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PLATO'S TIMAEUS



Translation, Glossary,
Appendices and Introductory Essay
Peter Kalkavage

Series editor
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Translation, Glossary,
Appendices, and Introductory Essay

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ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE, ANNAPOLIS

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Cover: Greek red-figure amphore ca. 490 BC, attributed to the Berlin Painter; Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund.

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PREFACE

The aim of this edition is to provide the English-speaking reader with a reliable translation of Plato's *Timaeus*. It is intended mainly for the adventuresome beginner. A veritable museum of Greek mathematics and physical science, the *Timaeus* is Plato's most forbidding dialogue. To offer the reader what I hope is the right amount of help, I have provided footnotes, a glossary, and appendices on music, astronomy and geometry. The appendices are intended as a primer for reading the *Timaeus*. Readers who want more detailed information are encouraged to consult *Plato's Cosmology* by F. M. Cornford, the commentary by A. E. Taylor, or Albert Rivaud's lucid introduction to his French translation in the Budé series. The Introductory Essay is intended more to provoke further questioning than to settle issues.

The *Timaeus* has a remarkable history. It is the dialogue most referred to (and criticized) by Aristotle. Thanks to the Latin translation by Chalcidius,* it was the only Platonic dialogue known to the medieval western world. Over the centuries the dialogue has inspired and instructed such diverse thinkers as Proclus, Plotinus, Dante, Montaigne, Kepler, Leibniz, Vico, Schelling, Goethe, Whitehead and Heisenberg. In the last century there has been a search for "Plato's cosmology," to use the phrase of Cornford's title. The search has unearthed valuable information but has been almost entirely historical and philological in nature. Little has been done to show why the *Timaeus* might be of enduring philosophic value. The dialogue has been treated as though it were an antique.

* Chalcidius, *Timaeus a Calcidio Translatus Commentarioque Instructus*, ed. J. H. Waszink, Leiden: Brill, 1962. Chalcidius translated only about *half* the dialogue into Latin (up to the end of 53B). For a brief account of Chalcidius on the *Timaeus* and Christian doctrine, see C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, pp. 49-60. "Chalcidius determined what the name of Plato should chiefly stand for throughout the middle ages" (*ibid.*, p. 52).

Now, antiquarianism is one of the central themes of the *Timaeus*. The Egyptian priests of Critias' tale record all the goings-on of the cosmos. They reduce the life of the whole to an infinite set of meaningless facts that are recorded—or rather, mummified—in the Egyptian archives. In this, his most antiquarian dialogue, Plato indirectly warns the reader not to become an Egyptian priest. The reader must resist the very spell of antiquarianism that the dialogue playfully casts. My hope for this edition is that it will help bring the *Timaeus* out of its Egyptian bondage to merely historical curiosity and the deciphering of this or that technical detail. I hope that readers will be encouraged to find in the *Timaeus* not merely a repository of Greek science but an occasion for their own thinking about the power of myth, the nature of the soul, history and politics, wholeness and the love of beauty, the human fascination with origins, the will to order, and the prospects of physical science for giving an adequate account of the world and man's place in the world.

The would-be translator of the *Timaeus* is keenly aware of his debts. In the course of completing this edition, I have relied extensively on the efforts of previous translators and commentators. The appendices and notes owe much to Cornford in particular. My colleagues and fellow translators, Eva Brann and Eric Salem, offered their continued encouragement and insightful responses to early drafts. Without our collaborative effort in translating the *Sophist* and *Phaedo* for Focus Press, this edition of the *Timaeus* would not have been possible. Another colleague and friend, Adam Schulman, was enormously helpful in the physical preparation of the text. Keith Whitaker, the editor for Focus Press, worked long and hard on my drafts and made incisive suggestions and corrections. Professor Alejandro Vallega of California State University offered valuable suggestions for the overall shape of the edition as well as for the translation. I am also indebted to St. John's College, whose wide-ranging liberal arts curriculum has allowed me to gain first-hand experience in teaching the disciplines central to the dialogue.

Above all, I wish to thank my wife, Christine, with whom I have had countless talks about the *Timaeus* over the last twenty-five years. My debt to her is beyond measure. Her patience, long hours of proof-reading and mastery of Greek were responsible for catching many errors and for helping to make the translation more consistent, accurate and interesting than it would otherwise have been.

PETER KALKAVAGE
ANNAPOLIS
DECEMBER 2000

TIMAEUS

Socrates, Timaeus, Hermocrates, Critias

- 17A **Socrates:** One, two, three ... but now where's our fourth, my dear Timaeus, of yesterday's feasters and hosts of today?
- Timaeus:** Some illness befell him, Socrates—he wouldn't have been left out of this meeting willingly.
- Socrates:** Then does the task of filling the missing one's part belong to you and these fellows here?
- B **Timaeus:** It certainly does, and we'll do everything in our power, at least, not to fall short in any way. Besides, it wouldn't be at all just for those of us who are left, after being entertained by you yesterday with gifts so befitting to guests, not to host you heartily in return.
- Socrates:** So then, I take it you remember what I ordered—how many things you were to speak of and about what?
- Timaeus:** Some of it we remember; and as for what we don't, you're here to remind us—or rather, unless there's some difficulty for you, go through it again briefly from the beginning, just to make it more secure for us.
- C **Socrates:** So be it. I suppose the chief part of the speeches recounted by me yesterday was about what sort of regime, as it appeared to me, would come to be best and of what sort of men it would be made.
- Timaeus:** And to be sure, Socrates, the regime you recounted was very much to the mind of us all.
- Socrates:** So then, as for the class of those who till the earth, and all the other arts in the regime, didn't we first off distinguish them as separate from the class of those who were to make war on the city's behalf?
- Timaeus:** Yes.
- Socrates:** And when, exactly in accordance with nature, we gave to each man the one sole occupation that was suited to his very self—one art to each—we said that those who had to make war on behalf of all, and they alone, had to be the guardians of the city, if anyone from the outside or even of those within might set out to do her harm; and that they'd
- D
- 18A

be gentle in dealing out justice to the people ruled by them, since they were by nature friends, but would become harsh in their battles against the enemies they happened to run into.

Timaeus: That's altogether so.

Socrates: For I think we were saying that the soul of the guardians had to be of a certain nature—spirited but at the same time philosophic, in the highest degree—so that they'd be able to become correctly gentle, and harsh, toward the people we mentioned.

Timaeus: Yes.

Socrates: And what about their upbringing? Weren't we saying that they'd been brought up on lessons in both gymnastics and music, in all things, in short, that were appropriate to these men?

Timaeus: Of course.

- B **Socrates:** And I suppose it was said that those brought up this way must never regard either gold or silver or anything else as their own private property. On the contrary, they must regard themselves as auxiliaries who take from those kept safe and sound by them a temperate wage for moderate men; and, in fact, they're to spend it in common and live as companions with each another, continually exercising a care for virtue and staying at leisure from all other occupations.

Timaeus: That too was said, and in just that way.

- C **Socrates:** Furthermore, regarding women, we mentioned that their natures were to be tuned to the men and so made similar to them, and that to all the women all occupations were to be given in common, those pertaining to war as well as to the rest of life's regimen.

Timaeus: That's just the way that too was said.

- D **Socrates:** Well, and what about the part that had to do with child-production? Or is that easy to remember because of the unusualness of what was said? We set it down, did we not, that regarding marriages and children all would be in common with all; and we contrived it so that no one might ever recognize his own private progeny, and all will regard all as their very kinsmen—as sisters and brothers if these happened to be within an age that fit their own, but as parents and grandparents if they came before and were upwards in age, and as their own offspring and descendants of their offspring if these were children and lower down in age?

Timaeus: Yes, and that's easy to remember, just as you say.

Socrates: And indeed, in order that they might become, to the best of our power, as good as possible in their natures right from the start, don't we remember how we said that the rulers, male and female, had to contrive some sort of lottery by secret ballots for marital coupling so that the

The translation makes a significant contribution to the study of Plato both at the introductory and advanced levels. Kalkavage's translation is a brilliant accomplishment as he makes the *Timaeus*, one of Plato's most intricate and important dialogues, accessible to new readers while remaining close to the Greek and to the philosophical complexities that will interest advanced students and scholars.

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