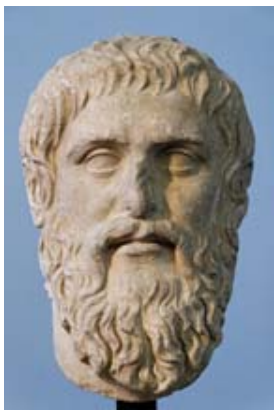
The Thiasos of Plato, Part 3



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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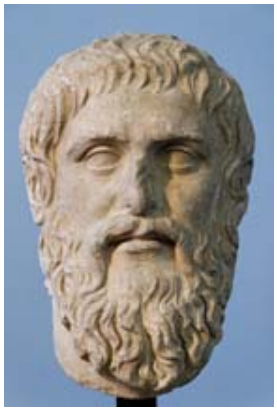
* One day, while Plato, then about eighty years of age and to some extent losing his memory, was walking the colonnades of the Academy alone without anyone to stand by him (Xenocrates was abroad and Speusippos was ill), Aristotle ambushed him with a gang of his own persuasion, questioning Plato aggressively 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.”

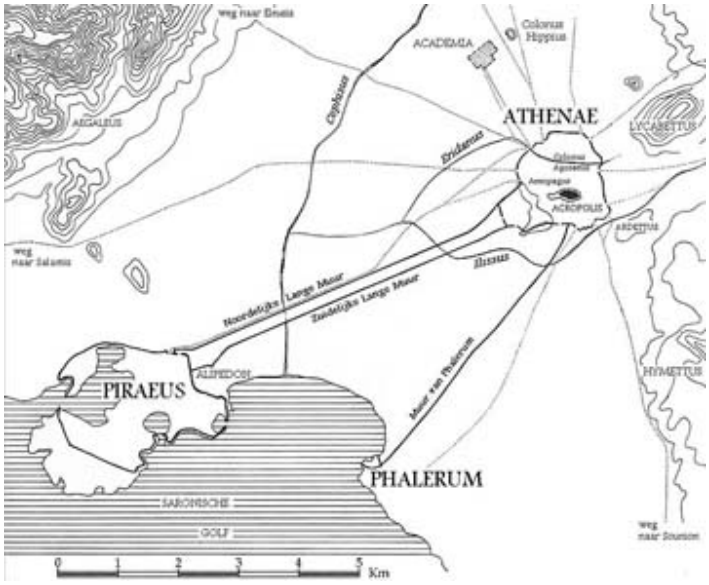
<READ PART 4>

The Thiasos of Plato, Part 2



Plato sculpted by Silanion circa 370 BCE

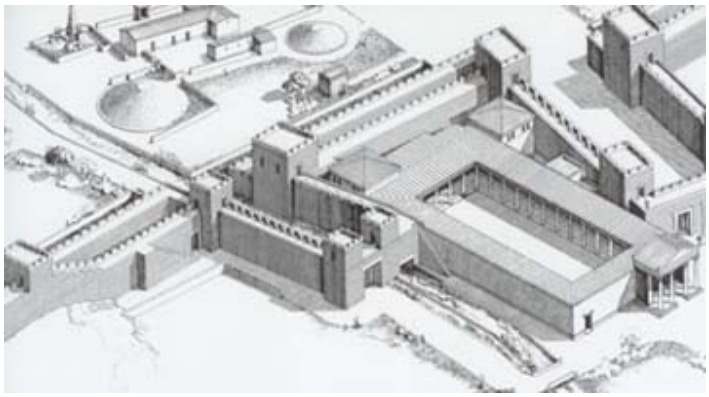
Socrates portrait by Palermo, copied from the 4th-century original



The Academy is located north of Athens.

It seems appropriate to begin in regular Socratic fashion, by dispelling false conceptions and replacing them with true ones. Let us begin first with the name. The term *Academy* (Greek: *Akademeia*) was used to identify a location long before

it identified Plato’s School. It was a public park in one of the most beautiful suburbs of Athens, a sacred precinct dedicated to the Attic hero Akademos, or Hekademos, who owned the property in the time of the legendary Theseus. Only later did the School become synonymous with its location. Second, Plato’s educational institution was not established as a school (*didaskaleion*) but as a religious association (*thiasos*) that taught a way of life (*diatrib*) through educational forms that were commonly associated with schools: the lecture (*schol*) and the seminar (*diatrib*). Third, Plato’s Academy was not isolated like the proverbial ivory tower but incorporated into the much larger and more colorful setting of Athens and its collective hierarchical life of obligations and entitlements that was the public cult of the *polis*. Rich with religious celebration and with groves sacred to Athena, the Academy was the site of festivals and funeral games, and it was the turning point of the Dionysian processions that marched from the Theater of Dionysus Eleuthereus at the center of the city to the sanctuary and back.



The Dipylon (‘two-gated’) was the largest and most important of fifteen gates into the Classical city of Athens. The road leading through it was more than 20 meters wide and formed the major route to Athens from Boeotia, leading via Plato’s Academy into the city and on to the Agora and Acropolis. The

corridor gate would have acted as a death trap to attackers. In times of peace, the Dipylon Gate had a more welcoming and a sacred aspect as it marked the transition from countryside to city. The interior court housed an altar for Zeus Herkeios ("of the Courtyard"), for Hermes (the divine protector of wayfarers and gates) and for Akamas, the local hero of the inhabitants of the surrounding township of the Kerameis. On entering the city, the weary traveler could refresh himself at the fountain house on his left. PHOTO: greeceathensaegeaninfo.com

The road from Plato's Academy led up to the Dipylon, which was the city's main gate while the Hiera Hodos (or "Holy Way")

from Eleusis led up to the Hiera Pyli (“Holy Gate”). Between the two gates stood the Pompeion which was the building from which the Panathenaean Procession used to set out. The Kerameikos Cemetery extended beyond the Dipylon Gate. Its most interesting section was the Street of Tombs (Hodos ton Tafon), flanked on either side by the tombs of wealthy Athenians. PHOTO: yasou.org

In Plato’s time, visitors from the city would have made their approach to the Academy past temples to Artemis and to Dionysius Eleuthereus, along a wide ceremonial avenue lined by funerary monuments to the honored dead. Off the road, behind the monuments on either side, rested garden plots, small houses, and the suburban residences of foreign residents (*metikoi*) and prosperous Athenian citizens; among them, the Garden of Epicurus and the house of Sophocles. Before the entrance to the sanctuary, there was an altar to Love (*Eros*), and beyond the ancient Wall of Hipparchus (*See* Supplement 2) that circumscribed the Academy and made it something like a vast courtyard, was the tree-filled sanctuary itself, crossed by many paths, which were bordered by altars to Prometheus, Hermes, Heracles, Hephaistos, Zeus Morios, and Kataibates. The paths within led through the groves of the twelve sacred olive trees called the *moriai* to either the altar and sanctuary of Athena or the exercise gardens *(gymnaseion*).

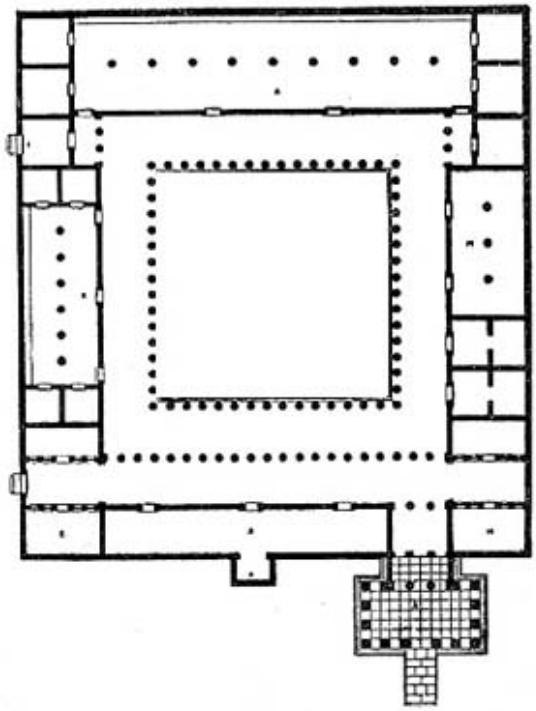


Diagram of the palaestra at Epidaurus

The *gymnaseion* complex enclosed a large rectangular court. At its center was the *palaistra*, a low building with its own central courtyard. Here boys were taught the art of wrestling. On the north, the structure was flanked by a bathhouse; on the other three sides, by pillared porticos that enclosed three oblong halls. These were inhabited by teachers and filled with tables for students, painted terra cotta metopes, wells, and great quantities of sculpture. As an institution, the *gymnaseion* at the Academy was one of three main centers of education for the men and boys of Athens. Here the body was trained through the sporting arts – running, wrestling, javelin throwing, boxing – and the mind through the arts of the Muses. This had been the custom for two hundred years, ever since Solon, a distant relative of Plato, made learning letters compulsory. Unlike elsewhere, both the *palaistra* and the exercise garden at the Academy were public and so full of activity that they frequently attracted the presence of Socrates. He is most famously depicted at the Agora, or center city plaza, searching for a citizen of the *polis* wiser than he, the one who knew that he knew nothing; but that is only a

partial image: Socrates as “gadfly.” Socrates was most at home at the Academy.

<READ PART 3>

SUPPLEMENTS

Supplement 2:

The Wall of Hipparchus

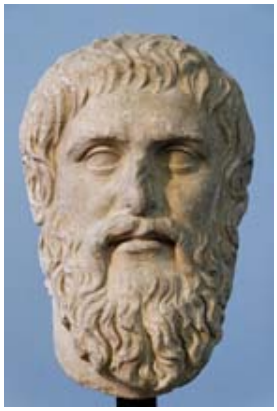
Murder of Hipparchus by the tyrannicides Harmodius and Aristogeiton depicted on a Greek vase

This edifice is only one of the public works provided for the polis by Plato’s legendary relations. The wall surrounding the Academy is attributed either to Hipparchus, a well-known patron of the arts, or to his brother Hippias, tyrant of Athens (527-514 BCE). Both were sons of Peisistratos, tyrant of Athens (546-527 BCE), who was in turn related to Solon (638-558 BCE), the legendary educator of the polis, who traced his paternal ancestry back to the last king of Athens. The mothers of Solon and Peisistratos were cousins. All were distant members of the maternal family of Plato (427-347 BCE),

whose lineage included Prometheus, Helen, and Aiolos. The family of *Plato the son of Ariston of Kollytos of the Neleidai of the Athenoi*, on his father's side, claimed Poseidon as their founder through a long line of heroes: Neileus and Pelias, Nestor, Antilochus, and Melanthos; the sons of Melanthos, Kodros and Mendron, were the founders of the three great Athenian clans from which Plato descended. Solon, as the primary lawmaker of archaic Athens, ended aristocratic rule by reforming the rival hierarchies and deific loyalties of its powerful clans into the polis and by placing its control in the hands of the wealthy; Peisistratos unified classical Athens by increasing the prosperity of Athens in a short time and by promoting a Panhellenic culture; Plato completed this progression by establishing a Panhellenic institute of higher education and promoting the ethical rule of philosopher kings.

<READ PART 3>

The Thiasos of Plato, Part 1



Plato sculpted

by Silanion
circa 370 BCE

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

Many images of Plato's Academy have come down to us through the centuries: the idyllic robed band of secular humanists in every conceivable posture of inquiry and discussion that appears in Raphael's fresco *The School of Athens*, a guild of scientific theorists, the intellectual salon par excellence, the ideal preparatory school. All are the constructs of one or another academician, from the Renaissance to the present, and all are far from true. Academies produced those images: the new Platonic Academy "revived" in 15th-century Florence by Cosimo de' Medici; the ephemeral circles of friends that dotted the urban landscape of 16th-century Italy, who gave themselves fantastic names and called themselves academies; the technicians and researchers of the 17th– and 18th-centuries in the Academies of the Arts of Florence and Paris and London; the proliferation of Christian and secular and children's academies in the 19th– and 20th-centuries. All have projected

their own images onto this institution of the distant past until it became to them little more than a newly hatched larva in the first stage of becoming themselves, after pupating through the Dark Ages, and ultimately becoming for us the grand hive of intellectual speculation, experimentation, and peer review of Platonic “right opinions” that is the modern secular university.

Plato’s Symposium by the German artist Anselm Feuerbach (1873)

Plato and His Disciples in the Garden of the Academy by Alexandre de Baer (circa 1874), from La Vie Des Savants Illustrés

Plato’s Academy depicted by Jean Delville (1867–1953)

PHOTO: theontologicalboy.blogspot.com

Whatever image we personally hold of Plato’s Academy could only be derived from one of these, until recently. Arts and sciences of all kinds no doubt had their place in Plato’s Academy, in all imaginable fields of study, as they do in the present global collective community of practitioners and transmitters of education and research that goes under the name of *academia* or *Acad me* or *Academy*. Yet the fact is that

Plato’s Academy resembles nothing in modern society so much as it resembles a 501(c)3 religious association; that is to say, a church. This may come as a surprise you. It was a surprise to me when I first found the hint of this fact in the writings of Purdue University classicist Christopher Planeaux. A personal conversation with him later confirmed it. (*See* Supplement 1) In the next few hundred words, I would like to share with you the image of Plato’s Academy I have found.

SUPPLEMENTS

Supplement 1:

Christopher Planeaux PHOTO My Space

Plato Scholar Christopher Planeaux

I should mention that Dr. Planeaux has made it his life’s work to determine the social and historical setting of each of Plato’s Dialogues and that he shares my enthusiasm for his work but not for my search for the mystic underpinnings of Plato’s teachings.

To him I owe the references “Plato: A Family History,” “Plato: A Biography,” and “Plato’s Academy” on the website

Christopher’s Athens (http:/php.iupui.edu/~cplaneaux/Plato)

<READ PART 2>