventeen years later, the same sentiment drove out Aristotle's successor, Theophrastus, along with all the others. Plato served as head of the Academy until his death around 347 BCE; by the time the law of Sophocles of Souion was enacted in 307 BCE, Polemon had succeeded Plato, Speusippus and Xenocrates as *scholarch*; and no existing source for the life of Polemon mentions his flight in the face of that law.

The Thiasos of Plato, Part 3



Plato sculpted by Silanion circa 370 BCE

Socrates portrait by Palermo copied from the 4th-century original

Pompeii gymnasium seen from the top of the stadium wall PHOTO Haiduc

Plato as a child had attended an exercise garden other than this one, the private *gymnaseion* of the grammatist Dionysios. There he had learned to compose tragedies and dithyrambs from famous teachers of music, and there in the *palaistra* of Ariston of Argos he had trained to compete as a champion wrestler in the Panhellenic games. As a youth, however, Plato studied philosophy at the Academy. (We have it on the word of Aristotle that he studied Heracleitus with Cratylus; according to another tradition, he studied Parmenides here.) It was also

at the Academy that Plato was formally presented to Socrates on the morning after Socrates had dreamed a prognostic dream in which he recognized Plato (a young swan flying out from the altar of Eros and settling in his lap, transforming into a full-grown swan and taking off into the sky again, singing a song that charmed all who heard it). In his twentieth year (407 BCE), after he had listened to Socrates discourse at length while the first tragedy he had ever composed played out on stage in the theater, Plato committed the decisive act of burning his poetry in a public spectacle at the Theater of Dionysius Eleuthereus during the Dionysiac festival. From that moment, Plato turned from his purely poetic ambitions and devoted himself to Socrates and the Pythagorean love of wisdom.

A year later, Socrates committed the first of the public acts that drew the derision of leading citizens of the *polis*. Plato continued to associate with him, and Socrates continued to teach for another eight years. Then a series of court trials aimed at religious impiety charged the atmosphere of Athens. The series culminated with an affidavit against Socrates that accused him of impiety and of corrupting the youth of the *polis*. The charges were serious. During the trial, Plato mounted the platform to speak on behalf of Socrates as one of the youths who had not been corrupted by him but was shouted down. The proceedings ended with the conviction of Socrates and the death sentence. During Socrates' last month of life, Plato visited him in prison; then he exited the scene.

After a self-imposed exile spent in Egypt, in Cyrene (Libya), in Italy, and in the cradle of the spiritual community of Pythagoras, Sicily – ten years following the judicial murder of Socrates, his exemplar and the midwife of his soul – Plato returned to the Academy to memorialize the teachings of Socrates and to celebrate them on the sanctuary grounds where Socrates had taught. He gathered together a community of spiritual companions and organized them into a *thiasos*, then

acquired for this new religious association a sacred plot of land (*temenos*) in the Academy and erected upon it a shrine to the Muses (*Mouseion*), an appropriate act in this sanctuary dedicated to education. (*See* Supplement 3) At first, the shrine was perhaps no more than a small altar in a small section of the grounds that served as a gathering place for the members of Plato's Academy. Later, perhaps, a moderate building was constructed to surround it; but it was the shrine that represented bonded property on public land. Here Plato's Academy of higher education celebrated the original arts of the Muses: Here they were free to give voice (***Aoide***) to divine truths and to the maieutics that bring them to birth, in oral teachings, in lectures, and in dramatic dialogues; here they observed liturgical occasions (***Melete***) with symposia and with all-night vigil feasts; and here they practiced the techniques of spiritual recollection (***Mneme***).

In time, Plato acquired a little garden estate near Colonos, not far from the sanctuary grounds of the Academy. (*See* Supplement 4) Plato taught at the sanctuary both in the exercise garden and in his *Mouseion*, and he taught outside the sanctuary in his Garden. Both *Mouseion* and Garden were parts of Plato's Academy. Public lectures might have been delivered in one of the pillared halls of the exercise garden or in the *exedra*, the three-walled open room furnished with benches, nearby. There might have been another *exedra* constructed on Plato's *temenos* near the shrine for seminars and feasting; and perhaps a third in Plato's own Garden, where he had his private quarters, and where, it seems, he met with his closest companions for private teaching and discussions. (*See* Supplement 5)

<READ PART 4>

SUPPLEMENTS

Supplement 3:

Plato’s Shrine to the Muses

Philosophers debating by “the tree against which young Phaedrus leaned,” in a first-century mosaic of Plato’s School from Pompey

In his *Phaedrus*, another kind of shrine to the Muses, Plato recalls Socrates and Socrates’ praise for Calliope, “the oldest” among the Muses, and Urania, “the next after her,” who “preside over the heavens and all discourse, human and divine, and sing with the sweetest voice,” and also for their devotees, those “who honor their special kind of music by leading a philosophical life.”

Supplement 4:

A King’s Ransom for Plato’s Private Garden

“Plato and His Disciples in the Garden of the Academy” by Alexandre De Baer (circa 1874), from La Vie Des Savants Illustres

Plutarch tells us that when Plato traveled to Syracuse a second time (360/361 BCE), he fell into disrepute with its tyrant, Dionysios, who entrusted the philosopher to a Spartan ambassador with instructions to dispose of him. The ambassador attempted to sell Plato on the island of Aigina, but a certain Annikeris, who was passing through on his way to Olympia, ransomed him. Dion, a friend of Plato and the political opponent of Dionysios, attempted to return to Annikeris the money he had paid for Plato; but Annakeris refused and used the money to buy for Plato the little garden estate near Colonos.

Supplement 5:

The Private Garden of Plato

A representation of Aristotle and Plato discussing philosophy in a garden, from a tile design at the 16th-century Jesuit university St Francisco at Evora, Portugal. PHOTO gardenvisit.com

The Garden of Plato was acquired in addition to the original Academy sanctuary. A tale of Plato's old age suggests that Plato had his personal quarters there.* The use of the Garden seems to have changed upon Plato's death. Plato's chosen successor as *scholarch*, his nephew Speusippo, did not live there, but a later successor, Polemon, seems to have spent all his time there. It is plausible that the *thiasos* formally acquired the garden property sometime around Plato's death, if not before. It was not disposed of in Plato's will, yet it was in the possession of Xenocrates, Polemon, and their successors all the way into the sixth century of the Christian era. The sanctuary of the Academy was destroyed in 88 BCE by the invading Roman army of Sulla, who cut down the groves sacred to Athena for timber to build siege engines to attack Athens, but the Garden remained in the hands of the Academy until its last *scholarch*, Damascius, escaped the statutory persecutions

of Justinian in 529 CE and fled with his companions and the Academy library to Sassanid Persia, and later found sanctuary in Harran, near Edessa, where the students of the Academy-in-exile remained until the tenth century, aiding the Islamic preservation of Hellenic medicine and philosophy.

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* One day, while Plato, then about eighty years of age and to some extent losing his memory, was walking the colonnades of the Academy alone without anyone to stand by him (Xenocrates was abroad and Speusippos was ill), Aristotle ambushed him with a gang of his own persuasion, questioning Plato aggressively and elenctically. Plato retreated from the sanctuary. When Xenocrates returned from abroad, he saw Aristotle perambulating on the colonnades (*peripatos*) where he had left Plato three months before and observed that Aristotle did not go back to Plato's but instead went off to his own place in town. Xenocrates, suspecting that Plato was ill, asked a companion where Plato was. The companion replied, "He is not ill, but Aristotle has been giving him a hard time and has forced Plato to retire from the *peripatos*, so he is philosophizing in his own garden."

<READ PART 4>