

Plato, Herodotus and the Question of Historical Truth*

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ABSTRACT: The present article aims to shed light on an intertextual relationship between Herodotus 2.142–144 and Plato *Timaeus* 21b–26c. The frame story of the Atlantis tale shows striking similarities to Herodotus' anecdote about Hecataeus of Miletus' meeting with Egyptian priests. It will be argued that Plato used Herodotus' anecdote in order to make a philosophical point about historical truth in the *Histories*. By using freely invented source references, Plato parodies Herodotus' handling of sources. First, the article offers a short summary of the two passages. Secondly, the similarities of the texts are explained, and evidence that Plato created the resemblances on purpose is provided. Thirdly, the article shows that Plato uses different strategies of authentication ironically and reverses Herodotus' message concerning the oldest civilisation in order to criticize the historiographer's use of sources in a humorous way.

KEYWORDS: Herodotus, Plato, *Timaeus*, Atlantis, Egyptian priests, historical truth, Solon, Hecataeus of Miletus, Egyptian *logos*, genealogical dating

The frame story of the famous Atlantis tale appears at *Timaeus* 21b–26c.¹ Critias explains how Solon went to Sais in Egypt and discussed genealogies, ancestry and the past with local priests. The priests laughed at his stories and told him about the history of Egypt and Athens, which went back much further than Solon had expected. The story bears striking similarities to Herodotus 2.142–144, where it is said that Hecataeus of Miletus travelled to Egypt, talked to priests in Thebes and boasted about what he thought was his long line of sixteen ancestors. Similarly, the priests in Thebes laughed at the protagonist and informed him about the long history of their temple. However, the main message of Herodotus' anecdote is that Egypt is by far the oldest culture, whereas in Plato's account, primeval Athens emerged 1,000 years before Egypt.²

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¹ It would go beyond the scope of this article to discuss the difficulties as well as the suggested solutions around the Atlantis tale; rather, aspects of the famous narrative will only be touched on where necessary for the conclusion of this article. On interpretations of the Atlantis tale, see for example Nesselrath 2002, who explains the clash between Atlantis and ancient Athens as a parallel to fifth-century Athenian politics and wars, especially the Battle of Marathon. Cf. also Pradeau 1997, who deals with a couple of questions and solutions from ancient and modern scholars.

² The relationship between the Atlantis story (including the introduction) and the following, mainly cosmological account in the *Timaeus* is not discussed in this paper. A great interpretation is offered by Johansen 2004.

Scholars have occasionally noted parallels between the two passages. For example, Friedrich Kluge states that Plato took the idea of using priests as transmitters of ancient knowledge from Herodotus.³ William Heidel suggests that *Timaeus* 21b–26c refers back to Herodotus’ opening words (1.1).⁴ Furthermore, he claims that when composing the frame story of the Atlantis tale, Plato had Herodotus 2.142–144 in mind.⁵ In a work including text, translation and commentary on the Atlantis story, Christopher Gill mentions ‘many echoes of Herodotus (esp. Book II) in the Atlantis story’.⁶ In an article from 1979, he suggests that ‘Plato is not only writing fiction but, consciously, playing the game of fiction, the game, that is, of presenting the false as true, the unreal as real’.⁷ Kathryn Morgan states that ‘Plato expands and merges the disparate elements of Herodotus’ account into one unified picture’.⁸ To sum up, several scholars mention parallels between Plato’s *Timaeus* 21b–26c and Herodotus 2.142–144, but none of them have compared the passages in detail. This article aims to fill the gap and, by comparing both authors’ methods of authentication, show that Plato parodied Herodotus’ way of writing history.

HERODOTUS, *HISTORIES* 2.142–144

The passage we are concerned with is part of the so-called Egyptian *logos*. Book 2 is characterized by the idea that Egyptian culture is the oldest in the world and many cultural, social, political and religious achievements therefore first occurred there, whereas the Egyptians did not take any elements from other civilisations.⁹ This worship of Egyptian culture leads to an almost polemical attitude towards the Greeks. For example, Herodotus makes no secret of his contempt for ‘the Hellenes that talk much and without reflection’¹⁰ (λέγουσι δὲ πολλὰ καὶ ἄλλα ἀνεπισκέπτως οἱ Ἕλληνες, 2.45).¹¹

Herodotus places 2.142–144 between the older history (starting at 2.99) and the more recent history of Egypt (2.147–182). The passage begins with a genealogical dating of the time between the first and the last Egyptian king. The two men are separated by 341 generations, and since three generations are equal to 100 years, 11,340 years have passed (142.1–3).¹² Furthermore, the priests tell Herodotus that during this period, the sun had risen four times in the west instead

³ Kluge 1909: 32.

⁴ Heidel 1933.

⁵ Heidel 1933: 195 and Heidel 1935.

⁶ Gill 2017: 12–13.

⁷ Gill 1979: 76. See also Gill 1977 and Gill 1993.

⁸ Morgan 2012: 239.

⁹ Hdt. 2.2–3, 2.15.3, 2.50, 2.52, 2.54–7, 2.77.1, 2.123.2–3, 2.145.

¹⁰ See Sheehan 2018: 95–7.

¹¹ The text is taken from Wilson 2015. See also Hdt. 2.11–17 and 2.20–23 for the ‘wrong ideas’ of the Greeks.

¹² The attentive reader will notice that, if three generations are equal to 100 years, 341 generations make 11,366.66 years, not 11,340. There have been several attempts to explain this discrepancy, for instance by Mitchel 1956, den Boer 1967, Ball 1979 and, most successfully, Keyser 1986 and Geus 2012, who assume that Herodotus made a calculation mistake due to the complicated Greek calculation system.

of the east. However, Egypt had not suffered any economic or health disadvantages from those astronomical anomalies (142.4). At 143, Herodotus describes how Hecataeus of Miletus had once come to Thebes and told the priests about his genealogy, which he traced back to a god in the sixteenth generation. Thereupon, the priests brought him — as they would bring Herodotus several years later — to a room containing 345 wooden figures.¹³ Because both Hecataeus and later Herodotus saw the wooden statues, the story was perceived by autopsy (*opsis*) — Herodotus' most common 'source reference'.¹⁴ Each figure represented a generation, as every high priest raised a statue of himself (143.1–3).¹⁵ The priests told Hecataeus that his descent from a god was impossible as none of those high priests' origins reached back to a divinity (143.4). The last of the gods to live in Egypt, Horus/Apollo, had lived long before the human priests (144).

PLATO, *TIMAEUS* 21B–26C

At the beginning of the *Timaeus*, Socrates welcomes his listeners, namely Timaeus, Critias, Hermocrates and an anonymous person,¹⁶ and recapitulates the conversation of the previous day about the ideal state, which of course refers to the *Republic* (17a–19b). As Socrates wants to see how the imagined *polis* would be in the real world, he asks the interlocutors about their opinion (19c–20c). Critias tells a story he heard from his homonymous grandfather, who in turn heard it from Solon (20d–21d).

According to Critias, the Athenian legislator Solon once travelled to Sais in Egypt and talked to the local priests. Since he wanted to encourage them to speak about history, he told them Greek myths, for example about Phoroneus, Niobe, and Deucalion and Pyrrha. Moreover, by giving a genealogy of their descendants and counting generations, he tried to calculate the time that had passed. One of the priests ridiculed Solon's speculations by making fun of the Greeks for being children who were too young to know about the old tales, as they did not remember the first stories (22a–b):¹⁷ a huge proportion of humankind had been wiped out by several different catastrophes, such as fires and floods. In Hellas, only some illiterate herdsmen dwelling in the mountains survived the floods, whereas Egypt had not been affected by any of these catastrophes, thanks to the condition of the country and the Nile. Since the Egyptian land and people had not been destroyed, they recorded and preserved the memory of these former times in their temples (22c–e).¹⁸ Solon's myths were no more than children's tales in the

¹³ The number 345 seems to contradict the aforementioned 341 generations, but it is probable that Herodotus added four generations between Sethos and Hecataeus.

¹⁴ Desclos 2003 offers an interesting interpretation of Herodotus' autopsy references by comparing the *Histories* to the *Corpus Hippocraticum*: similar to Greek medicine texts, Herodotus wanted his readers to take part in historical inquiries and thus interact with his text.

¹⁵ The number of priests corresponds to the number of kings (2.142.1).

¹⁶ Desclos 2003: 243–51 is of the opinion that the anonymous interlocuter provides an empty space that the reader, by interactively taking part in the dialogue, should fill. On the identity of the other characters, see Morgan 1998.

¹⁷ A similarly naive, uncritical mindset on the part of the Greeks is noticeable at *Leg.* 677–679. Cf. Morgan 2012: 236–8.

¹⁸ Cf. *Hdt.* 2.77.1, where the Egyptians appear as the first people to develop the art of writing.

eyes of the priests (23b), because the Greeks did not remember their ancestors' great deeds. Before the first flood, Athens had been the most powerful and best organized city (23c). Athena and Hephaistos founded Athens 9,000 years ago, Egypt came into being 1,000 years later and therefore possessed 8,000-year-old records (23d–e). This means that although the Egyptians were an uninterrupted civilisation whose records go back to the beginning of their existence, the Athenians were the oldest (though interrupted) people — which reinterprets Herodotus' claim about the Egyptians being the oldest civilisation.¹⁹ The priest explained that primeval Athens' laws and social structure were the same as the Egyptians had now, 9,000 years later, with the class of the priests as well as the military class separated from all others. Moreover, the ancient Athenian and modern Egyptian soldiers' weapons were the same, namely shields and spears, given to them by the goddess Athena (24a–b). Among all the great deeds of the primeval Athenians, one especially stood out: in front of the pillars of Heracles was a huge island called Atlantis (24d–e), whose kings' power reached as far as Egypt and Etruria (25a–b). Athens served as leader of the Greeks and managed to defeat the mighty island (25c). After that, the Athenian soldiers as well as Atlantis were swallowed up by the earth (25d).

After ending his account, Critias says that when hearing Socrates' description of the ideal state, he had been amazed at how precisely it coincided with Solon's story in some respects (25e). Critias' memory was vague, as he had only been ten years old when his grandfather had told him this story. Therefore, he wanted to sort out the events in his mind before telling Socrates (26a). He managed to recall the events overnight and blamed this youthful inquisitiveness for remembering the details; even though many years had passed since the day he heard the story, it was stuck in his mind because he had asked his grandfather to repeat it several times (26b–c). However, a contradiction between blurred (he first claims that his memory is vague) and accurate memory (the story is stuck in his mind) is noticeable in Critias' account, as will be described later.

SIMILARITIES

Although Herodotus' historical inquiry is on an entirely different level than Plato's fictional and philosophical response, the two accounts contain striking similarities. The first, rather obvious one is the basic structure of the story: a protagonist who lived a few generations before the author travels to Egypt, visits a temple and talks to priests about history and genealogy. Both actors are rebuked by the priests in an ironic way for boasting about their ancestors and old myths while, in the eyes of the priests,²⁰ only telling 'children's tales'. In both accounts, the Egyptian priests talk about long periods of time and huge numbers, mocking the Greeks for working with very short periods of time.

¹⁹ See Johansen 1998: 205.

²⁰ On the irony in Herodotus' passage, see for example Lloyd 1975: 127 and Rutherford 2018: 41–2. Fehling 1971: 62–4 is of the opinion that there might be a model for the anecdote in Hecataeus' works, where the geographer claimed to be of divine origin. Heidel 1935: 93 has the same idea: 'Nevertheless it is not improbable that Hecataeus himself may have given

Secondly, genealogical dating is used in both passages. Herodotus describes how many years have passed from the first king to the last on the basis of three generations being equal to 100 years (2.142.1–2). This way of calculating time is typical for Herodotus: for example, he dates by counting reigns in several passages,²¹ or he indicates that some event had happened some lifetimes or generations before.²² Dating events genealogically was a typical way for Greek historiographers in Herodotus' time to 'organize' the past — Hans-Joachim Gehrke uses the expression 'archaisches Ordnen' ('archaic organizing').²³ At *Timaeus* 22a–b, Solon, too, tries to calculate the years that have passed since the myths' protagonists lived by counting their descendants, although the result of the calculation is not mentioned. This manner of dating is uncommon in Plato's works.²⁴ Admittedly, this could be due to the difference in genre: in contrast to Herodotus, Plato does not report stories about the distant past very often. However, when Plato does tell a story set in the distant past, he either does not date the events at all or he uses years. For example, at *Protagoras* 320c–322d, where Protagoras recounts the famous myth about the development of culture, Plato does not date the story, but only gives a vague hint at a distant past that existed before humanity.²⁵ In the *Menexenus*, when reporting Aspasia's funeral oration (which Morgan describes as a 'masterly pastiche of the funeral oration'),²⁶ Socrates talks about the deeds of Hellenic ancestors (πρόγονοι), for instance the Persian wars, and again does not give any precise information about when these

occasion for the fling his successor took at him.' On the irony in Plato's passage, see Taylor 1928: 54, Rowe 1987, Morgan 1998: 102–3 and Schweitzer 2007: 107–16.

²¹ Hdt. 1.16.1, 1.25.1, 1.86.1, 1.102.1–2, 1.106.1, 1.130.1, 1.163.2, 1.214.3, 2.127.1, 2.137.2, 2.157.1, 2.159.3, 2.161.1–2, 3.10.2, 3.14.1, 3.66.2, 3.67.2–3, 4.1.2, 4.159.1, 5.65.3, 5.92F.1, 7.4.1, 7.154.1, 7.155.1.

²² Hdt. 1.3.1, 1.7.2–4, 1.184.1, 2.44.4, 3.48.1, 5.28.1, 6.86A.2, 6.98.2, 6.126.1, 7.171.1, 7.204.1, 8.131.2, 8.139.1, 9.64. However, it is interesting to note that not all generational dating is based on the assumption that three generations are equal to 100 years. On the contrary, several different numbers of years for a generation appear in the *Histories*. For example, when Herodotus lists twenty ancestors of Leonidas (7.204.1), Leotychidas (8.131.2) and Pausanias (9.64), he traces the Spartans' origin back to Heracles, who lived 900 years before Herodotus. If we subtract the years between the three leaders and Herodotus, and divide the number of years by twenty, one generation equals forty-two to forty-three years. On the other hand, at 1.7.4 Herodotus states that twenty-two generations are equal to 505 years, with the result that one generation is equivalent to 22.95 years. Moreover, by giving information like 'two generations later' (1.3.1) or 'Semiramis ruled five generations before Nitocris' without mentioning concrete figures (1.184.1), Herodotus seems to have no exact number in mind. Willem den Boer 1967: 38 shares this view and states that for Herodotus, a γενεή was not an unchangeable *terminus technicus*, but was taken together with the story he had heard from an informant.

²³ Gehrke 2014: 44. See also Gehrke 2010: 20–6.

²⁴ The verb γενεαλογέω appears in Plato's oeuvre only at *Tht.* 155d (describing Iris' ancestry) and *Resp.* 365e (Hesiod is called a poet who explains kinships). The noun γενεαλογία is only used in *Cra.* 396c and designates Zeus' lineage. None of those passages deal with genealogical dating.

²⁵ ἦν γὰρ ποτε χρόνος ὅτε θεοὶ μὲν ἦσαν, θνητὰ δὲ γένη οὐκ ἦν ('For there was once a time when there were gods, but no mortal beings', *Pl. Prt.* 320c–d).

²⁶ Cf. Morgan 2012: 227. On the connection between the frame story of the Atlantis tale and funeral orations, see Morgan 1998: 104–7.

events took place.²⁷ On the other hand, there are passages where Plato dates the story using years, such as the myth of Er (*Resp.* 614a–616b), in which Ardiaios the Great is said to have ruled a Pamphylian city 1,000 years ago (*Resp.* 615c). These examples show that Plato sometimes tells stories that are set in the past, but the fact that he dates none of them using generations supports the hypothesis that he created the story about Solon in Egypt guided by Herodotus' account.²⁸

Thirdly, both authors create a dialogue between the protagonist and Egyptian priests. Plato's relationship with the method of inquiry in historiography is critical; for example, at *Critias* 109d–110a, it is explained that inquiry into ancient matters comes with leisure and is thus an elite activity. Luc Brisson claims that in Plato's opinion, the *mythos* of the distant past is unfalsifiable because its happenings are inaccessible and thus cannot be reconstructed — which renders inquiry into those events pointless.²⁹ The fact that Plato parallels Solon with Hecataeus, both of whom practise inquiry in order to gain information about ancient times, is therefore rather suspicious. Moreover, the role of the priests as transmitters of knowledge is noteworthy: Herodotus often describes priests as mediators of knowledge in the Egyptian *logos*. In the second book of the *Histories*, he explicitly mentions priests nineteen times,³⁰ and he does so implicitly around two dozen times.³¹ They are a useful tool for transmitting knowledge as they testify to the antiquity of the Egyptian civilization. Using priests as mediators of knowledge surely met the Greek reading public's expectations: the oldest civilisation needed sages whose knowledge reached back to ancient times.³² Plato also mentions priests several times in his works. However, except at *Timaeus* 20d–6c and in two passages reminiscent of it (*Criti.* 108d and 110b), Plato describes priests as transmitters of knowledge only twice, namely at *Meno* 80c–1e³³ and

²⁷ One explanation for why Plato deals very rarely with time spans might be that the early and middle dialogues have an especially philosophical-ethical focus, which makes issues of dating quite irrelevant. Another explanation might be found at *Leg.* 676a–c, which deals with the immensity of time and the impossibility of grappling with it.

²⁸ A useful comparison could be made with Thucydides' way of dating past events, especially in the 'Archaeology'. Until the end of the Trojan war, he uses generic expressions such as *πάλαι* (1.2.1, 1.5.1, 1.6.5), *ἀπό παλαιοῦ* (1.2.6) or *τῶν παλαιῶν* (1.3.1). The first event after the Trojan war, namely the expulsion of the Boeotians from Arne, is dated to 'the sixtieth year after the destruction of Troy' (1.12.3: *ἕξηκοστῷ ἔτει μετὰ Ἰλίου ἄλωσιν*), and the occupation of the Peloponnese by the Dorians and the Heraclidai is 'in the eightieth year' (i.e. after the destruction of Troy) (1.12.3: *ὀγδοηκοστῷ ἔτει*). However, Thucydides does not use generations for dating. He follows a 'modern' system, which makes the hypothesis that Plato intentionally uses the 'old', Herodotean system of time reckoning more plausible.

²⁹ Brisson 2001: 91–102.

³⁰ *Hdt.* 2.2.5, 2.3.1, 2.10.1, 2.12.1, 2.13.1, 2.19.1, 2.44.2–3, 2.54, 2.99.2, 2.100.1, 2.102.2, 2.107.1, 2.113.1, 2.118.1, 2.120.1, 2.126, 2.130.2, 2.142.1, 2.143.

³¹ See Moyer 2011: 52.

³² See Moyer 2011: 47–52.

³³ In this passage, Socrates debunks Meno's opinion that one cannot find out something he or she does not already know. Socrates invokes 'priests and priestesses' (*τῶν ἱερέων τε καὶ τῶν ἱερείων*) as well as poets like Pindar who deal with the immortality of the soul. His basic message is that the soul returns and therefore possesses the powers of recollection. Every process of learning or experiencing is thus remembrance (81a–e). It is probable that Socrates refers to the priests because their sacred position suggests that they know what happens to the soul.

Leges 872e.³⁴ Both passages have religious or mystical content. As Plato does not use priests in a profane context as transmitters of (historical) knowledge elsewhere, the priests talking to Solon are another element that is typical for the *Histories*, but not for Plato's works.³⁵ The description of Egyptian people in Plato's texts is also worth noticing: for example, at *Leges* 747b–c, the Egyptians appear as greedy and deceptive — a stereotype that was already present in Aeschylus and Aristophanes.³⁶ At *Phaedrus* 275b, Phaedrus accuses Socrates of 'making up Egyptian stories, or from any country he likes' (ὦ Σώκρατες, ῥαδίως σὺ Αἰγυπτίους καὶ ὀποδαπούς ἄν ἐθέλης λόγους ποιεῖς) — another hint that Egyptian stories can be freely invented. The fact that Egyptians, who are — according to Plato — known for being greedy and untrustworthy, tell the story to Solon might indicate we should not take it too seriously and expect deceit.³⁷

Furthermore, at *Timaeus* 22c–d the priests inform Solon about various destructions of mankind through catastrophes such as fire and flood. The Egyptians were the only people to be saved from these devastations thanks to the Nile. This idea has a model in the *Histories*, too: at 2.142.4, Herodotus mentions irregularities in the sun's movements, and Heidel suggests that he is alluding to cyclical global conflagrations.³⁸ Herodotus states that those astronomical irregularities had no effect on the Egyptian people, who suffered neither from a decline of agricultural production nor from diseases or a higher death rate. The idea of cyclical conflagrations is evident in pre-Socratic fragments; however, none of these texts contain the opinion that the Egyptians were unaffected by those devastations.³⁹ The fragmentary preservation of pre-Socratic texts does not allow us to establish with certainty that Herodotus was the first to express the idea of Egypt being safe from cyclical devastations, and to discuss the evidence in detail would be beyond the scope of this article. Instead, I want to highlight the fact that Plato took on another idea from the *Histories*.

Plato mentions an affectionate regard between the Athenian and the Saitic people at *Timaeus* 21e (μάλα δὲ φιλαθήναιοι καὶ τινα τρόπον οἰκεῖοι τῶνδ' εἶναι φασί).⁴⁰ In addition, Sais was founded by the goddess Neith, who is identified with Athena. Since it is Athena who founds Athens (23c–d), the two cities, Sais and Athens, were founded by the same deity. The kinship between the Hellenes and Egyptians also appears in the *Histories*: Heracles' parents, Amphitryon and Alcmene, were both Egyptian by descent (2.43.2), and Herodotus explains that Perseus' ancestors, Danaus and Lynceus, were from Khemmis (2.91.5). As the

³⁴ 'Priests from ancient times' (παλαιοὶ ἱερεῖς) transmitted that Dike is an avenger of murders between relatives. Plato probably hints at the ἱερός λόγος, the 'holy story', which was passed on in mystery cults. Schöpsdau 2011: 327 sees intertextual relations between this passage and *Meno* 81a.

³⁵ See Kluge 1909: 32.

³⁶ Cf. for example Aeschylus *Supp.* 742 and 817–18, Aristophanes *Nub.* and *Thesm.* 922.

³⁷ Cf. Johansen 1998: 206.

³⁸ Heidel 1933: 192–4 and Heidel 1935: 88. Asheri et al. 2007: 344 follow this suggestion.

³⁹ Lloyd 1988: 106 lists the texts which contain the idea of cycles. None of them mention Egypt in conjunction with the cyclic fires.

⁴⁰ 'They say that they are great lovers of Athens and in some way akin to the Athenians.'

Hellenes often trace their descent from Heracles and Perseus, Herodotus' account implies that many noble Greek families stem from the Egyptians. Thus, both authors construct a relationship or a lineage between the Egyptians and Hellenes.

Another common element between the two texts is the mention of the Egyptian ruler Amasis. Herodotus explains that Amasis came from the district of Sais (2.172.1), describing the extensive construction activity Amasis promoted in his hometown. Moreover, in the *Histories* Amasis is often linked to the Greeks. He was reportedly a φιλέλλην (2.178.1) and did them many favours, such as allowing Greek immigrants to settle in Naucratis and providing land where they could build their altars and pray to their gods (2.178). He was so fond of the Hellenes that he married a woman from Cyrene called Ladice (2.181.1). In the *Timaeus*, Critias begins his account with mention of the Saitic district (21e), whose capital city is Sais, the home of king Amasis. This parenthesis is the only mention of Amasis in Plato's œuvre. Why does he make this reference here? Amasis does not play any role in Critias' narrative, and so it is highly plausible that this is another reference to Herodotus. First, Plato alludes to Herodotus' account on a linguistic level, namely by designating Amasis' people as φιλαθῆναιοι (*Ti.* 21e), which refers to φιλέλλην (Hdt. 2.178.1), and, as Kluge observes, by using a similar formulation to *Histories* 2.172.1.⁴¹ In addition to these linguistic similarities, Amasis links our two texts in terms of chronology. Herodotus establishes a chronological framework around the actors Solon, Amasis and Hecataeus: Solon visits Amasis in Egypt and gets to know Egyptian laws,⁴² which means that according to Herodotus,⁴³ Solon and Amasis were contemporaries. The protagonist of the genealogy anecdote, Hecataeus, was a contemporary of Amasis, too.⁴⁴ The logical consequence is that Solon also lived at the same time as Hecataeus. Thus, the two protagonists of our texts lived at the same time (according to Herodotus), with a connecting reference point in Amasis.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Kluge 1909: 32: 'Accedit quod est permagni momenti: iam P. Rawack censebat orationem (p. 21 e) Σαϊτικός ἐπικαλούμενος νομός, τούτου δέ τοῦ νομοῦ μεγίστη πόλις Σάις, ὅθεν δὴ καὶ Ἄμασις ἦν ὁ βασιλεύς lectores relegasse ad Herodoti historias II, 172: ἐβασίλευσε Ἄμασις, νομοῦ μὲν Σαίτω ἐών. Atque revera particula καὶ inter verba ὅθεν δὴ et Ἄμασις ἦν ὁ βασιλεύς cogitari non potest nisi Platonem ad aliquid certum omnibusque notum reicere voluisse probatur.' ('Add to this what is of great importance: already P. Rawack considered the sentence (p. 21 e) "there is a district called the Saitic, and the biggest city of this district is Sais, where king Amasis comes from" to remind readers of Herodotus' *Histories* II, 172: "Amasis became king, who was from the district of Sais". And indeed the placing of the particle καὶ between the words ὅθεν δὴ and Ἄμασις ἦν ὁ βασιλεύς cannot be explained except that Plato wanted to allude to something that is certain and familiar to everybody.')

⁴² Hdt. 1.30, 2.177. On Solon in Egypt, see Gazzano 2011: 223–41, on Solon in the *Histories*, see Hollmann 2015.

⁴³ The historicity of this information is not discussed as it has no importance for the further explanation.

⁴⁴ See Bichler 2000: 180.

⁴⁵ Such synchronisms are an important element of Greek chronological thinking. See for example Jacoby 1902.

In Plato's account, Athens and Sais were founded by the same goddess and have the same social structure.⁴⁶ The priest explains that primeval Athens had the same system of classes as contemporary Egypt (that is, at the time of Solon): there are priests, craftsmen, shepherds, hunters, farmers and warriors, and the priests as well as the military class are separated from all other groups. This system reminds the observant reader of Herodotus' explanation that the Egyptians are divided into several classes: priests, warriors, cowherds, swineherds, merchants, interpreters and steersmen (2.164.1). Again, the priests and the warriors are the only classes to enjoy (tax) benefits (2.168). However, the idea of two classes being separate from all others, which implies a division into three, might remind one not only of Herodotus, but also of the threefold division of men into philosophers, guardians and producers in the *Republic* (where similarly only two of the classes are discussed in detail). This parallel to the *Republic* is not surprising: we should not forget that Critias tells the story he heard from his grandfather because it reminded him of the ideal state and Socrates wanted to see how this ideal *polis* would turn out in reality (*Ti.* 19c–20c).

A comparison of *Histories* 2.142–144 and *Timaeus* 21b–26c has shown several resemblances, most of which are elements that are typical for Herodotus, but not for Plato. This indicates that Plato was inspired by Herodotus' anecdote and created his own account in a similar way. It also raises the question of why Plato did this. In order to comprehend his intention and understand why he composed the passage this way, it is necessary to discuss a remarkable element in both accounts: the strategies of authentication.

AUTHENTICATION STRATEGIES

Both texts work with striking strategies of how to make the story credible to the reader. Herodotus witnessed the high priests' statues, as did Hecataeus, whereas Plato's Critias talks about an odd chain of informants: he heard the story from his grandfather, who heard it from Solon, who in turn heard it from the priests. The priests had preserved the story for 8,000 years, and how the story was remembered for the 1,000 years between the development of Athens and Egypt is not mentioned at all. It is appropriate to analyse these two authentication strategies in detail.

At *Histories* 2.142–144, Herodotus frequently uses words that indicate that he had been on site and was guided in the temple by the priests. He mentions seven times that the priests *showed* him something (ἀποδείκνυμι⁴⁷ or δείκνυμι⁴⁸), once that they *are doing* something with him (2.143.1: ποιέω) and once that they *lead* him to the temple (2.143.2: εἰσάγω). The priests *say* something to him three times (λέγω),⁴⁹ *calculate* twice (2.143.2: ἐξαριθμέω and 2.143.3: ἀριθμέω) and *lecture* him once by *going through* the genealogy (2.143.3: διέξιμι). Herodotus repeats that what he has reported so far is based on what the Egyptians have said (ταῦτα μὲν νυν αὐτοὶ Αἰγύπτιοι λέγουσι, 2.147.1). These phrases and formulations

⁴⁶ See Görgemanns 2000: 414.

⁴⁷ Hdt. 2.142.1, 2.143.3 (twice), 2.143.4, 2.144.1.

⁴⁸ Hdt. 2.143.2, 2.143.3.

⁴⁹ Hdt. 2.142.1, 2.142.3, 2.142.4.

should prove that Herodotus has visited Egypt and the temple in Thebes, and has talked to the local priests. He emphasizes several times that he has seen the statues and heard the priests' story first hand.

If we roughly classify source references into three categories, ἀκοή, γνώμη and ὄψις,⁵⁰ Herodotus, as already mentioned, uses ὄψις in the passage in question, whereas Plato rather works on the basis of ἀκοή. This becomes evident in the conversational situation: Critias tells Socrates a story he heard from his grandfather, who was also called Critias. The older Critias, in turn, heard it from Solon. This means that from Solon to the younger Critias, the story is solely orally transmitted. It fits with this picture that Plato has his protagonists say ἀκοή four times.⁵¹ Furthermore, Critias mentions that it is necessary to recall the event, so that it will not be forgotten (*Ti.* 21a: ἐπιμνησθεῖσιν πρέπον, cf. Herodotus' proem).

The priests who talked to Solon possessed written evidence of events of the distant past. They refer to these records, kept in the temple, five times,⁵² and they also announce once that they will go over them in detail with Solon when they have time (*Ti.* 24a). Thus, the story has been preserved for 8,000 years by means of written records and finally transmitted orally from Solon to Critias, from the older to the younger Critias and from the latter to Socrates. As Egypt is supposed to have originated 1,000 years after primeval Athens, the narration must likewise have been transmitted orally throughout those remaining 1,000 years, since Plato emphasizes the fact that the inhabitants of primeval Athens were illiterate. It is questionable whether Plato considered this transmission of the narrative credible, and whether he intended it to be considered as credible at all.⁵³

In addition to this rather strange authentication story, there are some inconsistencies between the versions in the *Timaeus* and the *Critias*.⁵⁴ At *Timaeus* 26b–c, Critias describes why he remembers the story in detail, although he heard it at the age of ten. Thanks to his youthful joy and inquisitiveness, he heard the story with great pleasure (μετὰ πολλῆς ἡδονῆς καὶ παιδιᾶς τότε ἀκουόμενα). The old man instructed Critias willingly, despite his frequent enquiries (καὶ τοῦ πρεσβύτου προθύμως με διδάσκοντος, ἅτ' ἐμοῦ πολλάκις ἐπανερωτῶντος), so that it was burned into his mind like a permanent brand of an indelible writing (ὥστε οἶον ἐγκαύματα ἀνεκπλύτου γραφῆς ἔμμονά μοι γέγονεν). This explanation contradicts what Critias said a few moments before, when he stated that he did not want to

⁵⁰ Besides ἀκοή and γνώμη, ὄψις is one of Herodotus' most frequent source references, and the strongest and most convincing one, according to Luraghi 2001: 143. Bichler 2013: 136–43 states that Herodotus' autopsy references are usually related to regions that were accessible but not too familiar — eyewitness reports are rarely used in a Greek context, as they are regarded as unnecessary for a mainly Greek readership. For this reason, ὄψις references often appear in the Egyptian *logos*. Moreover, autopsy reports usually focus on two thematic areas: the chronological system of ancient times and embarrassing aspects of anthropomorphic and theriomorphic images of divinities. 2.142–143 can be assigned to the former aspect: Herodotus links the priests' genealogical calculations to the statues that he has *seen*. Therefore, he backs up his chronology of Egyptian history.

⁵¹ *Ti.* 20d, 21a, 22b, 25e, cf. Hdt. 2.100.1.

⁵² *Ti.* 23a, 23e, 24a, 24d, 24e.

⁵³ On the Atlantis story as a 'noble lie' see Morgan 1998: 102–4 and 2010: 281.

⁵⁴ On the relationship between the *Timaeus* and the *Critias*, see for example Broadie 2012: 115–72.

speak at first because his memory was not sufficiently clear, due to the time that had passed (διὰ χρόνου γὰρ οὐχ ἱκανῶς ἐμνησθήμεν, 25e–26a). The phrasing οὐχ ἱκανῶς ἐμνησθήμεν does not fit with the ‘permanent brand of an indelible writing’ he mentions a few moments later. There is another irreconcilable contradiction, namely with *Critias* 113a–b. In this passage, Critias explains why the protagonists of the Atlantis narrative have Greek names. As Solon intended to use the narrative for his own poetry, he researched the meaning of the names and found out that the Egyptians, who had first written them down for themselves, had translated them into their own language. Solon found out the meaning of each name, transposed it into Greek and wrote it down. Those records were allegedly in Critias’ grandfather’s and now his own possession, and he studied them closely when he was a boy (καὶ ταῦτά γε δὴ τὰ γράμματα παρὰ τῷ πάππῳ τ’ ἦν καὶ ἔτ’ ἐστὶν παρ’ ἐμοὶ νῦν, διαμεμελέτηται τε ὑπ’ ἐμοῦ παιδὸς ὄντος). Critias suddenly claims to have records about the rulers of Atlantis and to have dealt with them in detail. It is hard to believe that he has forgotten about these writings in the *Timaeus* when he explained his exact memory of the Atlantis narrative due to youthful interest. It seems that Plato wants to draw his readers’ attention to the source references in the Atlantis narrative; otherwise, he would not have mentioned them so many times and in such an odd and inconsistent reference chain.⁵⁵

Furthermore, Plato uses the words μῦθος and λόγος several times, and he apparently contrasts the two terms. The protagonists in the Atlantis narrative and its frame story refer to Solon’s journey to Egypt as λόγος six times. The word is used rather neutrally in the sense of ‘narrative’ or ‘story’ in all six cases: for example, Critias announces that he will tell the ‘story’ (*Ti.* 20d: λόγου), and Solon tries to impel the Egyptian priests to ‘tell stories about the beginnings’ (*Ti.* 22a: προαγαγεῖν βουληθεὶς αὐτοὺς περὶ τῶν ἀρχαίων εἰς λόγους). When Solon wants the priests to talk about events of the early period, he relates Greek myths, for example about Deucalion and Pyrrha (*Ti.* 22a–b: καὶ μετὰ τὸν κατακλυσμὸν αὐτῶν περὶ Δευκαλίωνος καὶ Πύρρας ὡς διεγένοντο μυθολογεῖν). Immediately afterwards, the priest laughs at him because of his ‘children’s stories’. In the following, the priest explains that the story of Phaethon, ‘although told in the form of a myth, is in truth a change in the celestial bodies orbiting the earth’ (*Ti.* 22c–d: τοῦτο μύθου μὲν σχῆμα ἔχον λέγεται, τὸ δὲ ἀληθές ἐστὶ τῶν περὶ γῆν κατ’ οὐρανὸν ἰόντων παράλλαξις). Despite being told in the form of a myth, the content of the Phaethon story is true. Consideration of 26c–d leads to the same conclusion: Critias proposes that ‘the citizens and the state, as you presented it yesterday in a myth [*sc.* Socrates in the

⁵⁵ Some scholars doubt the authenticity of the *Critias* due to inconsistencies like the one mentioned. For example, Rashed and Auffret 2017 describe a contradiction between *Ti.* 27a–b (where Critias says that two speeches are planned, one by him and one by Timaeus) and *Criti.* 108a–c (where an alleged third speech, namely by Hermocrates, is mentioned). A response to this claim was given by Tarrant 2019, referring to Tarrant et al. 2011, on the basis of linguistic analysis: the style of the *Critias* is inseparable from that of the *Timaeus* and the two dialogues have therefore been written by the same author. One could add that, although inconsistencies between the *Timaeus* and the *Critias* certainly exist, explaining them by inauthenticity is an unsatisfactory solution: why should another author not be able to compose a text that is consistent with the content of the *Timaeus*? It seems more likely that Plato was well aware of the contradictions, which are part of his irony. On this interpretation see Nesselrath 2006: 82.

Republic] should now be transferred into reality' (τούς δέ πολίτας καὶ τὴν πόλιν ἢν χθές ἡμῖν ὡς ἐν μύθῳ διήεισθα σύ, νῦν μετενεγκόντες ἐπὶ τάληθές δεῦρο θήσομεν).⁵⁶ Again, myth is set against reality. The use of μῦθος as 'untrue narrative' is most evident at 26e: Socrates considers it important that the narrative they go on to deal with is not 'an invented myth but a true *logos*' (μὴ πλασθέντα μῦθον ἀλλ' ἀληθινὸν λόγον εἶναι).⁵⁷

The analysis has thus shown that Plato intentionally contrasts the priests' narratives (*logoi*) with Solon's myths (*mythoi*) at *Timaeus* 20d–26e. In addition to these linguistic observations, it is remarkable that the priests date their narratives, but Solon does not.⁵⁸ The question arises as to why Plato sets Solon's encounter with the Egyptian priests apart from myths in this way. In the following, a discussion of words indicating the 'truth-content' of Solon's account might help to answer this question.

Plato has his characters say that the narrative is true (ἀληθής) nine times.⁵⁹ For instance, he emphasizes that the story is true, even though it might appear incredible (ἄκουε δὴ, ὦ Σώκρατες, λόγου μάλα μὲν ἀτόπου, παντάπασί γε μὴν ἀληθοῦς).⁶⁰ At 21a, Socrates distinguishes the incident as 'really accomplished' (πραχθέν ὄντως) from 'told' (λεγόμενον). It is questionable how seriously these affirmations of truth are meant. By emphasizing the historicity of the narrative several times, Plato seems to draw his readers' attention to the question of their truthfulness.⁶¹ Moreover, Socrates, after hearing Critias' account, says he supposes it is a 'huge thing' that Critias' story is a true account rather than a fabricated myth (τό τε μὴ πλασθέντα μῦθον ἀλλ' ἀληθινὸν λόγον εἶναι πάμμεγά που). Based on linguistic observations, Thomas Johansen argues that Socrates' statement should be understood in an ironic way and Socrates makes fun of the alleged 'truthfulness' of Critias' story.⁶²

The idea that Plato draws his readers' attention to metatextual issues is put forward by Michael Erler, who deals with the poetological dimension of the Atlantis episode.⁶³ Furthermore, Erler explains that Critias — as stated above — distinguishes between μῦθος and λόγος (as a narrative bound to facts and thus true) and that by 'truth' he refers to a historical reality based on facts.⁶⁴ Erler states that

⁵⁶ On the ὡς constructions in this passage, see Johansen 1998: 203–4.

⁵⁷ Brisson 2001: 7 and 90 also states that Plato usually contrasts the terms μῦθος and λόγος intentionally. According to his definition, myths in Plato's works are characterized by either a temporal or a spatial distance from the narrative situation.

⁵⁸ See Brisson 2001: 23.

⁵⁹ *Ti.* 20d, 21a, 21d, 22d, 26c, 26d, 26e, *Criti.* 110d, 111d.

⁶⁰ *Ti.* 20d. This formulation reminds one of the beginning of Herodotus' 'Tripolitikos *logos*' at 3.80.1, concerning the debate of constitutions in Persia: καὶ ἐλέχθησαν λόγοι ἄπιστοι μὲν ἐνίοισι Ἑλλήνων, ἐλέχθησαν δ' ὄν. Again, this might be a pun on Herodotus.

⁶¹ Cf. Morgan 2010: 271: 'Plato will also address the question of potential historicity through the Atlantis narrative.' Moreover, Morgan states that Socrates' simile about the ideal state being brought to life just like animals in paintings or those that are alive but at rest (*Ti.* 19b–c) 'marks a transition from pictorial to narrative art that recapitulates the transition from the *Republic* to the *Timaeus*'.

⁶² Johansen 1998: 212.

⁶³ Erler 1997: 84.

⁶⁴ On the first occurrence of the contrast between μῦθος and λόγος, see Erler 1997: 85–6.

terms like μῦθος, πλασθεὶς μῦθος and ἀληθινὸς λόγος resemble later poetological discussions typical in Hellenistic rhetoric and poetics, including sources such as Macrobius, Sextus Empiricus or Quintilian.⁶⁵ There is a distinction between myth as a) a description of the fantastic and impossible (usually referred to as μυθικόν or ψευδέν), b) a historical narrative of events that actually occurred (ἱστορικόν or ἀληθές), or c) a fictional narrative whose events did not actually happen but could have happened that way (πλασματικόν or ὡς ἀληθές). Erler also notes that the frame story of the Atlantis narrative is the first evidence of a poetological discussion about narratives and their relation to reality.⁶⁶

In order to understand the implications of this statement, it is necessary to compare the relationship of Critias' narrative with its starting point, namely the transferring of the ideal state described in the *Republic* to 'reality'. Critias notes that Socrates' remarks on the ideal state reminded him of Solon's story about Atlantis and primeval Athens. Indeed, he compares events and actors from his narrative to those in the ideal *polis* (for example, he identifies the guards from the *Republic* with primeval Athens' warriors, *Criti.* 110c–d). The *Republic* appears as a thought experiment that the discussants create in order to talk about justice and how to find it. It is mentioned that the ideal state may exist or may have existed in a spatially or temporally distant region, but evidence for the realizability of the ideal state is not provided (499c–d).⁶⁷ In a well-known passage (592a–b), the city exists only 'in theory' (ἐν λόγοις) and is located nowhere on earth (ἐπεὶ γῆς γε οὐδαμοῦ οἶμαι αὐτὴν εἶναι), and Socrates himself expresses the opinion that whether the ideal *polis* could be realized or not is irrelevant; it rather functions as a paradigm (472c–e). Morgan observes that the summary of the *Republic* in the *Timaeus* ends with the commonality of women and children. In the *Republic* (466d), the question about the realizability of the ideal state immediately follows the discussion about breeding.

Morgan concludes that if the recapitulation at the beginning of the *Timaeus* followed the same order as in the *Republic*, it 'very probably ended before any debate about whether the state could be brought from paradigm to reality'.⁶⁸ The fact that Critias takes up the question of historical 'truth' by making links between the (according to him) historically true Atlantis, primeval Athens and the hypothetical ideal *polis* shows that this issue is of importance to the protagonists of the *Timaeus*; Socrates, after all, suggests that someone should talk about the citizens of the ideal state in action — like creatures in a painting or animals at rest that are set in motion — and Critias complies with this request.⁶⁹ If we remember the above-mentioned threefold division of μῦθος into a) fantasy/invention, b) historical 'truth' and c) not true, but could be true, the ideal *polis* falls within the last category. Of course it is uncertain whether Plato already had in mind the categories described in Hellenistic times, but he makes clear how the ideal *polis* should be seen: it is probably not real, but could be real in the

⁶⁵ Macrobius. *In Somn.* 1.2.7–8, Sextus Empiricus. *Math.* 1.252, 1.263, Quintilian. *Inst.* 2.4.2.

⁶⁶ Erler 1997: 85. Also Gill 1979 calls the Atlantis story the first discussion about fiction.

⁶⁷ Erler 1997: 87.

⁶⁸ Morgan 2010: 270.

⁶⁹ On this simile, see Johansen 1998.

past or future or in a distant region. Since the beginning of the *Timaeus* aims at transferring the ideal state, a thought experiment, into reality, the conversation functions as a poetological discussion and raises issues about historical ‘truth’ and how to present it.⁷⁰ This means that we should understand Plato’s remarks as a statement on questions about historiography; for example, how the representation of historical events can serve the demonstration of philosophical purposes, or how narrative rules or strategies influence historical truth.⁷¹

It can be assumed that Plato’s intention was to make readers reflect on the narrative requirements for poetry, historiography and philosophy. The tradition of the story over 9,000 years seems both complicated and implausible. Moreover, by Critias constantly pointing out the historical veracity of his narrative (λόγος) and making references to the historically untrue content (μῦθος) of the *Republic*, the reader is stimulated to think about the μῦθος/λόγος opposition (which was relatively new in Plato’s time), and the narrative styles of the various literary genres. This interpretation resolves numerous problems that arise in reading the frame story of the Atlantis tale. For example, Critias explains very precisely how he heard the story and why he remembered it. The inconsistency between *Timaeus* 26c–d, where Critias says that he remembers the story well because he was a curious child when he heard it, and *Critias* 113a–b, where he mentions written records that he possesses and has studied in detail, should make the attentive reader aware of source references and authentication strategies. Even if these two texts represent two variants of the same story, they demonstrate that Plato experimented with different authentication strategies. It is through these awkward explanations, inconsistencies and the strong emphasis on truthfulness that the reader becomes suspicious and begins to think about source references and claims to historical truth — something undoubtedly intended by Plato.

CONCLUSION

Herodotus presents Hecataeus as a bad ‘historian’, uncritical of the tradition and therefore ridiculed by the Egyptian priests. By contrast, Herodotus seems to say that he himself is different, as he looks at and listens to all sources without prejudice and comes as close to the truth as possible. Moreover, he parodies the Greeks’ ideas about the age of their own culture and points to the greater age of the Egyptian civilization. Several parallels between *Histories* 2.142–144

⁷⁰ See Erler 1997: 88. Aristotle’s account in Chapter 9 of the *Poetics* resembles the point Plato makes about historical ‘truth’. According to Aristotle, formal criteria are not decisive for a distinction between poetry and historiography, for one could also put Herodotus’ *Histories* into verse form and they would nevertheless be a historiographical work (cf. Schmitt 2013). Rather, the main difference is that historiography deals with what has actually happened, while the contents of poetry did not necessarily actually happen but could have happened — which brings us back to category c) of the abovementioned classification. Apparently, a relevant discussion about narrative strategies and their relationship to reality existed in the Academy at the time of Plato and Aristotle.

⁷¹ Erler 1997: 97. On the ironic play with myth and truth, cf. Voegelin 1947.

and *Timaeus* 21b–26c suggest that Plato intentionally creates a similar account. Those parallels certainly trigger associations for Plato's reader with Herodotus' Hecataeus anecdote and keeps the *Histories* in mind.

However, the differences in the authentication strategies stimulate poetological reflections. Through emphasis on the 'truth' of Solon's encounter with the priests, the reader is made aware of the importance of historical truth. By having Critias verbosely explain the transmission of the narrative by means of ἀκοή and written records that no one gets to see, Plato cleverly draws the reader's attention to the importance of the source indications ὄψις and ἀκοή — source indications that are, after all, typical for Herodotus. Plato thus inspires a series of associations that make the reader think about historiography, truth and the *Histories*. He uses Herodotus' anecdote, which in an ironic way mentions the great antiquity of Egypt — a central theme in the second book of the *Histories* — and reverses the main message of the story: in his account, primeval Athens is the oldest city.

This article has shown that Plato does not want to present a historically correct version. Rather, he marks two versions of prehistory — Herodotus' as well as his own, presented by Critias — as unprovable and irrefutable. It is basically impossible to know anything of ancient matters, and ancient history cannot be reconstructed. Accounts of these times can thus only serve ethical and paradigmatic purposes.⁷² To sum up, Plato 'proves' the incredible Atlantis story with authentication strategies and 'safe' source references in order to question Herodotus' numerous, but unverifiable, references. By using these implausible layers of invented sources,⁷³ Plato draws his reader's attention to the meaning of 'truth' in general and 'truth' in Herodotus' *Histories* in particular.

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⁷² This opinion is also noticeable at *Resp.* 2.382c–d. See Johansen 1998: 209 and Morgan 2012: 241–2.

⁷³ On the irony in Herodotus' passage, see for example Lloyd 1975: 127 and Rutherford 2018: 41–2. Fehling 1971: 62–4 is of the opinion that there might be a model for the anecdote in Hecataeus' works, where the geographer claims to be of divine origin. Heidel 1935: 93 has the same idea: 'Nevertheless it is not improbable that Hecataeus himself may have given occasion for the fling his successor took at him.' On the irony in Plato's passage see Taylor 1928: 54, Rowe 1987, Morgan 1998: 102–3 and Schweitzer 2007: 107–16.

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