

DESIGNER HISTORY: PLATO'S ATLANTIS STORY AND FOURTH-CENTURY IDEOLOGY*

I. INTRODUCTION

The myth of Athens and Atlantis in Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias* can be, and has been, interpreted on a number of different levels. On the most fundamental, philosophical level the myth sets into narrative motion the paradigm of the ideal state elaborated in the *Republic*. Gill, in a series of publications, has done much to throw light on the nature of this invention: its relationship with modern categories of fiction and with antecedent historiography.¹ Yet the extent to which the myth of Atlantis is embedded in larger fourth-century political and historiographical concerns has been insufficiently appreciated.² In what follows, I shall attempt to reconstruct some of these concerns. I shall argue, first, that the narrative set-up of the Atlantis myth corresponds to the conditions specified in the *Republic* for the successful creation of a charter myth (the 'Noble Lie') for the ideal city, and that this is a valuable indication of the truth status of the myth and of the function it is expected to perform. This function is not merely a matter of abstract philosophical interest, since there are close parallels between the Atlantis myth and contemporary panegyric versions of Athenian history; in Section III, therefore, I shall explore these parallels through an examination of some Isocratean orations. Sections IV and V will investigate how such panegyric history illuminates areas of ideological concern for Athenians in the first half of the fourth century, most notably worries about legitimating the constitution (*politeia*) under which they lived, and about the attitude that should be taken towards Athenian maritime interests in the Aegean. The Atlantis myth creates a vision of Athens that is true to Plato's political ideals, but which is animated by contemporary historical *topoi*. The result is a narrative for an audience of philosophical *cognoscenti* that both rejects and transforms such *topoi*, and sparks a second-order consideration of the forces at work in the construction of history.

The contents of the myth are well known. At the beginning of the *Timaeus*, Socrates declares his dissatisfaction with a *Republic*-like discussion held on the previous day (19b-c). He wants an account of the just city in action, rather than a bare description. The other interlocutors in the dialogue are the astronomer Timaeus (probably a fictional character), and two historical politicians, Critias of Athens and Hermocrates of Syracuse.³ The philosophical entertainment

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¹ C. Gill, 'Plato on falsehood—not fiction', in C. Gill and T.P. Wiseman (eds.), *Lies and Fiction in the Ancient World* (Exeter 1993) 38-87; 'Plato's Atlantis story and the birth of fiction', *Ph&Lit* 3 (1979) 64-78; 'The genre of the Atlantis story', *CPh* 72 (1977) 287-304.

² The fourth-century context is adumbrated at Gill, 1977(n.1) 295 n.36, and in P. Vidal-Naquet, 'Athènes et l'Atlantide. Structure et signification d'un mythe platonicien', *REG* 77 (1964) 433 with n.66. L. Brisson, 'De la philosophie politique à l'épopée. Le "Critias" de Platon', *RMM* 75 (1970) 436 is the most expansive: 'il ne faut chercher l'île mystérieuse nulle part ailleurs que dans l'Athènes du V^e et du IV^e siècles dont une des faces est tournée vers la puissance maritime'. Brisson does not, however, examine the larger context of fourth-century panegyric and historiography.

³ The latter is plausibly identified with the Hermocrates who appears in the narrative of Thucydides as an architect of resistance against Athenian imperialist designs. The identity of Critias is more problematic. Gill, 1977 (n.1) 294 n.33, assumes that he is the notorious member of the oligarchic junta of 404-3 BC. This interpretation is accepted also by J.K. Davies, *Athenian Propertied Families* (Oxford 1971) 325. This would make him Plato's mother's cousin. Such an interpretation has not gone unchallenged, however. J.V. Luce has argued, based on Davies' stemma, that our Critias is Plato's great-grandfather ('The sources and literary form of Plato's Atlantis narrative', in E.S. Ramage [ed.], *Atlantis. Fact or Fiction?* [Bloomington 1978] 76-8, with discussion of previous scholarship). Critias' reference to his old age at *Tim.* 26b inclines me to believe that Critias is not the oligarch, and I note that

envisaged by the interlocutors is that Timaeus will give an account of the creation of the universe, followed by Critias, who will tell the story of ancient Athens and Atlantis. By a happy coincidence, the excellence of ancient Athens is well-suited to set the picture of the ideal state into narrative motion. The narrative of the *Timaeus* tells how

ἡ νῦν Ἀθηναίων οὐσα πόλις ἀρίστη πρὸς τε τὸν πόλεμον καὶ κατὰ πάντα εὐνομοτάτη διαφερόντως· ἦι κάλλιστα ἔργα καὶ πολιτεῖαι γενέσθαι λέγονται κάλλιστα πιασῶν ὀπόσων ὑπὸ τὸν οὐρανὸν ἡμεῖς ἀκοῆν παρεδεξάμεθα. (23c4-d1)

the city that is now Athens was the best in war and had in all respects the best laws by far. It is said to have performed the finest deeds and to have had the finest constitution of all of those we have heard report of under the face of heaven.

Among these deeds, the greatest was the defence of Europe and Asia against the hybridic island empire of Atlantis. When Atlantis attacked, Athens showed its excellence. She was the leader of the Greeks, but when they all deserted her she stood alone, defeated the enemy, prevented the free from being enslaved, and freed those who had been. This victory was, however, followed by earthquakes in which Atlantis sank into the sea and the Athenian army was swallowed up by the earth (24d-25d). The narrative of the *Critias* recounts in greater detail the disposition of ancient Athens and Atlantis, and begins to tell how Atlantis declined from its ancient virtue before the dialogue breaks off. Here then indeed is a charter myth for Plato's Athens.⁴ The Egyptian priests who are the ultimate source for the tale narrate that the laws of ancient Athens enjoined a strict hierarchical system, with priests, warriors, artisans and peasants (*Tim.* 24a-b). Critias explicitly identifies this system with that of the ideal state in the *Republic*. The citizens whom Socrates spoke of on the previous day are in fact Athenian ancestors (*Tim.* 25e-26d). Every character in the dialogue, including Socrates, claims to believe in the truth of this extraordinary coincidence. This is the more impressive because, as Socrates tells us, his interlocutors Timaeus, Critias, and Hermocrates are members of the only class of people fitted both by nature and by nurture to have a share both of politics and philosophy (τὸ τῆς ὑμετέρας ἕξεως γένος, ἄμα ἀμφοτέρων [viz. politics and philosophy] φύσει καὶ τροφῆι μετέχον 19e8-20a1). The situation is almost impossibly ideal.

II. CHARTER MYTHS AND TRUTH STATUS

We must first examine the truth status of the account, a status linked by the interlocutors to its historical utility. Critias introduces his tale of the origin of the Atlantis myth thus: 'Listen then, Socrates, to a very strange but absolutely true tale, as Solon, the wisest of the Seven Wise Men, once told it' (20d7-e1). Critias and Socrates stress the fact that the tale is historically true. The deed of the ancient Athenians is not merely spoken of, but was actually performed (οὐ λεγόμενον μὲν, ὡς δὲπραχθὲν ὄντως, 21a4-5). The ideal state that was described 'as if in myth' in the *Republic* (ὡς ἐν μύθῳ) will now be transferred to the realm of truth (ἐπὶ τᾶληθές) (26c8-d1). The tale has the great advantage of not being an invented *mythos* but a true *logos* (μὴ πλασθέντα μῦθον ἀλλ' ἀληθινὸν λόγον, 26e4-5). This stress on truth has caused problems for scholars of Atlantis and of Platonic myth alike. The most promising approach is, I think, to read Critias' exclamation over the marvellous coincidence of Solon's ancient Athens and Socrates' ideal city as an example of 'Platonic irony', which Rowe has

C. Osborne, 'Creative discourse in the *Timaeus*' in C. Gill and M.M. McCabe (eds.), *Form and Argument in late Plato* (Oxford 1996) 179-211, agrees, although, on her reading, maximizing the distance of the tale from the original narration indicates its inadequacy (182 n.8).

⁴ Gill, 1993 (n.1) 65.

described as 'a form of expression which, when taken with its context, tends to undermine itself... We are taken momentarily backstage, as it were, and shown the puppet-master at work'.⁵ When Critias says 'I was amazed ... when I realized how, marvellously, by some chance and not on purpose, you agreed in most respects with what Solon said' (δαίμονίως ἔκτινος τύχης οὐκ ἄπο σκοποῦ, 25e4-5),⁶ the very emphasis of the formulation invites the reader to distance herself from the narrative performance of the dialogue.

The mechanism through which the myth of Atlantis reaches the present of the *Timaeus* bears on the process of historical construction.⁷ Critias heard the story from his grandfather, Critias the son of Dropides, a relative of Solon. Like his literary forbears, Hecataeus and Herodotus, Solon has visited Egypt and talked to priests there.⁸ In Herodotus' narrative we hear how Hecataeus tried to trace his descent back to a god but was refuted by the priests (Hdt. 2.143). Solon is not as self-centred as Hecataeus. He tries to tell these priests the stories of Deucalion and Pyrrha in order to count generations and date the event. The priests greet this attempt with amusement: the Greeks are all children and have no accurate knowledge of the past. We have here the familiar association of myth with childhood, but the metaphor has been extended. The members of an entire civilization are called children, regardless of physical age: 'you are all young with respect to your souls' (22b6-7). None of them have the historical sophistication that would allow them to be called old (22b5); the entire Greek mythological tradition is childish stories, as are the genealogical complexities of the Greek aristocracy: 'the genealogies you have told are little different from children's stories', say the priests (23b3-5). Since the counting of generations was an important tool for the location of events in a remote historical past, this dismissal has the effect of cutting off the Greeks both from accurate history and from their cultural past.

The mechanism that achieves Greek ignorance is cosmological. There are periodic destructions of mankind, from which Egypt is saved by the beneficent protection of the Nile (22c-e). Civilization, and any accurate memory of the past, is destroyed everywhere else. Moreover, because of the cyclic nature of the destructions, the prospect for preserving knowledge in the future is slim. After each destruction, we infer, the rising civilization will have to provide itself with what we might call 'charter myths'; in the case of the current Greeks, as we know from the critique of poetic mythologizing in the *Republic*, these myths are childish and harmful.⁹ Because the Greeks are young in their souls (and, by implication, philosophically immature), they cannot be trusted to construct their history. Clearly, the success of such a project depends on one's prior knowledge of the truth, and since this truth is not a matter of record, the success will vary greatly.

Yet even if the speakers in the dialogue take Critias' protestations of truth at face value, the reader may be excused for feeling some misgivings. Certain parallels with the *Republic* suggest that more has been set in motion than the ideal of the perfect city, and highlight issues of the

⁵ C.J. Rowe, 'Platonic irony', *Nova Tellus* 5 (1987) 95.

⁶ If Critias is the oligarch, this passage becomes extremely resonant. It defines both the closeness and distance of any Critian politics from Socratic ones. One could say that the extreme irony here points up the appropriation by Critias of certain Socratic ideas, but also that any application of them is not a Socratic one. If members of the Thirty made pious noises about searching out the ancestral constitution, Critias' remarks are even more pointed. It may be that Plato has purposely constructed the character of Critias ambiguously, in order to spur reflection on these questions (cf. L. Brisson, *Platon, les mots et les mythes* [Paris 1982] 37).

⁷ For a more extensive treatment of the 'prehistory' of the Atlantis story, and one which makes it paradigmatic for mythological transmission in general, see Brisson (n.6) 32-49.

⁸ For the relationship between Plato and the historiography of Herodotus and Thucydides, see R. Weil, *L' "archéologie" de Platon* (Paris 1959) 18-26.

⁹ Compare *Rep.* 382d1-3 'In the mythological narratives we've just been talking about, because we don't know the truth about the past, we liken the false to the true as much as possible and so make it useful'.

modality and purpose of believing the myth. As a charter-myth for Athens, the tale of Atlantis has close connections with the Noble Lie (or the ‘Myth of the Metals’) at the end of *Republic* 3.¹⁰ This lie tells the prospective citizens of Socrates’ ideal state that, while they experienced being educated and trained for the new polity, they were really being formed within the earth, their mother and their nurse. The second part of the myth tells how each citizen has a genetic (metallic) inheritance that predisposes him or her to be a ruler, an auxiliary, a farmer or a craftsman. The object of the Noble Lie is to persuade the rulers of the city especially, but failing that, the rest of the city (μάλιστα μὲν καὶ αὐτοὺς τοὺς ἄρχοντας, εἰ δὲ μὴ, τὴν ἄλλην πόλιν, 414c1-2), that they should care for the city and each other. Socrates thinks it unlikely that they could induce the first generation to believe the myth of the metals, but it is possible that subsequent generations could be persuaded (415d2). Is this not the situation at the beginning of the *Timaeus*? Solon has been given a charter myth for Athens from the Egyptians, conveniently fetishized as preservers of accuracy about the past.¹¹ He tells this story to Critias’ grandfather, and the tale is passed down with the stamp of Solon’s authoritative truth on it. This tale has not yet been made available to the citizens of Athens at the dramatic date of the dialogue (421 perhaps?), but it has already persuaded Critias, and it shows every sign of having persuaded Socrates, Timaeus, and Hermocrates in advance. Of these four, three have been described as being suited to share in politics and philosophy and are in fact of some political importance in their respective cities. If the aim of a charter myth is particularly to persuade the rulers, the myth of Atlantis has made an excellent start. The truth of the tale must be acknowledged by the interlocutors because a successful noble lie does not make its fictional status transparent. This does not, however, mean that its status cannot be transparent to the reader.

These parallels with the *Republic* may indicate that one aspect of the Atlantis myth is Plato’s invitation to observe a Noble Lie in action and to speculate upon the possibilities of didactic mythologizing. If the tale of Athens and Atlantis were to be accepted both by a political elite, and by ordinary citizens, it would be a powerful paradigm for reform, especially given the Athenian predilection for elaborating the splendours of their past, both mythological and otherwise, and setting them up as a paradigm. Indeed, in a universe where accurate long-term historical knowledge is impossible, the use of a paradigmatic historical model is almost mandatory. But it is only the psychically mature who can be allowed to create it. The opening of the *Timaeus* thus creates a demand for the philosophical creation of history and demonstrates how the results might be implemented. The specific form taken by the myth (as a noble lie) is influenced by the *topoi* that animate contemporary Athenian versions of history, which are themselves charter myths.

III. THE ATLANTIS STORY AS PANEGYRIC HISTORY

Critias’ tale is a *festival* speech, which is told on the day of the Panathenaea in honour of Athena (*Tim.* 21a2-3) and is coloured by the epideictic rhetoric that characterized many Athenian festival occasions. The most famous genre glorifying the Athenian past and setting it up as a model for the present is, of course, the funeral oration, but throughout the fourth century Isocrates and others had been employing similar material.¹² Isocratean orations such as the

¹⁰ Gill, 1993 (n.1) 64-5.

¹¹ Although one might note that Egyptian authority in this sphere is itself a literary device, presumably borrowed from the historiographic tradition of Herodotus and Hecataeus (Gill, 1979 [n.1] 75).

¹² On festival orations, see G. Kennedy, *The Art of Persuasion in Greece* (Princeton 1963) 166-67. The most complete survey of the genre of the funeral oration is N. Loraux, *The Invention of Athens*, trans. A. Sheridan (Cambridge, Mass. 1986). As Loraux points out (302-3), Plato borrows most of the Atlantis myth from Athenian

Panegyricus and *Panathenaicus* were never performed by him, but this need not imply that his speeches were merely displays of eloquence.¹³ Isocrates stresses at the beginning of the *Panathenaicus* (1-2) that the aim of his career has been to give good advice.¹⁴ Part of this strategy is to argue from past glories and failures in order to establish the best course of action in the present; the paradigmatic role of the past is thus explicitly an issue. The charter-myth one chooses for Athens is a reflection of the programme one desires the city to follow.

Critias' ancient Athens participates in the commonplaces of fourth-century laudatory epideictic speeches, but creates them afresh and on a philosophic footing. Let us use the *Panegyricus* and *Panathenaicus* as examples of a more general discourse.¹⁵ The *Panegyricus* eulogizes Athens for making herself a model for the rest of Greece (παράδειγμα) and being the first to lay down laws and establish a constitution (νόμους ἔθετο καὶ πολιτείαν κατεστήσατο, 39-40). In the military sphere, Athens has endured many great struggles, both on her own behalf and on behalf of the freedom of others (ἀγῶνας ... πολλοὺς καὶ δεινοὺς καὶ μεγάλους, τοὺς μὲν ὑπὲρ τῆς αὐτῶν χώρας, τοὺς δ' ὑπὲρ τῆς τῶν ἄλλων ἐλευθερίας, 52). To enumerate all the dangers Athens faced when fighting the barbarians would be to speak at undue length; he will therefore narrate only the greatest. Thus, the Thracians and the Amazons tried to extend their power over Europe, but were utterly destroyed by the Athenians in an unparalleled defeat (68-70). Their most renowned victory was in the Persian War (66-68). The citizens of Athens at that time took care that the laws should be good, but realized that good men had little need of written laws; they strove to emulate each other in achieving the common good (78-79). The eulogy in the *Panathenaicus* is similar. Isocrates summarizes Athens' services to civilization, among them her expulsion of barbarians from the Greek islands and sea coasts (42-43), and her instruction of the other Greek cities in how to make Greece great (44). He then passes on to the excellence of her constitution—not the present one, but the constitution of the ancestors, who managed the city most nobly (τῶν προγόνων τῶν τὴν πόλιν κάλλιστα διοικησάντων, 120): a democracy mixed with aristocracy.

Both speeches construct a eulogistic model of Athenian history for contemporary emulation. This historical encomium encompasses both an Athenian constitution that surpasses all others and deeds of valour that make Athens preeminent in war. Note too that constitutional excellence is nostalgically retrojected into a mythological past. Points of comparison with the Atlantis story are numerous. Critias' Athens, like Isocrates', was by far the best in war and the best-governed (ἀρίστη πρὸς τε τὸν πόλεμον καὶ κατὰ πάντα εὐνομοτάτη διαφερόντως, *Tim.* 23c5-6). Both Plato and Isocrates employ the *topos* of singling out one deed or group of deeds among many (*Tim.* 24d; *Panegy.* 66). Both traditions record that Athens defended the Greeks and Europe against the incursions of hybriistic barbarians. In the *Timaeus*, Athens is the leader of Greece, undergoes extremes of danger (τοὺς ἐσχάτους ... κινδύνους), preserves some cities from slavery and liberates others (τοὺς δὲ μήπω δεδουλωμένους διεκώλυσεν δουλωθῆναι, τοὺς δ' ἄλλους ... ἀφθόνωσ ἀπαντας ἠλευθέρωσεν, 25c), just as, in the *Panegyricus*, Athens undergoes danger and preserves the freedom of all. When Critias expands the tale, we

tradition. For the Atlantis myth as a panathenaic oration, see F.M. Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology* (London 1937) 4-5; Luce (n.3) 59 with n. 28.

¹³ Of the speeches to be considered in this paper, *Panegyricus*, *On the Peace*, and *Areopagiticus* have been called variously symbolaetic, deliberative, or political. The *Busiris* and *Panathenaicus* have been labelled encomiastic and epideictic. For a survey of these generic classifications, see Yun Lee Too, *The Rhetoric of Identity in Isocrates* (Cambridge 1995) 13-17.

¹⁴ Too (n.13) 23-32. There is argument about the seriousness of Isocrates' advice. I return to this question below.

¹⁵ The *Panegyricus* is to be dated to 380 BC, and thus would have been available to Plato. The *Panathenaicus*, Isocrates' last work, dates to 342-339 BC, and thus postdates Plato.

learn that the Athenians administered justly both themselves and the rest of Greece, and were the most renowned people of that time (ἐλλόγμοι ... καὶ ὀνομαστότατοι, *Crit.* 112e5-6). They were the *hēgemonēs* of the Greeks, but their hegemony was willingly granted to them (Ἑλλήνων ἡγεμόνες ἐκόντων, 112d5). The *Panegyricus* tells us that, from the earliest time, the city was the leader of Greece (ἡγεμονικῶς εἶχε, 57), and in the aftermath of the Persian Wars, because it had excelled in every danger, it was given the prize of valour and rule over the sea (τοὺς κινδύνους διενεγκόντες, εὐθὺς μὲν τῶν ἀριστείων ἡξιώθησαν ... τὴν ἀρχὴν τῆς θαλάττης ἔλαβον, 72). Most notably, and as was the case in the *Critias*, this power is freely given. Those who now (that is, in the fourth century) seek to deprive Athens of her power did not then dispute it with them (οὐκ ἀμφισβητοῦντων, 72). Isocrates makes the same point in the *Areopagiticus*, this time explicitly tying it to constitutional excellence: those who used the constitution of the forefathers did many noble deeds, enjoyed a great reputation, and were willingly granted the hegemony by the Greeks (πολλὰ καὶ καλὰ διαπραξάμενοι καὶ παρὰ πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις εὐδοκίμησαντες, παρ' ἐκόντων τῶν Ἑλλήνων τὴν ἡγεμονίαν ἔλαβον, 17). The description of Athenian governmental practice and class structure (which refers us back to the discussion of the *Republic*) at *Crit.* 110c-d finds its counterparts in the Isocratean comments on Athenian constitutional excellence cited above.

One way of evaluating these extensive parallelisms is, like Loraux, to attribute them to a common reliance on the genre of the funeral oration. This model stresses how Isocrates takes both themes and modes of exposition from the oration, in what amounts to a form of plagiarism.¹⁶ Similarly, Plato would have constructed his Atlantis myth as a 'counter eulogy' which brings the funeral oration into question from the polemical standpoint of Platonic philosophy.¹⁷ Loraux dismisses the connection of the Atlantis myth with panathenaic orations because such orations had no institutional status in the fourth century.¹⁸ Yet the occasion for the *Timaeus-Critias* is not institutional; festival occasions gave many professionals the opportunity to display their eulogistic prowess. It is the sophists that Socrates rejects (after the poets) as potential speakers of his encomium of the city (*Tim.* 19e) in favour of the philosophical politician, and this should imply that Plato is not thinking only of the official funeral oration. I suggest that the links with Isocratean panegyric history are better read as a reflection of common concerns with the role of history in the first half of the fourth century. To be sure, such panegyric narratives find their literary ancestry in the funeral oration, but take on an added resonance in contemporary political debates. Isocrates is interested in using the past as a basis for present action, and Plato's concerns are not merely generic and theoretical; if they were, there would have been no need to stress that the purpose of the Atlantis myth is to bring the ideal city down to earth.

It is instructive to contrast Plato's treatment of similar themes in the *Menexenus*. The funeral oration delivered by Socrates in that dialogue is rightly considered parodic, and shows the extremities to which Plato could take the *topoi* of panegyric.¹⁹ We note the dual stress on excellence of government and nobility of deeds. The Athenian *politeia* is an aristocracy, although it is sometimes called a democracy. It is ruled by those who seem to be good and wise (ὁ δόξας σοφὸς ἢ ἀγαθὸς εἶναι κρατεῖ καὶ ἄρχει, 238d8—a particularly savage twist). It has performed many noble deeds (πολλὰ ... καὶ καλὰ ἔργα), and has fought on behalf of freedom against both Greeks and barbarians, battles exemplified in the mythical past but

¹⁶ Loraux (n.12) 91-7, 142.

¹⁷ Loraux (n.12) 298.

¹⁸ Loraux (n.12) 455 n.168.

¹⁹ On the *Menexenus* as parody, see G. Vlastos, 'ἸΣΟΝΟΜΙΑ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΗ', in G. Vlastos, *Platonic Studies* ² (Princeton 1981) 188-201; Loraux (n.12) 311-27.

especially in the Persian Wars (239a-d). The Peloponnesian Wars and the events at the beginning of the fourth century cause great embarrassment for the speaker. Athenian defeats are glossed over, and events are explained by the jealousy of the Greeks at Athenian prosperity.²⁰ The wounding ingratitude of the Greeks almost causes Athens to cease her benefactions (244b-c), but her compassion wins the day (244e-245a). No defeat that is not a moral victory. The difficulty in dealing with events after the Persian Wars points up the problems inherent in using recent history as a paradigm (cf. *Menex.* 236e5-6). History has been appropriated to praise; as Socrates remarks, it is easy to speak well when one is speaking among the objects of praise (235d5-6). The funeral oration claims to be a spur to present action, but is so tainted by encomium that it loses its effectiveness, as Plato's *reductio* shows. It too is 'designer history', but is designed to respond to a narcissistic Athenian desire for self-congratulation: the nature of the design corresponds to the model to which its author looks.²¹ The oration in the *Menexenus* is true to its genre, but is backed only by its own generic authority, not by the knowledge of a philosophical expert; the lie is not noble, and it has no hope of being believed. It is surely relevant in this context that the audience of the Atlantis myth is made up of experts.

Critias' account of Athens and Atlantis stands recognizably, then, in the tradition of eulogistic Athenian festival speeches along Isocratean lines. Just as these speeches treat the mythological past as part of a verifiable historical continuum, so Critias assimilates myth to a similar historical tradition. Yet Plato makes him do this in such a way that the tale is a philosophical advance over its crudely patriotic counterparts. If it is, from our point of view, to be a 'lie,' it must at least be a noble one. We have already seen that the willingness of the interlocutors to take the tale at face value is an indication of its philosophical nobility from the perspective of the *Republic*; this is a tale that convinces the philosophically and politically sophisticated. When Critias tells his story, he is not merely engaging in rhetorical manipulation of the same old patriotic commonplaces that fill the festival speeches. His Atlantis narrative is represented as a sincere attempt at reproduction of an authoritative source. The difference is encapsulated in his worries about narrative style. At the beginning of the *Critias* he frets that the theme he has to handle is even more difficult than that just treated by Timaeus (cosmology). Since his audience has some familiarity with the world of historical contingency and its human actors, they will be more exacting critics (*Crit.* 107b-108a). On the one hand, this is a transformation of a common *topos* of panegyric exordia, the fear that the speaker will not be able to live up to his subject matter.²² On the other, it reflects the set of philosophic concerns about imitability and the nature and permanence of language that was one focus of the introduction to Timaeus' cosmology in the previous dialogue (*Tim.* 29b-c). Critias is speaking to experts and must watch his words.

Plato's construction of a philosophically-based charter myth shows that he has observed the necessity for a city to construct its own 'noble lie', a version of the past that will encourage the citizens to care for the land and for each other and to seek excellence in the present. For imperial Athens, such a lie was entrenched in the funeral orations and other panegyric discourses that Plato would frequently have heard and read. Such discourses, far more than the

²⁰ Contrast the hegemony freely given Athens in the *Timaeus-Critias* and in some of Isocrates' versions of Athenian history (see above p. 106, below p. 117). Whereas Plato rejects history entirely, and Isocrates partly, the funeral oration has difficulty rejecting any. *Phthonos*, rather than Athenian error, is the cause of disaster. An anonymous referee of this journal points out that the *Hipparchus* takes a similarly cavalier attitude to historical fact in order to set up a positive paradigm. There, Socrates asserts that Hipparchus was a beneficent and quasi-philosophical ruler, who was murdered because Harmodius and Aristogeiton (his competitors in wisdom) were enraged when a young man thought Hipparchus wiser than they.

²¹ Cf. Loraux (n.12) 315.

²² For this *topos* in the funeral oration, see Loraux (n.12) 231-4.

formal works of Herodotus and Thucydides, were history for the average Athenian. It made small difference that this history was largely a myth. Yet Plato did not approve of Athens' imperial past. We know from the *Republic* that he was equally dissatisfied with the mythological past as it had been constructed by the poets. Both the actual and the mythological past are equally flawed; he must, therefore, make a fresh mythological start.²³ Since the *topoi* of Athenian eulogistic rhetoric are both hackneyed and unsuitable in content, he will transform them, although they remain recognizable. The Atlantis myth in *Timaeus* and *Critias* is offered as a conceptual replacement for speeches such as Isocrates' *Panegyricus* and *Panathenaicus*. The contrast between Isocratean and Platonic practice in the *Timaeus-Critias* is especially telling when we consider that each author considered himself the true 'philosopher' and ran an educational institution.²⁴ Isocrates considered Platonic philosophy abstract and useless mental juggling, and prided himself on being and producing the kind of man who used his judgment in order to arrive at the best decision (*Antid.* 271). Despite the shared *topoi*, Isocrates would have considered Plato's panathenaic tale useless, precisely because it cuts off the object of panegyric from the present, because the panegyric is presented as a philosophic exercise, and because it therefore makes no concrete proposal for the best course of action. His own rhetoric is superior to conventional panegyric because it not only praises past deeds, but gives counsel for the future (*Antid.* 62). Isocrates constructs for himself a territory that mediates between Platonic quibbling on the one hand and mere epideixis on the other. Plato, by contrast, associates the praise of ancient Athens with an extremely demanding cosmology, restricts its immediate audience to experts, and uses cosmic catastrophe to ensure that praise is distanced from the Athenian present.²⁵ Nor does he offer explicit advice; the panegyric seems to have lost exhortatory force. The absence of this feature is notable, and is evidence that Plato is avoiding cheap (Isocratean?) effects and easy (Isocratean?) answers. The very abstraction of the praise-narrative proves that it is concerned with second-order questions of *how* history is constructed to be true to ideals and ideologies that arise from and may react against the contemporary scene. For Plato, Isocrates and those like him are singing the same old facile song, whatever their pretensions.

IV. THE ROLE OF SOLON AND CONSTITUTIONAL HISTORY

The problematic truth status of the Atlantis myth is, I have proposed, intimately connected with its relationship to panegyric history. This becomes especially evident when we consider the connection of the Atlantis myth to fourth-century trends in the construction of constitutional history. Solon's role as authoritative source of the Atlantis myth parallels his function as a

²³ For Plato's Athens 'rebelle à l'histoire' see Brisson (n.2) 418.

²⁴ On the competing claims of Isocratean and Platonic philosophy, see now A. Wilson Nightingale, *Genres in Dialogue. Plato and the Construct of Philosophy* (Cambridge 1995) 13-59.

²⁵ Osborne (n.3) has a different perspective on the narrative remoteness of the myth. She argues that Plato uses the *Timaeus-Critias* to present two different kinds of authoritative discourse: a correct historical account and one which brings a living model into being. *Timaeus'* creative cosmology corresponds to the creative act of the Demiurge, while *Critias'* history lacks philosophic authority (184-5). Osborne proves eloquently the superior correspondence of the cosmology to its model. Nevertheless, one wonders what creative account of the just city in action could satisfy this criterion for authoritative philosophical discourse. Osborne cites *Rep.* 592b4, where Socrates remarks that the significance of the perfect city does not depend on its actual existence, but this is the view that Socrates finds unsatisfactory at the beginning of the *Timaeus*, precisely because that paradigm was not sufficiently animated. It is true that mere repetition does not create an authoritative account, but this censure might more justly be levelled at Isocratean (and other) panegyric; at least *Critias'* ancient Athens corresponds to the perfection of the paradigm. The remoteness of the source of the Atlantis myth and the contexts of its multiple reperformance create a distance not so much from living narrative as from current encomiastic practice.

signifier of constitutional legitimation in contemporary rhetoric. Plato presents Solon as the wisest of the Seven Sages (*Tim.* 20d8-e1) He is a poet, although he does not concentrate all his energies on poetry, but also a politician compelled to deal with civic strife (21c). As poet and politician, perhaps even as philosopher-statesman, Solon is ideally suited to be the purveyor of an encomiastic history of Athens with political implications. Had Solon not found the city of Athens in a state of faction when he returned from Egypt, he might have successfully put into poetry the tale of Atlantis (*Tim.* 21c). This is confirmed in the *Critias*: Solon had intended to use the story of Atlantis as material for his own poetry and therefore translated the Egyptian terminology into Greek (*Crit.* 113a). Had Solon completed his work, he would, in the opinion of the grandfather, have outstripped Homer and Hesiod (*Tim.* 21d1-3).

There is much to digest here. Solon is prevented from fulfilling his poetic potential by political pressures. As a result, poetry is only a sideline (21c4). We conclude that, as might be expected, the construction of poetic tales, however useful, must take second place to the running of the city. In the *Republic*, the founders of the city need not compose useful *mythoi* themselves, but need only give the poets the models according to which they should construct their tales (379a). The only situation where this will not be the case is the noble lie, which must be composed by Socrates, as founder, and then imposed successfully on the body of the city. I referred above to the similarity of the Atlantis myth to the noble lie, *qua* charter myth. We can now see that the myth and its transmission combine aspects of both of these situations. Solon abandons his grand Egyptian poetic project in order to take up the more important task of being a lawgiver. Yet he also blocks out enough of a narrative to be a model for subsequent generations of Critias' family. Although Solon's charter-myth has lain dormant, it is effectively reactivated at the Panathenaea.

Plato's Solon wished to turn the myth of Atlantis into poetry that would rival the heroic and didactic epic of Homer and Hesiod. The content of the myth combines both heroic and didactic elements: it tells its audience how they should live their lives (on the model of the *Republic*), and celebrates the paradigmatic achievements of the Athenian past. Solon's intended epic would thus have replaced Homer and Hesiod as the foundational text of the society. It would have become, to use Havelock's term, the cultural 'encyclopedia'.²⁶ Solon himself would have become, not only the preeminent sage and lawgiver, but the preeminent poet. The fields of poetry, politics, and wisdom/philosophy might have been united in one person. The imperfection of Athens prevents this happy collocation; poetry must cede to politics. We should note in this connection that Plato presents Solon's travels in a rather peculiar order. Both Herodotus (1. 29-30) and Aristotle (*Ath. Pol.* 11.1) place Solon's visit to Egypt after his legislation.²⁷ In the *Timaeus*, he is compelled to neglect poetry by the troubles he finds in the city after returning from his travels: '... if he had finished the story which he brought here from Egypt and had not been compelled to neglect it by the factions and the other evils which he found when he arrived back ...' (21c4-d1). While this formulation does not rule out the possibility that the factions (στῶσεις) in question are different from the ones that led to Solon's legislation (Plato might be referring, for instance, to the rise of Peisistratus), the most natural reading is that Solon's legislation followed the trip to Egypt.²⁸ Why has Plato constructed events in this way? In order

²⁶ E. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, Mass. 1963) 61-84.

²⁷ On the causal relationship between Solon's legislation and his travels in the ancient sources, see S.S. Markianos, 'The chronology of the Herodotean Solon', *Historia* 23 (1974) 16.

²⁸ Plutarch (*Sol.* 31.3) has perceived the difficulty. Since he accepts the tradition that the travels follow the legislation, he must put Solon's abandonment of the Atlantis narrative after the rise of Peisistratus, in Solon's old age. But he must then disagree with Plato (which he does explicitly) that Solon abandoned it because of lack of leisure, since he had indeed much leisure in his old age. Plutarch is probably entirely dependent on Plato's narrative

to reinforce the relative importance of poetry and statesmanship, but also so that Solon's legislation may be tinged with Egyptian authority. And let us not forget that part of what the Egyptians tell Solon is the constitution of ancient Athens that reifies the theorizing of Plato's own *Republic*. Even more striking: the family whose oral and written traditions have passed down the story is Plato's own.²⁹

The genealogy of the ideal constitution of the *Republic* is bewilderingly complex and was thought so even in antiquity. The *Timaeus* presents a stemma in which this constitution originates with the Athenians in the historical past. It is recorded by the Egyptians, who pass it on to Solon, who transmits it to the family of Critias. Its similarity to the *Republic* is said to be coincidental. At the level of the author, the narrative is subsequent to and dependent on the *Republic*: Plato is the ultimate father of the *logos*, although he is at pains to efface himself and invert the relationships involved. These relationships are further complicated by an ancient debate on Plato's sources for his ideal constitution. In the *Busiris*, Isocrates describes an Egyptian constitution with similarities to the state of the *Republic* and *Timaeus*. *Busiris* is said to have instituted a class system in which no one was allowed to change their occupation (15-16). So successful was this system that the most renowned philosophers who speak about such matters prefer it (17). Since the *Busiris* is to be dated to fairly early in Isocrates' career, it must predate the *Timaeus*. The best candidate for the reference is the *Republic*, although Socrates makes no mention of Egypt as a model for the constitution there.³⁰ We learn from Proclus that Crantor, an early exegete of the *Timaeus* active in the late-fourth and early-third centuries, reported that Plato's contemporaries mocked him on the grounds that he was not the author of the institutions of his *Republic*, but had plagiarized them from Egypt. Plato is supposed to have taken this criticism so seriously that, in the *Timaeus*, he went out of his way to stress that the Egyptians had copied their institutions from the ancient Athenians (*In Tim.* 2. 76, on *Tim.* 20d). We need not take Crantor's account of Plato's motivation too seriously, but it is intriguing in this context to recall Critias' protestations concerning the unforeseen coincidence of Solon's Egyptian story and Socrates' account of his state. This may be a tongue-in-cheek declaration that, appearances to the contrary, the Egyptian paradigm is not foundational.³¹ In any case, Plato's games of authorship and fictionality with the Atlantis myth and the constitution of the *Republic* reflect a more basic problem: does legitimacy derive from a stemma (whether genealogical, literary, or political) or does it inhere in content? For a philosopher, the authority of a constitution is not based upon authorship or history, but for most others, pedigree is essential. It enables the audience of a constitutional or historical discourse to feel confidence, while the author of such a discourse will manipulate it to bolster the status of his production. When Plato's Socrates requests that the ideal city be animated and has his request fulfilled by Critias, he sponsors a compromise between the world of the philosopher and the world of historical contingency.

The question of the authority for a given law or constitution was very much a live one at the

in his account of Solon and Atlantis. The only tradition that connects Solon's travels with Peisistratus puts them after Peisistratus' rise to the tyranny (Diog. Laert. 1. 50).

²⁹ This is not, however, to suggest that Solon's legislation either does, or is supposed to, reflect the constitution of the *Republic*. On the (spurious) tradition of a tripartite division of the Athenian civic body in early times and along the lines of the *Republic* and *Timaeus*, see S.D. Lambert, *The Phratries of Attica* (Ann Arbor 1993) 371-80.

³⁰ On the relationship of the *Busiris* to the *Republic*, see K. Ries, *Isokrates und Platon im Ringen um die Philosophia* (Munich 1959) 52-3. M. Pohlenz, *Aus Platos Werdezeit* (Berlin 1913) 216-22 uses the similarities between the *Busiris* and the *Timaeus* to argue that both works are dependent on an early version of the *Republic* where Plato was explicit about his dependence on Egyptian models. The wording of the *Busiris* passage quoted above does not, however, compel us to believe that the preference was explicit.

³¹ Pohlenz (n.30) 219 n.3 aptly compares *Phaedr.* 275b. When Phaedrus reproaches Socrates that his Egyptian myth of Thamus and Theuth is made up, Socrates replies somewhat tartly that it is the truth of the tale that matters, not its provenance.

time Plato was writing. Following the restoration of the democracy in 403 BC, the Athenians decided to complete the codification of their laws, and decreed that they should be governed in the ancestral way, using the laws of Solon.³² Finley has argued that by the 'laws of Solon' (and Dracon), the Athenians meant 'the law of Athens as it stood in 403, some of it indeed going back to the ancient lawgivers but much of it ... promulgated in the two centuries since Solon ... [A]dvocates went on cheerfully citing in the courts what they called "a law of Solon", even when it was blatantly impossible for the enactment to have been very ancient'. The renewed democracy appropriates Solon as its 'trump card' and principle of validation in the constitutional struggles of the time.³³ It is even possible, although conjectural, that the oligarchs of 411 may have used the figure of Solon for the same purpose.³⁴ Aristotle (*Pol.* 1273b35-1274a21) cites two traditions about the contribution of Solon to the democracy, one which praises him as having founded a mixed constitution, and one which criticizes him for having made the popular courts authoritative and destroying the power of the other elements of the city. As Hansen has suggested, this shows that there was probably a tradition which praised him as the founder of radical democracy.³⁵ There was, then, an extent to which the figure of Solon was 'up for grabs' in the fourth century, although everyone 'agreed that it was Solon who founded the modern Athenian state'.³⁶

Solon's importance as constitutional icon seems to have increased as the century progressed. In the first half of the century he tends to be mentioned in connection with specific laws, but this has changed by the mid-350s, at which point he is deployed more explicitly as a general paradigm.³⁷ By the latter part of the century, Thomas maintains, orators are fond of appealing to the lawgiver's intentions, especially his moral ones. Thomas links this appeal to a more general conservatism and to a pessimistic attitude towards the law, which entails a nostalgia for a simpler legal past and a reliable legal authority.³⁸ Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias* are, in part, a reflection of these developing fourth-century trends. They are most plausibly dated to the

³² The major piece of evidence for such a revision is Andocides (1. 83), who cites the 'decree of Teisamenus' and claims that it called for an examination and publication of the laws. There has been much recent controversy over the accuracy of Andocides' claim and the nature of the decree of Teisamenus. N. Robertson, 'The laws of Athens, 410-399 BC: the evidence for review and publication', *JHS* 110 (1990) 43-75 has argued that Andocides is an untrustworthy witness and that the decree does not indicate that the Athenians either contemplated or engaged in a revision of the laws. This interpretation has not been universally accepted. P.J. Rhodes, 'The Athenian code of laws, 410-399 BC', *JHS* 111 (1991) 87-100, gives a measured survey of the problem, and while granting the force of some of Robertson's arguments (99), concludes nevertheless that '*anagraphais* were to find and republish in or near the Stoa of the Basileus all currently valid written laws which applied to the whole community of Athenian citizens', and that 'additional laws should be enacted to give appropriate effect to the revised code in the circumstances of the amnesty' (100). Most recently, S.C. Todd, 'Lysias against Nikomachos: the fate of the expert in Athenian law' in L. Foxhall and A.D.E. Lewis (eds.), *Greek Law in its Political Setting* (Oxford 1996) 101-31, concedes the unreliability of Andocides (*cf.* Rhodes 97) but concludes that there was 'a substantial process of legal revision during the final decade of the fifth century' (107, 127-8). It seems reasonable to believe, therefore, that whatever the precise form of publication, there was publicly-expressed interest in compilation and revision of the city's laws.

³³ M.I. Finley, 'The ancestral constitution' in *The Use and Abuse of History* (London 1975) 39-40.

³⁴ M.H. Hansen, 'Solonian democracy in fourth-century Athens' in W.R. Connor *et al.*, *Aspects of Athenian Democracy* (= *C&M* Dissertationes xi, Copenhagen 1990) 88.

³⁵ Hansen (n.34) 90.

³⁶ Finley (n.33) 50.

³⁷ E. Ruschenbusch, 'PATRIOS POLITEIA. Theseus, Dracon, Solon und Kleisthenes in Publizistik und Geschichtsschreibung des 5. und 4. Jahrhunderts v. Chr.', *Historia* 7 (1958) 400-5.

³⁸ R. Thomas, 'Law and the lawgiver in Athenian democracy' in R. Osborne and S. Hornblower (eds.), *Ritual, Finance, Politics. Athenian Democratic Accounts Presented to David Lewis* (Oxford 1994) 122-4, 128-9.

350s, precisely the period in which the reconception of Solon picks up speed.³⁹ To cite Solon as an authority, as Plato has Critias do, is to appeal to a recognizable political commonplace in an attempt to confer authority on one's version of history.⁴⁰ When Finley discusses the intellectual opposition to democracy in the fourth century, he notes that the appeal to the 'ancestral constitution' retained vitality, but excepts Plato and his disciples from this trend. Plato, he thinks, dismisses the 'historical' discussion with contempt; the references to Solon in the Platonic corpus are casual and no Platonic constitution ever depended on ancestral arguments. For Plato, the rot in Athenian democracy affected Solon's constitution as well.⁴¹

These arguments are undoubtedly valid as far as Plato's explicit statements are concerned, but the mention of Solon in the *Timaeus* is anything but casual. The legends of the Greek lawgivers, as Szegedy-Maszak points out, 'deserve careful study ... because they illustrate so clearly the transformation of history by and into myth'.⁴² With the Atlantis myth, Plato adds a new element to this body of legend, with enough finesse that the legend has been taken to be true (and not just by Critias). He attempts to turn myth back into (paradigmatic) history. The appeal to the authority of Solon is a crucial part of this project. In order to effect a change in attitude in a society, its charter myth would have to be reworked and imposed on a people willing to accept it. By associating the myth of Athens and Atlantis with Solon, Plato has Critias engage in a characteristically fourth-century practice of tapping into an historical source for political validation. This is how a fourth-century noble lie would have to be presented. Both in its content and in its presentation (the appeal to Solon), the myth of Atlantis resumes and plays upon contemporary commonplaces.

Finley is correct to say that Plato does not, in the *Republic* or the *Statesman*, make any attempt to appeal to an ancestral constitution or engage in historical discussion. Yet the treatment of the myth of Atlantis in the *Timaeus* and *Critias* is precisely an attempt to claim that the constitution of the *Republic* is the ancestral constitution of Athens and that the report of it was brought back to Athens by the fourth century's most famous lawgiver and framer of constitutions, framed and narrated in terms that would have a particular fourth-century appeal.⁴³ How seriously should we take this claim? As readers, we must find this rhetoric fairly transparent (perhaps as soon as we hear that this is Solon's story). Plato does not really think that his ideal constitution was ever practised or that Solon or the Egyptians passed down any narrative treatment of it. Nor should we conclude that Plato's 'appeal' to Solon implies that, like Isocrates, he yearned for the days of oligarchic aristocracy. His use of the figure of Solon is closer to a parody of contemporary practice than an appropriation of it. Whereas the interlocutors must accept the noble lie at face value, we must not do so, but must recognize that Atlantis is a speculative exercise in political rhetoric, albeit philosophically based. Our focus must be on the construction.

One concern with this reading is that it 'platonizes' Solon. Although Solon behaves in an

³⁹ The dating of these two dialogues is, of course, a matter of considerable controversy. For an overview of the stylometric and philosophical problems involved in G.E.L. Owen's placement of the *Timaeus* at the end of the middle period, soon after the *Republic*, see G. Fine, 'Owen's progress', *PhR* 97 (1988) 373-83, and more generally, L. Brandwood, 'Stylometry and chronology' in R. Kraut (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge 1992) 90-120. In this paper I follow the conventional dating, which puts the dialogues in the last stages of Plato's career.

⁴⁰ Note that the terms in which Critias refers to the similarity between the Solonian and the Socratic constitutions, 'You [Socrates] agreed with Solon' (25e), are nicely calculated to invert the real state of affairs in which Plato has made Solon agree with Socrates.

⁴¹ Finley (n.33) 50-51.

⁴² A. Szegedy-Maszak, 'Legends of the Greek lawgivers', *GRBS* 19 (1978) 200.

⁴³ Hansen (n.34) 72-3, when noting the fourth-century trend to place the 'golden age' not in the remote but in the recent past, remarks that it is only Plato who has to look back millennia in order to find a society he approves of. This is a reflection of the vigour with which Plato wishes to cut himself off from all known history.

approved Platonic fashion when he abandons poetry for politics, and although the epic of Atlantis would have filled Plato's desire for a substitute to Homer and Hesiod, he is, after all, the founder of Athenian democracy. Yet at the end of *Laws* 3, the Athenian Stranger evinces some nostalgia for the Athenian constitution before it allowed excessive licence (693e), and mentions with approval the government of Athens at the time of the Persian invasions: magistracies were based on four ranks (ἐκ τμημάτων ἀρχαί τινες τεττάρων), Reverence was mistress, and people were willing to live as slaves to the laws (698b). This is at least reminiscent of the four-tiered Solonian system, and suggests that Plato found something to work with in it, although we should remember that the *Laws* aims at describing the second-best polity rather than the ideal city of the *Republic* and, by extension, the *Timaeus-Critias*. In any case, there is no reason why Plato should have felt compelled to make his constitution in the *Timaeus-Critias* conform to any Solonian reality, since he does not intend his narrative as a real history. A Solonian constitution in this context is the constitution of the *Republic*, and Solon is a floating signifier of constitutional excellence without any independent content.

The example of Isocrates shows that one could play fairly fast and loose with the concept of 'Solonian' democracy. He uses the constitution of Solon to stand for his own rather aristocratic version of democracy. At *Areopagiticus* 16, Isocrates urges the Athenians to return to the 'democracy of our ancestors'. The only way for them to escape their present evils is to reinstitute the democracy 'which Solon, the greatest friend of the people, laid down in law' (ἦν Σόλων μὲν ὁ δημοτικώτατος γενόμενος ἐνομοθέτησε). This democracy gave rewards and punishments according to individual deserts. They did not fill the offices by lot, but selected the worthiest and most reputable citizens (22-24). It was under this constitution that they were willingly granted hegemony by the other Greeks (17). Clearly, Isocrates belongs to the tradition of those who made Solon the author of a mixed democracy. At the end of his life, Isocrates retrojected the origins of his idealized democracy back to the time of Theseus, whose immediate successors established a democracy, but not a haphazard one; rather they combined it with the rule of the best (ἀριστοκρατία) (*Panath.* 129-31). Nevertheless, Solon still appears at the end of the great democratic tradition that ends with Peisistratus (*Panath.* 148).

That Isocrates was quite conscious of the significance of employing a figure like Solon as originator of constitutional excellence can be gathered from his treatment of Busiris in the encomium dedicated to him. The nature of the constitution that Isocrates attributes to the ancient Egyptians has already been examined above: they were endowed with a rigid class system reminiscent of the one in the *Republic*, and it was Busiris who gave it to them. Isocrates, however, feels the need to answer a potential objection:

Perhaps you will reply to what I have said, that I praise the land and the laws and the piety of the Egyptians, and even their philosophy, but I am not able to prove that he [Busiris] was responsible for these things, as I have assumed ... [but] I hold him responsible for nothing which is impossible, but for laws and a constitution [νόμων καὶ πολιτείας], which are the deeds of noble men ... I use the arguments which those who praise ought to employ. (*Bus.* 30-33)

From this passage we can discern that in an encomiastic framework, authorship of laws and constitutions is a deed of excellence that could be attributed to anyone. Busiris is a noble person. Noble people compose laws and constitutions. Therefore Busiris composed laws and a constitution. In this instance the *topos* is employed to praise an individual, but we can easily see how this kind of floating motif can be applied to a fixed person (Solon) who has positive connotations for most of the audience (rather than being used to rehabilitate a cannibalistic Egyptian pharaoh). What is important is that it takes a certain kind of person to be a foundational figure, and that Isocrates recognizes that the deployment of the motif is a matter of rhetoric rather than history. If we apply this conclusion to the construction of the Atlantis myth and its narrative history, we can cease to worry overmuch whether the Solon of the *Timaeus* and *Critias* is too platonized a figure. From the point of view of political rhetoric it is Solon's aura that is significant, rather than any constitutional detail.

Plato is not, however, unaware that his narrative about the real ancient Athenians will undergo a kind of scrutiny that Loraux neatly calls a ‘philosophical *dokimasia*’.⁴⁴ When Critias presents the plan of the two dialogues, he foresees a genetic account in which the human beings who have been created in the course of Timaeus’ cosmology will be deemed to have received an education along the lines indicated by Socrates in the *Republic*. This is how he characterizes his own task: ‘I will receive the men who have come into being in Timaeus’ account. I will receive from you [Socrates] some of them who have been superbly educated. In accordance with the account and the law of Solon (κατὰ δὲ τὸν Σόλωνος λόγον τε καὶ νόμον) I will introduce them into our presence as if we were *dikastai* and make them citizens of this city, on the grounds that they are the Athenians of that time, whom the report of the sacred writings disclosed when they were unknown (ἐμήνυσεν ἀφανεῖς ὄντας)’ (*Tim.* 27a7-b4). This passage has considerable legal resonance.⁴⁵ The interlocutors are conceived as jurors sitting in judgement on a citizenship case. Information has been laid about the candidates for citizenship. The verb used, *mēnuō*, is a technical legal term, usually used of negative evidence given in denunciation.⁴⁶ What are we to make of the account and the law of Solon? The account is obviously the narrative Solon heard in Egypt, but Solon is not known to have legislated on citizenship.⁴⁷ The answer is that Solon is once again being invoked in his aspect as founder of the Athenian state. In a real sense, it is he who is making these fictional Athenians real citizens. Even more significant is that the judgement that the interlocutors and the readers make about the legitimacy of their claim to citizenship is a judgement about the proper nature of the Athenian constitution. If they are not ‘real’ citizens, then the political agenda of the *Republic*, *Timaeus*, and *Critias* is to be dismissed. If we accept the literary genealogy as a true representation of the way things should be, we accept that other accounts of Athenian history—and the lessons they are thought to teach—are flawed and misleading. It is Solon who presides over this complex interplay of utopianism and rhetorical pragmatism, just as he does in the other fourth-century sources examined above.

V. IMPLICATIONS FOR FOREIGN RELATIONS

The effort to contextualize the myth need not stop with an examination of its generic affinities and their philosophical implications. History, constitutional and otherwise, affects present policy. In this section I shall explore how the Atlantis myth plays upon concerns about the nature of Athens’ maritime alliances at the time of the second Athenian league: the idea that maritime expansion causes constitutional decay is common to the myth and Isocratean orations of that period. Vidal-Naquet has already pointed out that in juxtaposing Athens and Atlantis, Plato was setting an idealized Athens of the past against the Athens of the present.⁴⁸ Previous scholars had remarked that Atlantis resembled an idealized Persian East; the conflict between Athens and Atlantis would then be a mythical transposition of the Persian wars.⁴⁹ Vidal-Naquet

⁴⁴ Loraux (n.12) 297.

⁴⁵ For an interpretation of this passage that focuses on the tension between narrative and reality, see Gill, 1977 (n.1) 303-4; also Weil (n.8) 30-31.

⁴⁶ *LSJ* s.v. μῆνω II. cf. S.C. Todd, *The Shape of Athenian Law* (Oxford 1993) 187. The verb used of introducing the ‘fictional’ Athenians into the presence of the interlocutors, εἰσάγω, also has technical implications (*LSJ* s.v. εἰσάγω II.3).

⁴⁷ But see also P. Manville, *The Origins of Citizenship in Ancient Athens* (Princeton 1990) 124-44, for whom the implication of much of Solon’s legislation is the formalization of citizenship categories.

⁴⁸ Vidal-Naquet (n.2) 429: ‘Rencontrant et vainquant l’Atlantide, qui donc vainc en réalité l’Athènes de Platon, sinon elle-même?’. So too Brisson (n.2) 436: ‘il est nécessaire de considérer le combat de l’Athènes primitive contre l’Atlantide comme l’expression de l’opposition intérieure à l’Athènes contemporaine à Platon entre sa face tournée vers la puissance maritime et celle tournée vers la puissance terrestre, gage de sobriété, qu’incarne dans sa pureté l’Athènes primitive’. Cf. Gill, 1977 (n.1) 295-8.

⁴⁹ Vidal-Naquet (n.2) 427. This parallel is reinforced, as he points out (428), by echoes of Herodotus. The ‘great and wonderful deeds’ (μεγάλα τε καὶ θαυμαστά) of Greeks and barbarians at Hdt. 1. 1 are matched by the ‘great and wonderful deeds’ (μεγάλα καὶ θαυμαστά) of the ancient Athenians at *Tim.* 20e4-5, and both sets of deeds

emphasized that Plato's ancient Athens is a uniquely stable land power with no ports, commerce or maritime trade. In this it contrasts with Atlantis, which is a colonialist and expansionist maritime power with a huge navy and substantial ports.⁵⁰ He notes briefly possible contemporary resonance of the myth for the mid fourth-century Athens,⁵¹ but fundamentally this reading makes the myth a late fifth-century allegory in which Atlantis maps onto the aggressive maritime pride of Athens that led to defeat at the end of the Peloponnesian War. This historicizing interpretation of the Atlantis myth is suggestive, but does not go far enough. The same kind of reading can set the myth in a fourth-century context.

The selection of a paradigm from the past determines the rhetoric employed in discussions of present needs. Such an explicit discussion does not take place in the *Timaeus* or *Critias*, but we will hear its echoes; the 'moral' is present but never drawn. For a more explicit treatment, we must return to Isocrates. The connection between constitutional history and the history of foreign policy and warfare was much in the mind of Isocrates when he wrote the *Areopagiticus* (probably around 355 BC). I have already quoted the passage where he connects Athens' historical hegemony with the Solonian constitution (17); it is important to note that he also declares there that those who desired the present constitution were hated by all and barely escaped the uttermost disaster, a reference to Athens' near escape from total destruction at the end of the Peloponnesian War. He expands on the dangerous precedent of the fifth-century past in his oration *On the Peace*. This work was probably written in 355, in the closing stages of the Social War, the conflict between Athens and some of her leading allies that brought to an end the resurgence of Athenian influence in the aftermath of the formation of the second Athenian league. Isocrates inveighs against those who 'say that we should imitate our forefathers and not see ourselves made fools of and merely watch while people sail the sea without being willing to pay us a contribution (συντάξις)'. But which ancestors do they mean, Isocrates asks? Those at the time of the Persian Wars or those at the time of the Peloponnesian War? If the latter, they are merely advising the city to run the risk of complete destruction once again (36-7).

In order to appreciate Isocrates' point here, we must look briefly at Athens' relationships with other Greek states in the first half of the fourth century. Athens spent the beginning of the century attempting to recover its position after the Spartan victory in the Peloponnesian War. Its efforts came to a head with the founding of the second Athenian confederacy in 377 BC. In the charter of the new league, the Decree of Aristoteles (*IG* ii² 43), there are several specific guarantees concerning the treatment of Athens' new allies. The allies are to be autonomous and have freedom of constitution (lines 20-21). They will not be garrisoned or pay tribute (φόρος), and there is a ban on Athenian ownership of allied land (lines 21-23, 35-46). How far Athens lived up to these guarantees is disputed. The cleruchies sent to Samos (365 BC) and Potidea (361 BC) are said by some to infringe the spirit, if not the letter, of the league charter, and Athenian interference with the autonomy of member states has been reconstructed.⁵² The league finally fell apart with the Social War of 357-55 BC. Now, some recent opinion has concluded that reconstructions of an Athenian decline into imperialism are projections of the history of the first Athenian league onto the second,⁵³ and it may well be that Athenian imperialistic ambitions and actions have been exaggerated. Yet if modern scholars can project the fifth-century empire into the fourth (rightly or wrongly), so could fourth-century Athenians, their enemies, and their allies. What is important for present purposes is that Athenian actions

are threatened with obscurity because of the passage of time.

⁵⁰ Vidal-Naquet (n.2) 429-33.

⁵¹ See above (n.2).

⁵² Thus, e.g., F.H. Marshall, *The Second Athenian Confederacy* (Cambridge 1905) 50-53. Samos and Potidea were not league members, and Potidea's cleruchy was probably installed by request (cf. *IG* ii² 114). J. Cargill, *The Second Athenian League* (Berkeley 1981) 146-60 objects to the interpretation that sees the cleruchies as infringing the spirit of the charter. For those with their eye on the past, however, the cleruchies may have seemed an ominous development.

⁵³ Cargill (n.52) 161; P. Harding, 'Athenian foreign policy in the fourth century', *Klio* 77 (1995) 113-15.

in the fifth century existed as a paradigm that people could, if they desired, choose to employ; the specific guarantees in the Decree of Aristoteles seem intended to reassure members that Athens has no imperialistic designs; the fifth-century model is recalled and rejected.⁵⁴

The passage from Isocrates' *On the Peace* cited above is good evidence that questions of paradigm were explicitly raised in Athenian discussions of their relationship with their allies. The proponents of the fifth-century model criticized by him draw no distinctions between fifth-century 'tribute' (φóρος) and fourth-century 'contributions' (συντάξεις). The paying of contributions is equated with the imitation of the fifth-century empire. Even if, therefore, Athenian policy was not the reassertion of empire, actions such as the sending of cleruchies could easily be misinterpreted by those, like Mausolus, who had an interest in arguing that the Athenians were a threat. The league may well have foundered upon the fear, rather than the actuality, of Athenian imperialism.

The supposition that we should attach importance to perception as well as to action may help us to resolve recent difficulties over the intent of *On the Peace*. Harding has asserted that the speech should be read as a rhetorical exercise rather than political advice; it is one member of an epideictic antilogy arguing for peace, just as the other member of the pair, the *Archidamus*, argues for war. One consequence (for Harding, desirable) of dismissing *On the Peace* as political advice is that the oration has been used to argue for imperialistic intent on the part of the Athenians during the period of the second league; once it is disposed of, we are free to acquit the Athenians of reversion to bad habits.⁵⁵ A disadvantage of this approach is that we must then dismiss Isocrates' own statements in the *Antidosis* about the seriousness of his intent: he wants to give the city good advice.⁵⁶ Moreover, I am uncomfortable with the idea that any speech could be *merely* epideictic. Even in an epideixis, an orator must use arguments that will seem plausible to his audience. In fact, Harding also thinks that *On the Peace* is a partisan tract 'insinuating that Chares' brutal behaviour was responsible for the Social War'. Partisanship is at some remove from rhetorical game-playing; are we really to think that Isocrates was the only person who deployed arguments based on the past? It is reasonable, then, to assume that comments such as Isocrates' could be and were used in deliberations at the time of the Social War, whatever the nature of any 'official' policy.

Let us return to the ideology of *On the Peace*. Isocrates thinks that the Athenians are mad, because although they eulogize the deeds of their ancestors, they do the opposite. At the time of the Persian Wars—familiar territory here—they liberated the cities of Hellas and were considered worthy of hegemony; now they seek to enslave them. Moreover, they complain that they do not enjoy the same honour as their ancestors (41-42). How may the Athenians regain possession of piety, moderation, justice, and the other virtues? The answer is simple. 'We must', he says, 'stop desiring a sea empire. This is what has thrown us into confusion and has destroyed the democracy under which we were the happiest of the Greeks' (64). A little later, he contrasts the condition of Athens before and after the acquisition of a maritime empire. The earlier *politeia* gained Athens military supremacy and freely-conceded hegemony. The subsequent state of license and greed earned universal odium. The multitude of the people were mesmerized by the wealth that flowed into the city, but it was greed for such wealth that led

⁵⁴ C.D. Hamilton, 'Isokrates, *IG* ii² 43, Greek propaganda and imperialism', *Traditio* 36 (1980) 83-107 argues that references to autonomy, etc., are a response to recent Spartan excesses rather than to Athens' fifth-century malpractice, and that the purpose of the league was the restoration of Athens' empire. It seems unlikely, however, that allied memories were short enough for members to jump into the Athenian fire (however vicious the Spartan frying pan) without guarantees they at least felt were sincere.

⁵⁵ Cargill (n.52) 176-8 admits the seriousness of the speech, but thinks that Isocrates' criticisms apply *only* to the period of the Social War, and not to a process of degeneration. But Isocrates certainly thinks that the constitution has been degenerating consistently, and it is difficult to find evidence for a period of political and military recuperation in the speech.

⁵⁶ Cf. the remarks of R.A. Moyses, 'Isokrates' *On the Peace*: rhetorical exercise or political advice?', *AJAH* 7 (1982) 118-27.

to recklessness and destruction (74-89). Lest we think that a sea empire caused harm only in the specific instance of Athens, he hastens to declare that this is a general rule. Speaking of the Spartans, he concludes that the *archē* (rule) of the sea was the *archē* (beginning) of misfortunes (101). Rule on land gave them good order and steadfastness; rule of the sea led to arrogance and lack of discipline. They no longer kept the laws of their forefathers but were plunged into confusion (101-2). The point could not be more clearly made that sea air rots your constitution.

The most comprehensive treatment of this theme comes in the *Panathenaicus* (115-16). Isocrates anticipates that critics will want to inject a discussion of constitutions into his discussion of Athens, and undertakes to prove that the city excels in this area. His praises, however, will go not to the present constitution but to the constitution of the ancestors. This superior constitution was abandoned because it was inappropriate for the exercise of the sea power needed to frustrate the machinations of the Spartans. Hegemony on land is practised with good-order, moderation, and obedience, while hegemony on sea is increased by technical nautical skill. Although the founders of the empire knew that the good order of the former constitution would be destroyed by a sea empire, and that the goodwill of the allies would turn to hatred, nevertheless they thought it better to commit injustice than suffer it (certainly a swipe at the Socratic maxim that it is better to suffer injustice than commit it).

All these themes recur in the narrative of Atlantis. Because of the excellence of their constitution, the ancient Athenians were beautiful in body and soul and ruled both themselves and the rest of Greece in justice. The inhabitants of Atlantis, on the other hand, undergo the same degeneration as their modern Athenian counterparts. The end of the *Critias* tells us how at first the Atlanteans were obedient to their laws. Only virtue was important to them and they disdained their prosperity. This made them wise and gentle; their wealth did not make them drunk. But as the divine element in them became weakened, they became greedy and power-hungry (*Crit.* 120e-121b). It was this hunger which led them to attack Greece, and caused their total defeat. Enough has by now been said to indicate that, for some audiences at least, it will have been Atlantis' sea power that was a major factor in their instability, leading as it did to greed and disobedience to their laws. As Vidal-Naquet pointed out, the maritime character of Atlantis is crucial, but it is crucial not just with respect to the fifth-century past. Plato was playing on themes that were the most topical of his day. It is probable that the *Timaeus* and *Critias* were being composed during the Social War, the time when Isocrates was writing *On the Peace*. If, as I have suggested, the question of whether Athens should embrace (or was embracing) the late fifth-century maritime paradigm was in the air, the story of Atlantis resonates closely with contemporary debate. This would be true even if we were to date the dialogues earlier than the 350s (although they are most at home there), since the problem of historical paradigm was present when the league was founded and must have continued to loom between 377 and 357.

Do the parallels between Plato and Isocrates mean that the former is merely constructing a cryptic version of the latter's oration? By no means. Isocrates situates himself as counsellor, while Plato is absent from his narrative and constructs it as a more distanced exercise in the construction of history. The parainetic element is different from that in Isocrates. If one wants to draw the present moral, one can easily do so, but this is not necessarily the point. To give advice as Isocrates does is to admit one's implication in the current political system with all its rhetorical posing, but while Isocrates is proud of his implication (*Antid.* 263-9), Plato rejects contemporary politics. It would be as pointless for him to offer specific advice as to construct a history of the ideal state that was based on real Athenian history. The well-governed, non-maritime Athens is a non-starter given the city's actual past; Isocrates' rhetoric is an unsuccessful compromise between the desire for civic stability and the necessity of pandering to Athens' self-image. Plato, on the other hand, wants a paradigm shift, one which involves embracing a different (Platonic) form of constitution, and one which will, by its very nature, entail the abandonment of maritime ambition and its concomitant moral rot. The Atlantis myth criticizes such ambition, but its presentation in the context of the cosmology of the *Timaeus* and the politics of the *Republic* traces the root of the problem far deeper than Isocrates can. This

is why the myth is set in the remote past.

This interpretation of the myth of Atlantis has said little about possible connections to the cosmology of the *Timaeus*, and one might wonder whether the readers who were interested in the foundational properties of triangles found much to their purpose in such an extended meditation on historicizing rhetoric. Yet it is the property of a Platonic dialogue that it contains many intersecting levels of interpretation; in the end, one level resonates with all the others. The *Timaeus* and *Critias* aim to give an historical account of the universe encompassing both cosmology and political history.⁵⁷ The purpose of the cosmology is not to achieve scientific certitude, but to produce a narrative second to none in likelihood, one which is internally consistent and does justice to the beneficent intentions of the Demiurge. Some of the human beings created by the end of Timaeus' account are to receive the ideal education described in the *Republic*. So far, all is paradigmatically for the best, but the sensible world is one of change and decay (cf. *Rep.* 546a); conflict must enter, therefore, with the kingdoms of Athens and Atlantis. An idealized Athens lives out a transformed version of her own history and is cut off at the peak before degeneration can begin. Socrates' request for a representation of the ideal state in action is thus fulfilled. To the extent that this state is recognizably Athenian in its name and its historical tropes, its function is parainetic in a way that the city of the *Republic* could not be, but *only* for a philosophic audience that accepts the presuppositions of the *Timaeus* and *Republic*. Plato takes his narrative as far down into the realm of historical contingency as it can go without bringing in actual historical fact. It is a mediating element between the historical narrative of Athens (which cannot be told for ethical reasons) and the paradigms of the *Republic* and Timaeian cosmology. Because it is motionless, the paradigm of the *Republic* cannot move us; the triangles of the *Timaeus* are esoteric indeed, but the Atlantis myth confronts us with how and why we construct our own histories, and how we transform ourselves by telling them. Its close relationship with the themes of contemporary historicizing panegyric functions as a deconstruction of them, and shows that the design of history cannot be taken for granted or remain unexamined by the philosopher. The power of national myths on the popular mind dramatizes the need for philosophical control, and the Atlantis myth is an example of such manipulation, as the genres of philosophy, history, and oratory intersect.⁵⁸ Both the myth and the cosmology are constructed to make a point about the way the world should be, the principles upon which we should construct it, and the means by which such models are rendered believable.

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⁵⁷ For a full-scale study of links between cosmology and political history in *Timaeus-Critias*, see J.-F. Pradeau, *Le monde de la politique* (Sankt Augustin, forthcoming).

⁵⁸ Gill has speculated that the myth is about playing the 'game of fiction', although he subsequently repudiated this notion (1979 [n.1] 76, 1993 [n.1] 62-6). Certainly, to call it a game is to underestimate the didactic stakes involved; cf. G. Naddaf, 'The Atlantis myth: an introduction to Plato's later philosophy of history', *Phoenix* 48 (1994) 200. Naddaf sees the myth as the 'preamble' (191) to the foundation of a new constitution along the lines of the *Laws*. I find the idea of the myth as a preamble attractive, but am doubtful whether it is appropriate to have a *Republic*-like paradigm of the best city as the persuasive introduction to the 'second-best' constitution of the *Laws*. On the relationship of the *Critias* to the *Laws*, see further C. Gill, 'Plato and politics: the *Critias* and the *Politicus*', *Phronesis* 24 (1979) 148-67. The Atlantis myth has another interesting parallel in Xenophon's creation of didactic pseudo-history in the *Cyropaedia*, on which see P.A. Stadter, 'Fictional narrative in the *Cyropaedia*', *AJP* 112 (1991) 461-91. Stadter remarks on the overt and utopian didacticism of the narrative (464). Although Xenophon includes the obligatory preface, he, unlike Critias/Plato, makes no claim to factual accuracy. For Stadter, 'Xenophon and Plato, in their different ways, reassert for prose the right to present the truth without focusing on the validity of the historical referent' (465).