

PLATO'S ACADEMY

An Introduction

Undoubtedly, Plato's Academy has been the most prestigious and most influential of all educational institutions in antiquity. It was founded by one of the greatest thinkers of all times and its activity as a centre for philosophical and scientific research lasted for several centuries. Moreover, it has produced some of the most brilliant minds in these areas, who have determined—to a great extent—the development of human thinking ever since. Its importance has been universally acknowledged, both in antiquity and in modern times, even by those who are by no means favourably disposed towards the intellectual achievements that took place within its confines. It therefore comes as a shocking surprise to the modern researcher when he realizes how little we actually know today about its history, its development, its organization and its functioning, how obscure several aspects of its social profile still remain, and how many of the common beliefs about it are in fact no more than fanciful myths or pure speculations. Not that there has been a scarcity of eminent scholars who have spent considerable amounts of time, effort and scholarship in trying to elicit a coherent picture out of the existing evidence concerning the basic characteristics, the institutional status, the internal organization and the methods of intellectual training and research that were employed in the school during the time of its prominence in the social and intellectual life of Athens. Names such as those of K. G. Zumpt, U. v. Wilamowitz, P. Boyancé, H. Cherniss, J. Glucker and J. Dillon suffice to indicate the high standards of acumen and scholarship that have been engaged in order to solve the so-called "Riddle of the Academy" during the past two centuries. However, the questions which seem to remain stubbornly unanswered or hotly debated still vastly

outnumber and heavily overshadow the few certainties that can be accepted as such. Besides, no comprehensive account of the history of the school as a whole, its philosophical evolution, its scientific contributions and its political and social significance seems to exist so far, thus leaving much to be desired in any attempt to form an overall picture of its importance. Even the archaeological record appears to be distressingly obscure and confusing, having so far reached no conclusive results concerning its exact location and the precise nature of the structures that have been brought to light by the excavations in the area.

It seems quite remarkable that, in his dialogues, Plato mentions the Academy only once and rather casually in the introduction of his *Lysis*, as a place frequented by Socrates, while Aristotle never refers to the area as a place where teaching activity actually occurred. Most of our information comes from much later sources, such as Diogenes Laetius, Philodemus' Academic History, Numenius and the late Neoplatonists, all working at second remove or more from any contemporary testimony. The reliability of these sources is an intensely debated issue, but all of us will, I think, agree that in most cases we have to rely on what would normally be regarded as pretty shaky evidence.

What appears to be sure is that in the broader area which was in ancient times known as the Academy (*Ἀκαδημία*), being a grove dedicated to the hero Academos or Hecademos, was founded one of the public gymnasia of ancient Athens, as usually situated outside the city wall, at a distance of about a mile from the Dipylon gate on the north-west of the Agora and beyond the famous public cemetery known as the *Δημόσιον Σῆμα*. Plato is said by Diogenes to have been engaged in philosophising in this area even before he acquired some kind of property in the nearby elevation of Hippios Colonos, while Olympiodorus seems to report that he established his school

in the gymnasium itself (*διδασκαλεῖον ἐν Ἀκαδημείᾳ συνεστήσατο*). The status of this *διδασκαλεῖον* and its exact relation to the other activities taking place in the gymnasium, usually involving physical and military training, remain unclear, but there are some indications that at least part of the educational process was eventually transferred into Plato's own property, which comprised a modest house (*οἰκίσκος*) and a small garden (*κηπίδιον* or *χωρίδιον*), where, according to the testimony of Aelian, the master had to confine himself late in his life, when Aristotle and his gang of acolytes bullied him through their dogged questioning out of his customary *peripatos*. It is said that apart from the teaching and research activities that one would expect to occur in such a school, there were also banquets and other social events taking place, but the only neighbour we hear being mentioned in our sources is none other than the notorious misanthrope Timon, whose tower is known to have dominated the area. It is also probable that some of the activities of the school usually took place near a shrine dedicated by Plato to the Muses in the Academy grove, a *μουσεῖον*, where his successor Speusippus later added statues of the Graces and, presumably, even later a Persian admirer of Plato called Mithradates dedicated a portrait of the master made by the sculptor Silanion.

There is a well-known tradition according to which Plato had purchased the property close to the gymnasium of the Academy using the money collected by his friends in order to reimburse the ransom payed by Anniceris of Cyrene in order to rescue him from the slave market in Aegina, after his infelicitous first journey to Sicily, a sum which however Anniceris refused to accept. This may well be, in part or as a whole, no more than just another piece of imaginative fiction, however it accords fairly well with the date generally accepted as the one corresponding to the establishment of Plato's philosophical school in the area, namely the year 387 B.C. If

this is so, then dialogues such as the *Meno*, supposed to have been written at about this time, would be expected to reflect, at least to some extent, the kind of teaching that would be taking place in the school itself, involving the systematic exercise in definitional technique, mathematical training, dialectical argument based on hypothetical premises and the meticulous examination of commonly established views concerning political, educational and moral issues.

Apparently, Plato continued to exercise his teaching until the end of his life and, in the meantime, the school had acquired enough organizational backbone as to require somebody to supervise the proceedings during the intervals when the master was absent. We hear, for example, that when Aristotle first joined the Academy in 367 B.C., Eudoxus was acting as stand-in scholarch (*V. Marc.* 11, *V. Lat.* 11), since Plato was away on his second visit to Sicily. A further indication for the organizational structure underlying the function of the school is given by the fact that, after the demise of its founder, its continuity was maintained by a regular series of successions, where each new scholarch was appointed according to certain procedures that were accepted as being legitimate even by those who were not happy with the outcome, as, e.g., in the case when Aristotle was among the candidates. Indeed, we are in a position to form a nearly continuous list of the heads of the school from the time of Plato up to that of Philo of Larissa in the first century B.C. This is a token of an uninterrupted line of successions connecting these two figures, perhaps a unique achievement for any known secular institution in the ancient world.

Nonetheless, such institutional continuity by no means implied any rigid adherence to some definite body of doctrines. In fact, the Academy is also well-known for its lack of a specific doctrinal core around which its cohesion and its general outlook was maintained. Already at the very beginning, the first successor of

Plato, his nephew Speusippus, is known to have deviated from the teaching of his master on some of the most fundamental aspects of his philosophy, repudiating even its brand doctrine, the famous Theory of Forms. This pattern of defiance towards any sort of received dogma seems to permeate the history of the school throughout its existence and has caused several fierce debates to emerge within its boundaries on various occasions. It has even obscured the issue of when exactly the Academy ceased to exist. Various answers have been given to this vexed question by different scholars until today, ranging from those who have advocated its nearly millennial continuity until the closure of all the philosophical schools in Athens at the time of the emperor Justinian, in 529 A.D., to those more recently upholding the view that Plato's school ceased to function in the area of the Academy after the destruction of that part of the city by the invading forces of Sulla, in 86 B.C. The melancholic description of its deserted location given by Cicero at the beginning of the fifth book of his *De finibus* certainly provides a strong indication that, at the time of his visit there, less than a decade after this event, philosophical teaching was already something belonging to the past. Indeed, the very notion of Platonism as a definite set of doctrines is something that emerges only after that period, at a time when individual and independent Platonic teachers active in other parts of the Roman empire were feeling the need to organize their teaching around a core of dogmatic positions generally perceived as being genuinely 'Platonic', as well as on the basis of a meticulous and systematic reading of the Platonic dialogues.

To be sure, debating has been one of the main activities the members of the Academy were engaged in for most of the time, the outcome being the emergence of some of the most refined, complex, subtle or even abstruse philosophical ideas and arguments to be found in the whole history of thought, a fact which is in part

responsible for the ambivalent connotations of the term 'academic' up to our own time. In fact, although during the Hellenistic period the term was normally used to refer to members of the school or to various philosophical positions held by them, in later times it was mainly used to designate a particular version of allegiance to Platonism, mainly associated with the prominent use of scepticism.

In general, one might reasonably contend that the history of the Academy constitutes a typically Greek phenomenon. Such a bizarre combination of high intellectual aspirations and achievement, brilliant thinking, indefatigable arguing and assiduous reasoning, radically new ideas, subtlety of expression, lofty political ideals and ambitions, and avid scientific curiosity, on the one hand, and of much idle talk, bitter polemic, pedantic scholasticism, occasional verbal trickery, devious political machinations and petty academic intrigue on the other, as well as the disregard, if not the downright disdain, for the commonly observable facts, is one that can hardly be imagined to emerge with all its glaring contradictions in any other part of the world. Even so, the intellectual force that all these tensions have produced has made the school of Plato a continuous source of both fascination and inspiration.

As I understand it, the purpose of our meeting is not to attempt to resolve these tensions neither to provide any final answers to all the multifarious questions related to the existence and the history of the Academy. It is rather meant to indicate what a vast and complex field of research it represents and to point out its paramount significance for an understanding of the roots of our civilization. Let us hope that the contributions of our speakers will stimulate further research in the field and will make other people realize the importance of viewing the Academy as a whole as a landmark of unique intellectual achievement.