

SOCRATES: One, two, three . . . Where's number four, Timaeus? The four of you were my guests yesterday and today I'm to be yours. 17

TIMAEUS: He came down with something or other, Socrates. He wouldn't have missed our meeting willingly.

SOCRATES: Well then, isn't it for you and your companions to fill in for your absent friend?

TIMAEUS: You're quite right. Anyhow, we'll do our best not to come up short. You did such a fine job yesterday hosting us visitors that now it wouldn't be right if the three of us didn't go all out to give you a feast in return. b

SOCRATES: Do you remember all the subjects I assigned to you to speak on?

TIMAEUS: Some we do. And if there are any we don't—well, you're here to remind us. Better still, if it's not too much trouble, why don't you take a few minutes to go back through them from the beginning? That way they'll be the more firmly fixed in our minds.

SOCRATES: Very well. I talked about politics yesterday and my main point, I think, had to do with the kind of political structure cities should c

have and the kind of men that should make it up so as to be the best possible.

TIMAEUS: Yes, Socrates, so you did, and we were all very satisfied with your description of it.

SOCRATES: Didn't we begin by separating off the class of farmers and all the other craftsmen in the city from the class of those who were to wage war on its behalf?

TIMAEUS: Yes.

d SOCRATES: And we followed nature in giving each person only one occupation, one craft for which he was well suited. And so we said that only those whose job it was to wage war on everyone's behalf should be the guardians of the city. And if some foreigner or even a citizen were to go
18 against the city to cause trouble, these guardians should judge their own subjects lightly, since they are their natural friends. But they should be harsh, we said, with the enemies they encountered on the battlefield.

TIMAEUS: Yes, absolutely.

SOCRATES: That's because—as I think we said—the guardians' souls should have a nature that is at once both spirited and philosophical to the highest degree, to enable them to be appropriately gentle or harsh as the case may be.

TIMAEUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: What about their training? Didn't we say that they were to be given both physical and cultural training, as well as training in any other appropriate fields of learning?

TIMAEUS: We certainly did.

b SOCRATES: Yes, and we said, I think, that those who received this training shouldn't consider gold or silver or anything else as their own private property. Like the professionals they are, they should receive from those under their protection a wage for their guardianship that's in keeping with their moderate way of life. And we said that they should share their expenses and spend their time together, live in one another's company, and devote their care above all to excellence, now that they were relieved of all other occupations.

TIMAEUS: Yes, we said that as well.

c SOCRATES: And in fact we even made mention of women. We said that their natures should be made to correspond with those of men, and that all occupations, whether having to do with war or with the other aspects of life, should be common to both men and women.

TIMAEUS: That, too, was discussed.

d SOCRATES: And what did we say about the procreation of children? We couldn't possibly forget that subject, because what we said about it was so unusual. We decided that they should all have spouses and children in common and that schemes should be devised to prevent anyone of them from recognizing his or her own particular child. Everyone of them would believe that they all make up a single family, and that all who fall within their own age bracket are their sisters and brothers, that those who are

older, who fall in an earlier bracket, are their parents or grandparents, while those who fall in a later one are their children or grandchildren.

TIMAEUS: You're right. That really was an unforgettable point.

SOCRATES: And surely we also remember saying, don't we, that to make their natures as excellent as possible right from the start, the rulers, male and female, should secretly arrange marriages by lot, to make sure that good men and bad ones would each as a group be separately matched up with women like themselves? And we said that this arrangement wouldn't create any animosity among them, because they'd believe that the matching was due to chance?

TIMAEUS: Yes, we remember.

SOCRATES: And do we also remember saying that the children of the good parents were to be brought up, while those of the bad ones were to be secretly handed on to another city? And that these children should be constantly watched as they grew up, so that the ones that turned out deserving might be taken back again and the ones they kept who did not turn out that way should change places with them?

TIMAEUS: We did say so.

SOCRATES: So now, Timaeus, are we done with our review of yesterday's talk—at least with its main points—or are we missing some point we made then? Have we left anything out?

TIMAEUS: Not a thing, Socrates. This is exactly what we said.

SOCRATES: All right, I'd like to go on now and tell you what I've come to feel about the political structure we've described. My feelings are like those of a man who gazes upon magnificent looking animals, whether they're animals in a painting or even actually alive but standing still, and who then finds himself longing to look at them in motion or engaged in some struggle or conflict that seems to show off their distinctive physical qualities. I felt the same thing about the city we've described. I'd love to listen to someone give a speech depicting our city in a contest with other cities, competing for those prizes that cities typically compete for. I'd love to see our city distinguish itself in the way it goes to war and in the way it pursues the war: that it deals with the other cities, one after another, in ways that reflect positively on its own education and training, both in word and deed—that is, both in how it behaves toward them and how it negotiates with them. Now on these matters, Critias and Hermocrates, I charge myself with being quite unable to sing fitting praise to our city and its men. That this should be so in my case isn't at all surprising. But I have come to have the same opinion of the poets, our ancient poets as well as today's. I have no disrespect for poets in general, but everyone knows that imitators as a breed are best and most adept at imitating the sort of things they've been trained to imitate. It's difficult enough for any one of them to do a decent job of imitating in performance, let alone in narrative description, anything that lies outside their training. And again, I've always thought that sophists as a class are very well versed in making long speeches and doing many other fine things. But because they wander from

one city to the next and never settle down in homes of their own, I'm afraid their representations of those philosopher-statesmen would simply miss their mark. Sophists are bound to misrepresent whatever these leaders accomplish on the battlefield when they engage any of their enemies, whether in actual warfare or in negotiations.

So that leaves people of your sort, then. By nature as well as by training you take part in both philosophy and politics at once. Take Timaeus here. He's from Locri, an Italian city under the rule of excellent laws. None of his compatriots outrank him in property or birth, and he has come to occupy positions of supreme authority and honor in his city. Moreover, he has, in my judgment, mastered the entire field of philosophy. As for Critias, I'm sure that all of us here in Athens know that he's no mere layman in any of the areas we're talking about. And many people whose testimony must surely be believed assure us that Hermocrates, too, is well qualified by nature and training to deal with these matters. Already yesterday I was aware of this when you asked me to discuss matters of government, and that's why I was eager to do your bidding. I knew that if you'd agree to make the follow-up speech, no one could do a better job than you. No one today besides you could present our city pursuing a war that reflects her true character. Only you could give her all she requires. So now that I'm done speaking on my assigned subject, I've turned the tables and assigned you to speak on the subject I've just described. You've thought about this together as a group, and you've agreed to reciprocate at this time. Your speeches are your hospitality gifts, and so here I am, all dressed up for the occasion. No one could be more prepared to receive your gifts than I.

HERMOCRATES: Yes indeed, Socrates, you won't find us short on enthusiasm, as Timaeus has already told you. We don't have the slightest excuse for not doing as you say. Why, already yesterday, right after we had left here and got to Critias' guest quarters where we're staying—and even earlier on our way there—we were thinking about this very thing. And then Critias brought up a story that goes back a long way. Tell him the story now, Critias, so he can help us decide whether or not it will serve the purpose of our assignment.

CRITIAS: Yes, we really should, if our third partner, Timaeus, also agrees.

TIMAEUS: Of course I do.

CRITIAS: Let me tell you this story then, Socrates. It's a very strange one, but even so, every word of it is true. It's a story that Solon, the wisest of the seven sages once vouched for. He was a kinsman and a very close friend of my great-grandfather Dropides. Solon himself says as much in many places in his poetry. Well, Dropides told the story to my grandfather Critias, and the old man in his turn would tell it to us from memory. The story is that our city had performed great and marvelous deeds in ancient times, which, owing to the passage of time and to the destruction of human life, have vanished. Of all these deeds one in particular was magnificent. It is this one that we should now do well to commemorate and present

to you as our gift of thanks. In so doing we shall also offer the goddess a hymn, as it were, of just and true praise on this her festival.¹

SOCRATES: Splendid! Tell me, though, what was that ancient deed our city performed, the one that Solon reported and old Critias told you about? I've never heard of it. They say it really happened?

CRITIAS: I'll tell you. It's an ancient story I heard from a man who was no youngster himself. In fact, at the time Critias was pretty close to ninety years old already—so he said—and I was around ten or so. As it happened, it was the day of the presentation of children during the Apaturia.² On this occasion, too, we children got the customary treatment at the feast: our fathers started a recitation contest. Many compositions by many different poets were recited, and many of us children got to sing the verses of Solon, because they were new at the time. Now someone, a member of our clan, said that he thought that Solon was not only the wisest of men in general, but that his poetry in particular showed him to be the most civilized of all the poets. (The man may have been speaking his mind, or else he may have just wanted to make Critias feel good.) And the old man—how well I remember it—was tickled. He grinned broadly and said, "Yes, Amynder, it's too bad that Solon wrote poetry only as a diversion and didn't seriously work at it like the other poets. And too bad that he never finished the story he'd brought back home with him from Egypt. He was forced to abandon that story on account of the civil conflicts and all the other troubles he found here when he returned. Otherwise not even Hesiod or Homer, or any other poet at all would ever have become more famous than he. That's what I think, anyhow." "Well, Critias? What story was that?" asked the other. "It's the story about the most magnificent thing our city has ever done," replied Critias, "an accomplishment that deserves to be known far better than any of her other achievements. But owing to the march of time and the fact that the men who accomplished it have perished, the story has not survived to the present." "Please tell us from the beginning," said the other, "What was this 'true story' that Solon heard? How did he get to hear it? Who told him?"

"In Egypt," Critias began, "in that part of the Delta where the stream of the Nile divides around the vertex there is a district called the Saïtic. The most important city of this district is Saïs. (This is in fact also the city from which King Amasis came.) This city was founded by a goddess whose name was 'Neith' in Egyptian and (according to the people there) 'Athena' in Greek. They are very friendly to Athens and claim to be related to our people somehow or other. Now Solon said that when he arrived there the people began to revere him. Furthermore, he said that when he asked those priests of theirs who were scholars of antiquity about ancient times,

1: The goddess is Athena, patron deity of Athens; the conversation is presumably taking place at the celebration of the Panathenaic Festival in Athens.

2: The Apaturia was celebrated in Athens in October–November of each year. The presentation of children took place on the third day.

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he discovered that just about every Greek, including himself, was all but completely ignorant about such matters. On one occasion, wanting to lead them on to talk about antiquity, he broached the subject of our own ancient history. He started talking about Phoroneus—the first human being, it is said—and about Niobe, and then he told the story of how Deucalion and Pyrrha survived the flood. He went on to trace the lines of descent of their posterity, and tried to compute their dates by calculating the number of years which had elapsed since the events of which he spoke. And then one of the priests, a very old man, said, ‘Ah, Solon, Solon, you Greeks are ever children. There isn’t an old man among you.’ On hearing this, Solon said, ‘What? What do you mean?’ ‘You are young,’ the old priest replied, ‘young in soul, every one of you. Your souls are devoid of beliefs about antiquity handed down by ancient tradition. Your souls lack any learning made hoary by time. The reason for that is this: There have been, and there will continue to be, numerous disasters that have destroyed human life in many kinds of ways. The most serious of these involve fire and water, while the lesser ones have numerous other causes. And so also among your people the tale is told that Phaethon, child of the Sun, once harnessed his father’s chariot, but was unable to drive it along his father’s course. He ended up burning everything on the earth’s surface and was destroyed himself when a lightning bolt struck him. This tale is told as a myth, but the truth behind it is that there is a deviation in the heavenly bodies that travel around the earth, which causes huge fires that destroy what is on the earth across vast stretches of time. When this happens all those people who live in mountains or in places that are high and dry are much more likely to perish than the ones who live next to rivers or by the sea. Our Nile, always our savior, is released and at such times, too, saves us from this disaster. On the other hand, whenever the gods send floods of water upon the earth to purge it, the herdsmen and shepherds in the mountains preserve their lives, while those who live in cities, in your region, are swept by the rivers into the sea. But here, in this place, water does not flow from on high onto our fields, either at such a time or any other. On the contrary, its nature is always to rise up from below. This, then, explains the fact that the antiquities preserved here are said to be the most ancient. The truth is that in all places where neither inordinate cold nor heat prevent it, the human race will continue to exist, sometimes in greater, sometimes in lesser numbers. Now of all the events reported to us, no matter where they’ve occurred—in your parts or in ours—if there are any that are noble or great or distinguished in some other way, they’ve all been inscribed here in our temples and preserved from antiquity on. In your case, on the other hand, as in that of others, no sooner have you achieved literacy and all the other resources that cities require, than there again, after the usual number of years, comes the heavenly flood. It sweeps upon you like a plague, and leaves only your illiterate and uncultured people behind. You become infants all over again, as it were, completely unfamiliar with anything there was in ancient times, whether here or in

your own region. And so, Solon, the account you just gave of your people's lineage is just like a nursery tale. First of all, you people remember only one flood, though in fact there had been a great many before. Second, you are unaware of the fact that the finest and best of all the races of humankind once lived in your region. This is the race from whom you yourself, your whole city, all that you and your countrymen have today, are sprung, thanks to the survival of a small portion of their stock. But this has escaped you, because for many generations the survivors passed on without leaving a written record. Indeed, Solon, there was a time, before the greatest of these devastating floods, when the city that is Athens today not only excelled in war but also distinguished itself by the excellence of its laws in every area. Its accomplishments and its social arrangements are said to have been the finest of all those under heaven of which we have received report.'

"When Solon heard this he was astounded, he said, and with unreserved eagerness begged the priests to give him a detailed, consecutive account of all that concerned those ancient citizens. 'I won't grudge you this, Solon,' the priest replied. 'I'll tell you the story for your own benefit as well as your city's, and especially in honor of our patron goddess who has founded, nurtured and educated our cities, both yours and ours. Yours she founded first, a thousand years before ours, when she had received from Earth and Hephaestus the seed from which your people were to come. Now our social arrangement, according to the records inscribed in our sacred documents, is eight thousand years old. Nine thousand years ago, then, did these fellow citizens of yours live, whose laws and whose finest achievement I'll briefly describe to you. At another time we'll go through all the details one by one at our leisure and inspect the documents themselves.

"Let's compare your ancient laws with ours today. You'll discover many instances that once existed among you, existing among us today. First, you'll find that the class of priests is marked off and separated from the other classes. Next, in the case of the working class, you'll find that each group—the herdsmen, the hunters and the farmers—works independently, without mixing with the others. In particular, I'm sure you've noticed that our warrior class has been separated from all the others. It's been assigned by law to occupy itself exclusively with matters of war. Moreover, the style of armor used is that of shields and spears, which we were the first among the peoples of Asia to use for arming ourselves. The goddess instructed us just as she first instructed you in the regions where you live. Moreover, as for wisdom, I'm sure you can see how much attention our way of life here has devoted to it, right from the beginning. In our study of the world order we have traced all our discoveries, including prophecy and health-restoring medicine, from those divine realities to human levels, and we have also acquired all the other related disciplines. This is in fact nothing less than the very same system of social order that the goddess first devised for you when she founded your city, which she did once she

had chosen the region in which your people were born, and had discerned that the temperate climate in it throughout the seasons would bring forth men of surpassing wisdom. And, being a lover of both war and wisdom, the goddess chose the region that was likely to bring forth men most like herself, and founded it first. And so you came to live there, and to observe laws such as these. In fact your laws improved even more, so that you came to surpass all other peoples in every excellence, as could be expected from those whose begetting and nurture were divine.

“Now many great accomplishments of your city recorded here are awe-inspiring, but there is one that surely surpasses them all in magnitude and excellence. The records speak of a vast power that your city once brought to a halt in its insolent march against the whole of Europe and Asia at once—a power that sprang forth from beyond, from the Atlantic ocean. For at that time this ocean was passable, since it had an island in it in front of the strait that you people say you call the ‘Pillars of Heracles.’³ This island was larger than Libya and Asia combined, and it provided passage to the other islands for people who traveled in those days. From those islands one could then travel to the entire continent on the other side, which surrounds that real sea beyond. Everything here inside the strait we’re talking about seems nothing but a harbor with a narrow entrance, whereas that really is an ocean out there and the land that embraces it all the way around truly deserves to be called a continent. Now on this Isle of Atlantis a great and marvelous royal power established itself, and ruled not only the whole island, but many of the other islands and parts of the continent as well. What’s more, their rule extended even inside the strait, over Libya as far as Egypt, and over Europe as far as Tyrrhenia.⁴ Now one day this power gathered all of itself together, and set out to enslave all of the territory inside the strait, including your region and ours, in one fell swoop. Then it was, Solon, that your city’s might shone bright with excellence and strength, for all humankind to see. Preeminent among all others in the nobility of her spirit and in her use of all the arts of war, she first rose to the leadership of the Greek cause. Later, forced to stand alone, deserted by her allies, she reached a point of extreme peril. Nevertheless she overcame the invaders and erected her monument of victory. She prevented the enslavement of those not yet enslaved, and generously freed all the rest of us who lived within the boundaries of Heracles. Some time later excessively violent earthquakes and floods occurred, and after the onset of an unbearable day and a night, your entire warrior force sank below the earth all at once, and the Isle of Atlantis likewise sank below the sea and disappeared. That is how the ocean in that region has come

3. The strait of Gibraltar.

4. South of the Mediterranean the empire extended across North Africa to the western frontier of Egypt. To the north it included Europe as far east as central Italy.

to be even now unnavigable and unexplorable, obstructed as it is by a layer of mud at a shallow depth,⁵ the residue of the island as it settled.”

What I've just related, Socrates, is a concise version of old Critias' story, as Solon originally reported it. While you were speaking yesterday about politics and the men you were describing, I was reminded of what I've just told you and was quite amazed as I realized how by some supernatural chance your ideas are on the mark, in substantial agreement with what Solon said. I didn't want to say so at the time, though. Because it had been so long ago, I didn't remember Solon's story very well. So I realized that I would first have to recover the whole story for myself well enough, and then to tell it that way. That's why I was so quick to agree to your assignment yesterday. The most important task in situations like these is to propose a speech that rewards people's expectations, and so I thought that we would be well supplied if I gave this one. And that's how—as Hermocrates has already said—the moment I left here yesterday, I began to repeat the story to him and to Timaeus as it came back to me. After I left them I concentrated on it during the night and recovered just about the whole thing. They say that the lessons of childhood have a marvelous way of being retained. How true that is! In my case, I don't know if I'd be able to recall everything I heard yesterday, but I'd be extremely surprised if any part of this story has gotten away from me, even though it's been a very long time since I heard it. What I heard then gave me so much childlike pleasure—the old man was so eager to teach me because I kept on asking one question after another—that the story has stayed with me like the indelible markings of a picture with the colors burnt in. Besides, I told the whole story to Timaeus and Hermocrates first thing this morning, so that not just I, but they, too, would have a supply of material for our speech.

I've said all this, Socrates, to prepare myself to tell Solon's story now. I won't just give you the main points, but the details, one by one, just the way I heard it. We'll translate the citizens and the city you described to us in mythical fashion yesterday to the realm of fact, and place it before us as though it is ancient Athens itself. And we'll say that the citizens you imagined are the very ones the priest spoke about, our actual ancestors. The congruence will be complete, and our song will be in tune if we say that your imaginary citizens are the ones who really existed at that time. We'll share the task among us, and we'll all try our best to do justice to your assignment. What do you think, Socrates? Will this do as our speech, or should we look for another to replace it?

SOCRATES: Well, Critias, what other speech could we possibly prefer to this one? We're in the midst of celebrating the festival of the goddess, and this speech really fits the occasion. So it couldn't be more appropriate. And of course the fact that it's no made-up story but a true account is no

5. Reading *kata bracheos* in d5.

27 small matter. How and where shall we find others to celebrate if we let these men go? We've no choice. Go on with your speech, then, and good luck! It's my turn now to sit back and listen to your speeches that pay back mine of yesterday.

b CRITIAS: All right, Socrates, what do you think of the plan we've arranged for our guest gift to you? We thought that because Timaeus is our expert in astronomy and has made it his main business to know the nature of the universe, he should speak first, beginning with the origin of the universe, and concluding with the nature of human beings. Then I'll go next, once I'm in possession of Timaeus' account of the origin of human beings and your account of how some of them came to have a superior education. I'll introduce them, as not only Solon's account but also his law would have it, into our courtroom and make them citizens of our ancient city—as really being those Athenians of old whom the report of the sacred records has rescued from obscurity—and from then on I'll speak of them as actual Athenian citizens.

SOCRATES: Apparently I'll be getting a complete, brilliant banquet of speeches in payment for my own. Very well then, Timaeus, the task of being our next speaker seems to fall to you. Why don't you make an invocation to the gods, as we customarily do?

TIMAEUS: That I will, Socrates. Surely anyone with any sense at all will