

THE DRAMATIC DATES OF PLATO'S PROTAGORAS AND THE LESSON OF ARETE

It is generally agreed that the *Protagoras* recounts a single meeting which took place in the late 430s.¹ If this is correct, then, as has long been recognized, the dialogue contains a number of disturbing anachronisms.² It is the purpose of this study to question the supposition of a single dramatic date. I argue that Plato did not record the events of a single meeting in the dialogue, but that he drew upon the action and dialogue of more than one meeting in the course of Protagoras' visits to Athens. If it can be shown that this is the way in which Plato composed the dialogue, then he is not guilty of the glaring anachronisms in the *Protagoras* with which he is charged.³ At the end of this study I suggest a reason for Plato's choice of this method of composition. First, however, the evidence for Protagoras' visits to Athens should be considered.

Hippocrates' mention (310e) of an earlier visit by Protagoras provides evidence for two visits, the one to which he referred and the one in whose course the meeting at Callias' home took place. There is no problem in holding that one of these visits took place in the 430s. The evidence is clear and has not been challenged.⁴ What needs to be resolved is the date of the other visit; that is, is it to be dated to the 440s, as is generally thought, or to the 420s, which is the solution preferred in this study? The difficulty with dating the visit in the 440s is that there is no evidence for Protagoras' presence in Athens then.⁵ On the other hand, there is evidence from the dialogue and

¹ Among those who agree that this is the dialogue's dramatic date are: E. Zeller, *Abhandlungen der königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, phil.-hist. Kl. (1873), pp. 79 ff.; A. E. Taylor, *Plato* (London, 1936), p. 236; J. S. Morrison, *CQ* 35 (1941), 2 and *CQ* n.s. 8 (1958), 203; J. A. Davison, *CQ* n.s. 3 (1953), 37 and *TAPA* 80 (1949), 73; M. Gagarin, *TAPA* 100 (1969), 133; C. C. W. Taylor, *Plato: Protagoras Translated with Notes* (Oxford, 1976), p. 64; and W. K. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* 4 (Cambridge, 1975), p. 214. Prosopographical references are to J. K. Davies, *Athenian Propertied Families: 600–300 B.C.* (Oxford, 1976) where possible (hereafter, *APF*). Otherwise references are to J. Kirchner, *Prosopographia Attica*, i–ii (Berlin, 1901–3), hereafter *PA*. Other references to studies cited in this note are to the author and, where the same man has two, also by date.

² The fullest explanation of this anachronism is given by Zeller, p. 86.

³ In the *Symposium*, which was certainly intended to recount the details of a single meeting, Plato was concerned to be very specific about its dramatic date, namely the occasion of Agathon's first dramatic victory. On the other hand, the dramatic date of the *Gorgias*, like that of the *Protagoras*, is not made explicit and so it is thought to be flawed with anachronisms; cf. Zeller, p. 82. It may be that an analysis similar to the one used in this study could be applied to the *Gorgias*.

⁴ The primary reason for supposing that the dialogue's dramatic date should be set in the late 430s is the presence of Pericles' sons, Paralus and Xanthippos, who died c. 430/29, both victims of the plague. It has been emphasized by Davison (1953), p. 53, that there can be no doubt that Protagoras' account of Pericles' reaction to his sons' deaths is that of an eyewitness; cf. [Plut.] *Mor.* 118e. It is also pointed out that in the introduction of the dialogue Alcibiades is represented as being lately filled out with a beard. He was born c. 450 and can reasonably be expected to have begun growing it in the late 430s.

⁵ Protagoras is supposed to have been in Athens in the 440s to compose the constitution of Thurii. Our source, Heraclides Ponticus (*ap.* Diog. Laertius 9. 50), tells us only that he composed it and not that he composed it in Athens. M. L. West, *JHS* 100 (1980), 147, argues that the Prometheus trilogy may have been produced c. 440. As support he notes that some of the philosophical ideas in the trilogy may have their roots in Protagorean thought. He goes on to

other sources that he was in Athens in the late 420s. Athenaeus (5. 218d) notes that in Eupolis' *Flatterers*, produced in 421, Protagoras was represented as being in Athens,⁶ and Protagoras' comment (327d) that Pherecrates' *Savages*, produced in Gamelion of 420, was staged at the previous Lenaea suggests that he saw the play. This reference has been thought anachronistic for a meeting which took place in the 430s. However, it could be considered evidence that Protagoras' visit in the late 420s provided Plato with material for the dialogue. The following examination will strengthen the conclusion that Plato deliberately included in the dialogue scenes, actions, and discussion taken from both Protagoras' visit in the late 430s and that of the late 420s.

Callias, the son of Hipponicus, was born c.450⁷ and was thus, in the late 430s, in his late teens. The problem is self-evident: his age, in the late 430s, does not sit well with Plato's clear portrayal of him as the master of the house and the gracious host of the gathering. For example, Callias' freedom in rearranging the rooms suggests that, by the time of the meeting, he was the head of the house.⁸ For this to be the case it is reasonable to suppose that his father was dead. Hipponicus, however, was a general in 427 (Thuc. 3. 91. 4).⁹ Some who accept a dramatic date in the late 430s have been sensitive to the incongruity. J. S. Morrison, for one, claims that by the late 430s Hipponicus had moved from his house as the result of marital difficulties and so Callias had inherited it somewhat prematurely.¹⁰ There is neither evidence for such an

remark, 'If we trust the indications in Plato's dialogue, Protagoras visited Athens for the first time in the 440s (or the late 450s) and for the second time c. 433.' Protagorean thought may be detectable in the plays, but I do not think that its presence can be supported by the undoubted possibility that Protagoras was in Athens in the 440s.

⁶ Athenaeus also points out that Protagoras is not likely to have been in Athens before this since he is absent from the chorus of thinkers in Amipsias' *Connus* (423). In this light, it is likely that Protagoras arrived in Athens between the production of the *Connus* (423) and the *Flatterers* (421), by which time we know that he was in Athens. It may be that Protagoras took advantage of the armistice of 423 to travel to Athens. However this may be, it is significant that Athenaeus thought that the dialogue's dramatic date was in the 420s, and for him the anachronistic element was the presence of Pericles' sons.

⁷ cf. Davies, *APF*, p. 263.

⁸ At 315d Plato tells us that Callias, as a result of the large number of visiting sophists, cleared out a room for use as a guest room which had previously been used as a storeroom. Commentators have understood Plato to mean only that Callias emptied a storeroom in order to billet the sophists. Yet one may wonder whether he made this remark only to emphasize Callias' graciousness as a host. Plato's word for storeroom (*ταμειον*) also means something like 'treasury', and it may be that he meant this observation be taken in two ways. It is well known that Callias lost most of the vast fortune which he inherited. At *Apology* 20a Plato notes that Callias spent a great deal of money on sophists (Zeller, p. 85, calls it *Sophistenwirtschaft*). In a different yet very real sense, Callias can be said to have emptied the *ταμειον* to accommodate the sophists. For a review of Callias' expenditures, cf. Davies, *APF*, p. 61.

⁹ Andocides (4. 13) reports that Hipponicus died at the siege of Delion in 424. Davies, *APF*, p. 262, doubts the correctness of this claim. He suggests that it 'almost certainly embodies a confusion with the death of Hippocrates'. This has, of course, to be argued. However this may be, we know from Eupolis' *Flatterers* (Athenaeus 5. 218d) that Callias' inheritance was, in 421, a recent event.

¹⁰ Morrison (1941), p. 3, builds his case upon the report in Plutarch, *Per.* 24, that the unnamed woman who was married to both Hipponicus and Pericles was married first to Hipponicus. Davies, *APF*, p. 457, suggests that the woman was married first to Pericles, but I am not convinced that Plutarch's order of the marriages should be rejected. Morrison objects further that the references in the dialogue suggesting that Callias was the master of the house are no proof that he was. He does not seem to have taken Zeller's study into consideration. Zeller, p. 84, has shown that Callias' rearrangement of the storeroom (315d) and another reference (311a) to the house as his point to the conclusion that he was, at the time of the meeting, master of the house.

extraordinary move, nor, for the following reasons, is Hipponicus likely to have made it. The differences between father and son were so considerable that Aeschines of Sphettos, among others, made extensive reference to them.¹¹ Though we know little about the stormy relationship, Callias' behaviour after his father's death suggests that Hipponicus' worst fears were realized: Callias managed to waste most of the prodigious fortune which he inherited, spending large amounts on sophistry.¹² It is very unlikely that Hipponicus, regardless of his other troubles, would have turned over his house to such a son. The evidence fits together most reasonably if we hold that Callias, in the late 430s, was a teenager still very much dependent on his father's say and not the obliging host of itinerant sophists. Some ten years later, in the late 420s after Hipponicus' death, Callias became master of the house. His opening it to the sophists was perhaps one of his first acts in this capacity.

The presence of Agathon at the meeting is another indication that it took place in the late 420s. He was certainly born between 447 and 440, but his year of birth is probably closer to 440 than to 447, since in the *Symposium* he is described as νέου ὄντος οὕτω σφόδρα (175e) and emphasis is laid on the greatness of his achievement precisely because of his youth.¹³ In this light it is unlikely that he was as old as 30 in 416, the dramatic date of the *Symposium*. It is more likely that he was about 25. In any event, Agathon, in the late 430s, was too much of a boy to have attended the meeting at Callias' house, if it took place in the late 430s. It should be remembered that Hippocrates (310e) tells Socrates that he himself did not hear Protagoras the last time he was in town because at that time he was still a νέος. On the other hand, there is no difficulty with Agathon's age if the meeting took place in the late 420s.

Alcibiades, born c. 450,¹⁴ was old enough to have heard Protagoras lecture in the late 430s, but there is a problem with the role which Plato assigned him in the *Protagoras*. When Socrates rises to leave the meeting in the middle of the dialogue (355e), it is Alcibiades who takes Socrates' part by arguing that the question and answer format preferred by Socrates is a reasonable format for discussion. Similarly, at 347b, it is Alcibiades who, desirous that Socrates and Protagoras continue, keeps the elder Hippias from delivering his lecture on Simonides' poem with the brusque Ναί, ἔφη, ὦ Ἰππία, εἰσαυθής γε. At 348b it is once more Alcibiades who encourages Protagoras to continue the dialogue. It is somewhat out of place to picture an Athenian of barely ephebic age speaking with such authority in that company. It

¹¹ For a collection and evaluation of the fragments from Aeschines, cf. H. Dittmar, *Aischines von Sphettos* (Berlin, 1912), pp. 86 and 284. The poor relationship between these two was the subject of frequent comment in antiquity; cf. Dittmar, p. 193.

¹² cf. n. 8 for the evidence on Callias' expenditures. Hipponicus was dead by the time Callias hosted the sophists, but there was one member of the household who was able to express displeasure at his new master's use of the house. The doorman, on hearing Socrates and Hippocrates conversing (315d), assumes that they are part of the host of visiting sophists. He answers the door and shuts it in their faces. The picture which Plato presents is one of a family retainer unused to and disturbed by the recent swell of visitors; cf. Zeller, p. 84. In this connection, it is worth noting that Callias' inheritance was so notorious that Eupolis chose Callias' house as the scene for his *Flatterers* of 421.

¹³ The year 447 is often given as the year Agathon was born; cf. Kirchner, *PA*, s.v. This conclusion is based on the note in Aelian (*VH* 13. 4) that when Agathon was at the court of Archelaus in 407 he was 40 years of age. Aelian's comment, however, should not be pressed to mean that Agathon was exactly 40 in 407. Such a chronological indication means no more than that, in the year under consideration, a man was mature and at his acme. Aelian's account can best be reconciled with the evidence from the *Symposium* (175e), which shows Agathon to be a νέος in 416, by holding that in 407 he was closer to 35 than to 40.

¹⁴ Davies, *APF*, p. 18.

may be objected that Alcibiades was a very special man. This objection would have some force if it were only the characterization of Alcibiades which encourages doubts about the standard view of the dialogue's dramatic date. As it is, there are also the discrepancies of Callias' and Agathon's ages. In the late 420s, however, Alcibiades was approximately 30 and may reasonably be believed to have spoken up in this fashion.

Those concerned with the problem of the dialogue's dramatic date have apparently felt forced to choose between a date in the 430s and one in the 420s. The consensus is that the date in the 430s is preferable. However, this solution requires that we attribute to Plato the grossest historical and social inaccuracies. Those who recognize that there are problems with a dramatic date in the late 430s are satisfied that Plato was not interested in historical verisimilitude and that such incongruities are simply anachronisms. For example, W. K. C. Guthrie notes that, 'We shall meet Plato's anachronisms again',¹⁵ and E. Zeller, who treated this problem in greater detail, concluded that Plato subordinated historical accuracy to artistic purpose.¹⁶ These views accommodate the supposed anachronisms, but are we willing to believe that Plato was to such a disturbing degree unconcerned with the realities of Athenian social history? An alternative is to question the premise upon which the standard conclusion is based. I am suggesting that there is more than one dramatic date. The seemingly contradictory evidence can be reconciled without recourse to anachronisms by holding that Plato saw this dialogue as an opportunity to offer a review of Protagoras' relations with prominent Athenians, not a verbatim account of any single gathering, and so did not feel bound to restrict himself to the events of only one meeting. The contradictions which have been seen in the *Protagoras* should not be attributed to an ignorance of history or to a vague artistic purpose. Rather Plato seems to have included deliberately what was memorable from at least two visits Protagoras made to Athens.

It may even be that the contradictions are to be understood as chronological signposts left by Plato to indicate that the dialogue is made up of events selected from more than one visit. For example, Plato chose Callias' house as the *mise-en-scène*. This was undoubtedly the location of a meeting which took place in the late 420s. We do not know where Protagoras met with Athenians during his earlier visit in the 430s, but it is unlikely that the setting was as impressive as Callias' house. The irony implicit in his liberal reception of the sophists is unmistakable precisely because his dissolution of the family fortune was seen to be the result, in part, of his spending large sums on *Sophistenwirtschaft*. It would have been impossible to use Callias' house as the setting for the dialogue if Plato had restricted himself to the events of Protagoras' visit in the 430s. Similarly, the spectacle of the two sons of 'Olympian Pericles' in the train of the great sophist as he spoke on the eve of the Archidamian war presents a striking picture of Protagoras' influence on Athenian youth. To be sure, one of Plato's purposes in choosing his material from as many sources as possible was to present a vivid, humorous, and ironic picture of Protagoras' dealings with Athenian youth. This should come as no surprise, since Plato strove to achieve a similar result in all his dialogues; but in the *Protagoras* there is a design which transcends obvious humour.

To uncover Plato's purpose a review of the Athenian youth present in the *Protagoras* is required. Some of the young men, such as Alcibiades, Callias, Andron the son of Androtion, Phaedrus, Eryximachus, Charmides, and Philippides the son of Philomelus, were born close to 450. In the late 430s they were ephebes and some, no

¹⁵ Guthrie, p. 215.

¹⁶ Zeller, p. 85 and a similar comment on p. 98.

doubt, saw their first military action in the early stages of the Archidamian war.¹⁷ In the late 420s these men were approximately 30 years of age; the men who, to judge from their pedigree, ought to have provided Athens with the kind of leadership which would have led their city to a successful completion of the Peloponnesian War, whether on the field or through diplomacy. In the cases of those men for whom there is evidence, any such expectation fell far short of realization.

Alcibiades, the most illustrious of the lot, did show promise (perhaps too much promise) in the arts of war and statecraft, but the services he rendered his city – some responsibility for the resumption of hostilities with Sparta, encouragement of the disastrous Sicilian expedition, complicity in the Hermokopidae affair, and the suggestion that the Spartans fortify Decelea – are too well known to require extended comment. Charmides and Critias fell in civil strife at Munychia.¹⁸ Eryximachus and Phaedrus both suffered disgrace (and the latter, at least, the loss of property) as a result of the Hermokopidae affair.¹⁹ Adeimantus, the son of Leucolophides, was accused of betraying the Athenian cause at the battle of Aegospotamoi.²⁰ Agathon and Pausanias were at the court of Archelaus by 407.²¹ Although we do not know with certainty why Agathon left Athens and a promising dramatic career, Aristophanes' longing reference to him (*Frogs*, 83), together with the special plea he makes later in the same play (686 ff.) for the return of those exiled as a result of the *stasis* of 411, suggests that Agathon and Pausanias may have been involved in this coup and left Athens as a result. The Athenian auditors, representatives of the very finest aristocratic houses, failed to provide Athens with the necessary leadership.²²

The dialectic of the *Protagoras* is primarily concerned with *arete* and the possibility of its being taught. On the basis of their ancestry and education, the Athenian auditors are precisely those who might have been expected to learn the lesson of *arete*. Their fates, which Plato knew well, suggested to him at least that these members of the Athenian aristocracy did not learn that lesson.²³ As can be seen from the dialogue's conclusion, the question whether *arete* can be taught is left in *aporia*. Both Socrates and Protagoras have reversed their earlier positions on the matter. Socrates, contrary to his earlier position, maintains that it is knowledge and so teachable. Protagoras, contrary to his earlier position, is not sure that *arete* can be taught.²⁴ It is worth noting that Socrates' openness to the possibility that it is teachable is at variance with his position at the end of the *Meno* (99e), where he claims that it cannot be taught and

¹⁷ We know, for example that Alcibiades took part in the hostilities before Potidaea in 432; cf. *Symposium* 220d.

¹⁸ cf. Xen. *Hell.* 2. 4. 19.

¹⁹ For Eryximachus, cf. Andoc. 35 and Davies, *APF*, p. 462; for Phaedrus, Davies, *APF*, p. 201.

²⁰ cf. Xen. *Hell.* 2. 1. 32.

²¹ cf. Aelian, *VH* 13. 4.

²² There is too little evidence on the fates of the others to say anything with certainty, but one suspects that they did not end their lives any more gloriously than those for whom there is evidence.

²³ The reason for Alcibiades' failure to learn from Socrates has been discussed most recently by M. Gagarin, *Phoenix* 31 (1977), 22.

²⁴ M. Gagarin, *TAPA* 100 (1969), 163, in a detailed study of the dialogue's dialectic, sees it concluding somewhat differently. He argues that Socrates and Protagoras arrive at 'remarkably similar conclusions'. I find Socrates' summation of their positions (361a) indicative of disagreement and aporetic conclusion. This, to my mind, is made specific at 361c, where Socrates tells Protagoras that their positions are turned upside down or reversed (*ἄνω κάτω παραττόμενα*) and that, before they continue to examine the question, they must backtrack and consider first the nature of *arete*. In other words, rather than having reached any agreement or even having made any progress, they have actually lost ground.

that it comes to a man *θεία μοίρα . . . ἄνευ νοῦ*. It may be impossible to discover what Socrates' precise position was, but I suspect that it was closer to the one expressed in the *Meno*. However this may be, Plato had knowledge of the auditors' fates, and the dismal historical record left by them is as strong a proof as any in the dialectic of the *Protagoras* that *arete* cannot be taught. It may be excessive to hold that Plato considered it a waste of time to listen to Socrates and Protagoras debating the subject of *arete*, but the fates of the auditors may have made him wonder whether this generation of Athenians spent too much of their energy listening to sophists debating problems such as whether *arete* can be taught, and too little energy becoming men of *arete*.

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