



Corruption and Urban Landscape in Plato: The Story of Atlantis, the Chronicle of Thucydides and the Geometry of the Town Plan

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Abstract. The aim of this paper is to study Plato's use of urban landscape to convey the historical-political meaning of the Atlantis story. As the crux of the argument, I will argue two interlinked hypotheses: first, that the descriptions of Atlantis and primaeval Athens provide the key to identifying these cities, respectively, as mirror images of fifth-century Athens and of an idealised Sparta, suggesting that the story conceals an evocation of the Peloponnesian War. Secondly, I will propose that Plato expresses the cause of this conflict also through the urban landscape and, specifically, through the symbolism of the corruption of the circular layout that initially defines Atlantis.

Keywords: *Critias*; Peloponnesian War; Circular Layout; Hippodamian Town Plan.

[esp] Corrupción y paisaje urbano en Platón: la historia de Atlantis, la crónica tucididea y la geometría del plano urbanístico

Resumen. El objetivo del presente trabajo es estudiar el uso que Platón hace del paisaje urbano para transmitir el significado histórico-político del relato de Atlantis. Como eje del argumento, sostendré dos hipótesis conectadas entre sí: en primer lugar, que las descripciones de Atlantis y de la Atenas primitiva aportan la clave para identificar estas ciudades, respectivamente, como trasuntos de la Atenas del siglo V y de una Esparta idealizada, sugiriendo que el relato esconde una evocación de la Guerra del Peloponeso. En segundo lugar, propondré que Platón transmite la causa de este conflicto también mediante el paisaje urbano y, concretamente, a través del simbolismo que comporta la corrupción de la planta circular que inicialmente define Atlantis.

Palabras clave: *Critias*; Guerra del Peloponeso; planta circular; planta hipodámica.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. The urban landscape of the cities in *Critias*: Two opposing paradigms. 2.1. Atlantis: The suggested Athens. 2.2. Primaeval Athens: The suggested Sparta. 2.3. The tale of *Critias*: An evocation of the Peloponnesian War. 3. The cause of the conflict: The corruption of the circle. 3.1. The circular layout. 3.2. The orthogonal grid. 3.3. The corruption of the circle. 4. Conclusion. 5. Bibliographical references.

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1. Introduction

The relevance of urban landscape² in Plato's work is constant, although it is not always reflected in the same way: On the one hand, Plato chooses different places of the Athenian polis, which are part of its urban landscape, as settings for the dialogues, consciously using the connotations of these places to establish a connection between setting and content that forms part of the message he conveys.³ On the other hand, and in parallel to the above, Plato sometimes turns the urban landscape into an explicit object of reflection. Within the latter, Plato's detailed descriptions of Atlantis and primaeval Athens, the cities involved in the mythical account that he includes in *Critias*, are particularly noteworthy.⁴

If there is one thing these *póleis* have in common, it is that their topographical characteristics respond to a particular model of government and organization of society that is strictly connected with the town plan Plato chooses for each of them. Thus, the aim of this paper is to study the philosopher's use of urban landscape to convey the historical-political meaning of the history of Atlantis. As the crux of the argument, I will defend two interlinked hypotheses:

First, I will consider that it is Plato's constructed urban landscape and its political implications that provide the key to identifying the cities in the story of *Critias* with their historical equivalent. In the light of his descriptions, I will support Pradeau's thesis that Plato conceives Atlantis primarily as a mirror image of contemporary Athens. However, in contrast to this author and in line with one of Gill's proposals, I will identify primaeval Athens with a Sparta idealised by the philosopher. In contrast to the efforts to agglutinate and validate various interpretations at the same time, I will suggest that the most appropriate interpretation of Plato's story corresponds to the representation of two city paradigms which, because of their divergences, end up colliding in a mythical retelling of the Peloponnesian War.

Second, I will propose an urban landscape-based interpretation of the cause of the conflict between Atlantis and primaeval Athens. As a reader of the Thucydidean chronicle, and in accordance with the root cause that the historian attributes to the Peloponnesian War, Plato points to Atlantean (that is, Athenian) imperialism as the origin of the conflict. I will suggest that Plato conveys this cause also through the urban landscape, establishing a conscious opposition between two types of town plan more or less extensible to the *chórai* of the different cities he designs: the circular layout and the orthogonal grid. I will also underline the importance of human intervention on the landscape as a cause of the loss of the divine element among the Atlanteans and, by extension, of the conflict with primaeval Athens. I will thus argue that the war of the mythical account responds to the same cause as its possible historical equivalent, insisting on the relevance of interpreting the former as a Platonic reflection on the Thucydidean chronicle.

² The notion of "urban landscape" can involve multiple dimensions. I use it as referring to the physical elements that constitute a city, either natural (such as topography and environmental resources) or anthropized (such as town plan, architecture, and the distribution of the population across the habitat).

³ On the platonic frames, see Kaklamanou *et alii* 2021.

⁴ Although this account is also present at the beginning of *Timaeus*, it is in *Critias* that Plato pays greater (and decisive) attention to the urban landscape, so I will focus my analysis on the latter dialogue.

2. The urban landscape of the cities in *Critias*: Two opposing paradigms

The meaning of Plato's account of Atlantis has been debated since antiquity.⁵ While some have dismissed it as pure imagination,⁶ others have sought to demonstrate its authenticity.⁷ In the face of these positions, I subscribe to the perspective which, in my opinion, sheds the most light on Platonic thought: The line defined by Vidal-Naquet, who suggested a correspondence between reality and myth which Plato used to express his political ideas.

Emphasising the fact that this philosopher did not think in terms of sources, but rather in terms of models,⁸ Vidal-Naquet argued that there was a clear opposition between Atlantis, a city of sailors, and *primaeva* Athens, a paradigm of land power. The discussion therefore lies in identifying which historical city or cities correspond to which *parádeigma*,⁹ in order to unveil the reality of the conflict hidden behind the myth.

2.1. Atlantis: The suggested Athens

The first proposal to identify Atlantis with a historical reality was made in the twentieth century, when Bidez and Friedländer claimed to glimpse in the Atlantean empire a representation of the Eastern world and, specifically, of the Persian empire. They justify this identification by underlining their common features, such as the immense extension of the territory, the magnitude of the constructions, the hydraulic resources, and the naval power. According to this interpretation, the war between Atlantis and *primaeva* Athens could be a mythical transposition of the Persian Wars related by Herodotus.¹⁰

Vidal-Naquet soon went a step further, however. While maintaining the existence of parallels between Plato's account and Herodotus' historiographical text, he drew on already established comparisons between Atlantis and fifth-century Athens to propose an interpretation that did not deny the previous one: Athens is not only fighting against Persia, but also against itself.¹¹ Atlantis is therefore a mirror image of the Athens of the philosopher's time. Indeed, although Atlantis was described as an island, Vidal-Naquet recalled that Pericles had already urged the Athenians to act as if they were islanders at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War.¹² In line with these connections, the ten Atlantean kings and the ten parts into which Atlantis is divided evoked the ten tribes of Cleisthenes.¹³ Moreover, the description of the harbours and fortifications of the Platonic city owed much to the Athenian port complex, whose hubbub and tumult is also typical of the Atlantean coast.¹⁴ The most

⁵ Procl. *in Ti.* 1.76.1-1.80.8.

⁶ Martin 1981 [1841].

⁷ See the wide spectrum of speculations collected in Vidal-Naquet 2005.

⁸ Vidal-Naquet 1964, 421, 425.

⁹ On Plato's constant use of *paradeigmata*, see O'Meara 2017.

¹⁰ Bidez 1945, appendix II, 33-34; Friedländer – Meyerhoff 1969 [1954], 384-385. Cf. Vidal-Naquet 1964, 427.

¹¹ Vidal-Naquet 1964, 429-443. Precedents to his thesis: Bartoli 1779; Rivaud 1985 [1925], 249-250; Herter 1928, 28-47; Kahn 1963, 224. See also Vidal-Naquet – Lévêque 1973, 134-140.

¹² Pl. *Criti.* 113c; Th. 1.143.5. Cf. X. *Ath.* 2.14; cf. Vidal-Naquet 1964, 436, n. 79.

¹³ Pl. *Criti.* 113e-114a.

¹⁴ Pl. *Criti.* 115d, 116a, 117d-e. Cf. Vidal-Naquet 1964, 441.

relevant aspects were the implications of this design: A maritime existence led, both in Athens and Atlantis, to political changes, to trade, and, with the necessary naval power, to imperialism.¹⁵

I will not elaborate further on the features shared by Atlantis and fifth-century Athens, as they have already been extensively discussed both by Vidal-Naquet and by those who follow his thesis, which has been generally accepted.¹⁶ Even those who insist on interpreting the story as a depiction of the Athenian victory over the barbarian element in the Persian Wars maintain Vidal-Naquet's perspective as complementary,¹⁷ for it seems clear that Plato created Atlantis inspired by at least these two realities: Eastern despotism and Athenian thalassocracy.¹⁸

However, even assuming that Atlantis possesses characteristics of both or several powers, I believe it is necessary to define more precisely which historical account Plato invokes through the conflict between the Atlanteans and the primaeval Athenians, since the complementarity of features of different origins does not necessarily imply the multiple character of the Atlantean identity or of the meaning of the account. There is certainly one identity that stands out. In this respect, I agree with Pradeau's interpretation, who points out two reasons why the two proposed reflections of Atlantis, Athens and Persia, are not reconcilable: Firstly, because of a matter of accessibility to the interpretation of the text, since the conjunction of all the possible meanings threatens "la lisibilité même du *Critias*". Secondly, because of the result that emerges from the analysis of Plato's text itself: In spite of the "matériel ornemental étranger", the Atlantean habitat is a Greek habitat.¹⁹

Indeed, beyond a question of "legibility", Plato himself provides clues to the identification of Atlantis. Following the hypothesis formulated in the introduction to this work, urban landscape is one of the main tools that serve this purpose, as Pradeau demonstrates by examining the parallels between Atlantean urban planning and that of a Greek city that focuses on the agora to meet the demands of a trade-based economy (that is, fifth-century Athens). I therefore refer to the work of this author to affirm the eminently Greek character of the urban landscape of Atlantis.²⁰

I will, nonetheless, add a factor beyond spatial analysis to consider Atlantis as a representation of Athens contemporary to Plato: The Greek names of the Atlanteans. While it is true that Critias insists on justifying why these names will be familiar to his audience by alluding to a history of successive translations,²¹ it is precisely this fact, this emphasis on stating reasons, that draws attention to the Greek character of these names. It can be deduced, therefore, that Plato did not wish this detail to go unnoticed. He could have selected, or invented, barbarian names for the Atlanteans, but he chose to emphasize their Hellenic nature instead. This choice does not seem

¹⁵ Pl. *Criti.* 115c-e, 117d-e, 119b, 114d-e. Cf. Vidal-Naquet 1964, 436.

¹⁶ Brisson 1970, 436; 2001 [1992], 321-325; Gill 1977, 295-296; Loraux 1986 [1981], 456, n. 178; Pradeau 1997, 11-12, 103-104; Morgan 1998, 114; Johansen 2004, 11; Gregory 2008, lv, lvi, n. 32; Garvey 2008, 391; Stegman 2017, 251, 259, n. 82. For an analysis of the similarities between Atlantis and Periclean Athens, with special emphasis on the urban landscape and architectural elements, see Pradeau 1997, 103-108.

¹⁷ Broadie 2012, 130, 140-141; Gill 2017, 27-28.

¹⁸ On the complementary (but not exclusive) recognition of features of other cities, such as Miletus and Syracuse, see Pradeau 1997, 12.

¹⁹ Pradeau 1997, 265.

²⁰ Pradeau 1997, 265-275.

²¹ Pl. *Criti.* 113a-b.

innocent, especially when one considers the links between the names of certain Atlantean characters and the Athenian cultic reality, as Lambert has done in the case of Euenor, the eponym of an Attic *génos* involved in the cults of the acropolis.²²

In short, the Atlanteans are not distinguished from the Athenians either racially, ethnically or onomastically.²³ According to this idea, in the history of Atlantis there is no struggle against the Barbarian. It is, rather, what Plato defines as *stásis* in the *Republic*, since for him a struggle between Hellenes is equivalent to an internal conflict.²⁴ Nonetheless, before defining the chronicle implicit in *Critias*, it is necessary to identify the historical equivalent of primaeval Athens, the enemy of Atlantis.

2.2. Primaeval Athens: The suggested Sparta

The first thing that is striking when reading Plato's description of primaeval Athens is the enormous contrast between it and the Athens the philosopher knew.²⁵ Despite this, Vidal-Naquet did not hesitate to see in it the Athenian polis itself in its terrestrial facet and in conflict with the maritime version of itself.²⁶ It was not until 1977 that Gill proposed another possibility: Primaeval Athens "can also, and more persuasively, be seen as a picture of Sparta lodged in an Attic locale".²⁷ While this idea has been embraced by other authors, it has generally been taken as one interpretation among others, without an extensive development of the characteristics that primordial Athens shares with Sparta or a definitive shift in the historical reading concealed beneath Plato's account.²⁸ Gill himself, in his 2017 book, maintains the equivalence between Sparta and primaeval Athens, but enthusiastically incorporates Broadie's thesis, according to which the story about Atlantis "alludes, unmistakably, to Athens' defeat of Persia at Marathon", turning the primordial Athens into a pre-Periclean Athens.²⁹ I will now briefly outline the need to reappraise these assumptions.

As I have argued above, both the cityscape and the Atlantean names imply a struggle between Greeks, which restricts the possibilities for interpretation. Moreover, the conflict between the two versions of Athens proposed by Vidal-Naquet might make sense in the absence of other clues; however, both *Critias*' insistence on the "historicity" of his account³⁰ and the similarities between Sparta and primordial Athens invite us to explore another path. Therefore, I believe it is necessary to carry out a deeper analysis of the correspondence between Sparta and primaeval Athens, in the light of which I will re-evaluate the hypothesis of Plato's evocation of the

²² Pl. *Criti.* 113a-b, 113c-d; Lambert 2008, 25.

²³ Pradeau quotes Bartoli, according to whom the Atlanteans are "des Athéniens, des Athéniens toujours, des Athéniens de tous côtés" (Bartoli 1779, 225; Pradeau 1997, 265).

²⁴ Pl. *R.* 5.470b-d (see, in particular, 5.470c5-5.470d).

²⁵ Vidal-Naquet 1964, 430; Brisson 1970, 436.

²⁶ Vidal-Naquet 1964, 430-433.

²⁷ Gill 1977, 295.

²⁸ Brisson 2001 [1992], 321-324, recognises in primaeval Athens an idealised Sparta and claims that the Atlantis story can be interpreted as a "ré-actualisation symbolique" of the Peloponnesian War; however, he does not dismiss the hypothesis about the Persian Wars (see p. 577). In a very similar line, see Welliver 1977, 41-43; Johansen 2004, 11; Gregory 2008, lv, lvi, n. 32.

²⁹ Gill 2017, 27-28, following Broadie 2012, 130-140, who also considers other perspectives in 140-141.

³⁰ Pl. *Ti.* 20d 7-8.

Peloponnesian War. However, before comparing primordial Athens with Sparta, it is necessary to clarify to which Sparta Plato is referring.

Since the well-known work published by Ollier, *Le mirage spartiate*, in 1933, several authors have analysed Plato's use of Sparta (sometimes in a veiled way, sometimes more explicitly or even overtly) as a model for creating his ideal *póleis*.³¹ This would fit with the representation of Sparta through primaeval Athens, a city Plato conceives as virtuous. Nonetheless, Sparta also seems to be the subject of criticism in Plato's work.³² This duality may raise doubts as to whether Plato would indeed choose Sparta as a positive paradigm. As I will argue, the answer depends on which Sparta the philosopher is observing.

The Sparta to which Plato refers as a "mirror-city" is, in reality, an idealised polis drawn from the *mirage* that gradually took shape from the fifth century onwards. Plato allows himself to be enthralled by the *kósmos* of the Lycurgus legend, by its *eunomia* and *autarkeia*. However, this image clashes with the historical reality of the fourth century: Shattering the illusion of Lacedaemonian immutability,³³ in Plato's time, a series of changes took place that turned the austere Sparta that the philosopher admires into an imperialist power seemingly driven by greed.³⁴

Considering this, Plato is, to all intents and purposes, a man of his time: On the one hand, as Ollier pointed out, he is writing during the full flowering of the idealization of "the city of Lycurgus",³⁵ so the influence of the *mirage* is easily understandable. On the other hand, I agree with Ephraim David that the Spartan reality of the fourth century must have had an impact on contemporary Greek consciousness, in which I include Plato. This could explain not only chapter 14 of Xenophon's *Republic of the Lacedaemonians*,³⁶ but also the Platonic criticisms of Sparta: These would be directed not at the polis of the legend of Lycurgus, but at contemporary Sparta; an interventionist Sparta that was building its hegemony by imposing a tribute on its allies, establishing oligarchies of a markedly laconizing character and installing garrisons and harmosts in foreign territories.³⁷ The Sparta of Plato's time would have been more similar to the timocracy described in the *Republic* than to the cherished ancestral constitution of the Lacedaemonians, now shattered by imperialist policy and the influx of money.³⁸

Therefore, the historical context in which Plato writes clarifies the reason for the criticisms that cast a shadow over his ideal vision of Sparta, justifying the apparently ambiguous relationship that the philosopher maintains with this polis. I say "apparently" because, despite everything, in Plato the ideal Sparta weighs more heavily than the censured Sparta. Proof of this is that, beyond the Sparta that is visible in Plato, the idealization of the Lacedaemonian polis is camouflaged in Callipolis, Magnesia, or primaeval Athens.³⁹

³¹ Morrow 1993 [1960], 40-73; Tigerstedt 1965, 251-276; Powell 1994, 273-321.

³² Pl. R. 8.544c, 547e-548b; Lg. 637c, 666e, 806c.

³³ Lys. 33.7.

³⁴ X. Lac. 14.

³⁵ Ollier 1933, 215.

³⁶ David 1981, 3, 52.

³⁷ On Spartan interventionism after the King's Peace, see Fornis 2016, 249.

³⁸ Plu. Lys. 17.1-2; cf. Ael. VH 14.29. See also Fornis 2016, 193-194.

³⁹ The lack of harshness of Platonic criticisms of Sparta compared to those made against Athenian democracy has been emphasised, and the features shared by Callipolis and Magnesia with the Spartan system have been

It is the topography what provides the first key to this identification, for it reveals that primordial Athens is far from being classical Athens: The Athens of Plato's time was notable for its lofty Acropolis. However, the Acropolis of the "Athens of now" is said in the account to be different, because a succession of earthquakes, coupled with a great flood, eroded all the earth around it.⁴⁰ This reference to seismic movements, together with the fact that this supposed "Athens of now" does not correspond topographically to the Athens of Plato's time, suggests that it may not be the latter, but Sparta after the great earthquake of 464, the heir of primaeval Athens.⁴¹

In terms of urban design, it is important to note that primordial Athens did not have an agora, a central element of institutional and economic daily life in Athenian democracy. In this sense, primaeval Athens evokes once again Lycurgeoan Sparta, in which, according to Plutarch, it was frowned upon for older men to spend the day lounging in the agora, attending to matters of money or barter, rather than attending the gymnasiums.⁴² Moreover, in contrast to the marketplace of the Athenian agora and the activities carried out in Piraeus, the primordial Athens of *Critias* is an eminently agricultural city, without ports and without a navy. Along the same lines would be the Sparta of the *mirage*, in which the absence of gold and silver minimised foreign trade by banishing all "unnecessary and superfluous arts".⁴³

Primaeval Athens has no fleet, but it is, like Sparta, powerful on land. In fact, it is the warriors who occupy the centre of the immense Acropolis of this primordial Athens. Meanwhile, a second class of population, the farmers and craftsmen, are relegated to the outskirts of the city.⁴⁴ In this way, Plato's guardians and producers are separated in primaeval Athens, which reserves a preeminent place for the former behind a wall around the Acropolis.⁴⁵ In this context, it is also striking that this wall is the only one present in primordial Athens, which lacks the fortifications characteristic of classical Athens. In this respect, it once again resembles classical Sparta, which was not walled.⁴⁶ Instead of the walls, it was the armed citizens who defended Sparta, for the Lacedaemonians, like the primordial Athenians, placed the warriors at the central axis of their society, around which the *perioikoi* and the helots would arrange themselves.

In line with the Platonic "Principle of Specialisation", this differentiation of functional groups, which reaches a spatial level in both Sparta and primaeval Athens, also manifests itself in the sphere of the activities carried out: The fertile land of primordial Athens, worked by its farmers, allows its warriors, citizen-soldiers, to engage only in defensive activities.⁴⁷ These take place on the terrestrial level, for primordial Athens leaves no room for maritime life, nor for what Plato would understand as its degenerations: Trade, openness to foreigners, and imperialism.⁴⁸

extensively analysed. On this topic, see Morrow 1993 [1960], 45-48 and Tigerstedt 1965, 273-275.

⁴⁰ Pl. *Criti.* 111e-112a; *Ti.* 25c-d.

⁴¹ Th. 1.101. Cf. Paus. 3.17.1.

⁴² Plu. *Lyc.* 25.1.

⁴³ Plu. *Lyc.* 9.4-5.

⁴⁴ Pl. *Criti.* 110c, 112ab.

⁴⁵ Pl. *Criti.* 112b.

⁴⁶ Plu. *Lyc.* 19.4. The fortification of the city did not take place until the period between the third and the second centuries BC; cf. Waywell 1999, 1.

⁴⁷ Pl. *Criti.* 110c, 110e, 111e.

⁴⁸ Pl. *Grg.* 519a; *Lg.* 4.704d-705b.

Along the same lines, Sparta enjoyed *autarkeía*, self-sufficiency based on the resources provided by its territory. The latter was worked by the helots, so that the citizens could devote all their time to the management of public affairs. In this sense, the system of primaeval Athens is consistent with the *diailta* prescribed by Lycurgus' legislation, which, under penalty of *atimia*, denied Spartans the possibility of engaging in technical and commercial work, which was considered degrading.⁴⁹

The equivalent of the Spartiates in primordial Athens, its warrior community, is characterised by permanence, being relatively stable in numbers.⁵⁰ This stability can also be extended to the architectural style of the city, because, unlike the buildings of Atlantis, the art of building in primaeval Athens was handed down, unchanged, from generation to generation, maintaining a sobriety typical of the Sparta described by Thucydides.⁵¹ Furthermore, its constitution and its administration are intended to be permanent and immutable. The same is true of Lycurgus' Sparta: Its unwritten laws protected the permanence of the system. In fact, Thucydides considers that it was the internal stability of Sparta that enabled the city to achieve the power it acquired in the fifth century.⁵²

This unchangeability is also sought through the absence of gold and silver, a feature in which Lycurgus's Sparta again coincides with primordial Athens.⁵³ In fact, the warriors of the latter practice a kind of communism: They possess nothing of their own, because they consider everything to be common. Their lifestyle, characterised by a Spartan-like austerity, leads them to demand from farmers and craftsmen only what they need to survive, thus forming a middle ground between ostentation and servile poverty.⁵⁴ Their living quarters, also common, are located to the north of the Acropolis, where the facilities reserved for organizing, in the winter season, the *syssítia* or communal meals. These lead one to think, once again, of Sparta, where the institution of the *syssítia* was fundamental for the Spartiates, both for the definition of full citizenship and for the maintenance of order.⁵⁵ During the summer, the primordial Athenian *syssítia* were held in the southern part of the city. There was no shortage of gymnasia, key institutions in Spartan society.⁵⁶ In these sports facilities, the primaeval Athenians trained the bodies and souls that, according to Critias, would be admired for their beauty throughout Europe and Asia.⁵⁷

Faced with the virtue of the latter, the degeneration of the Atlanteans will provoke the punishment of Zeus: The god sends Atlantis on a collision course with primitive Athens in the hope that the Atlanteans will become more moderate.⁵⁸ In the conflict, the primordial Athens stops the expansion of the Atlantean power,⁵⁹ just as Sparta (as

⁴⁹ X. *Lac.* 7.1-2; Plu. *Lyc.* 24.2. On the possible motivation for the introduction of these measures in Sparta at the time of Plato, see Fornis 2016, 53.

⁵⁰ Pl. *Criti.* 112d.

⁵¹ Pl. *Criti.* 112c, 116b; Th. 1.10.2.

⁵² Th. 1.18.1. Cf. Pl. *Criti.* 112e; Plu. *Lyc.* 13; Cic. *Flac.* 63.

⁵³ Plu. *Lyc.* 9.1; Pl. *Criti.* 112c.

⁵⁴ Pl. *Criti.* 110c-d, 112c.

⁵⁵ Pl. *Criti.* 112b; Hdt. 1.65.5; X. *Lac.* 5.2; Plu. *Lyc.* 10, 12.6. The *syssítia* are also an important element for Plato in *Laws*; see David 1978, 486-495.

⁵⁶ Pl. *Criti.* 112c; *Prt.* 342b-c; X. *Lac.* 5.8-9; Plu. *Lyc.* 25.1.

⁵⁷ Pl. *Criti.* 112e.

⁵⁸ Pl. *Criti.* 120d, 121a-c.

⁵⁹ Pl. *Ti.* 24e, 25b-c.

Plato knew well at the time of writing *Critias*) stopped Athens, wielding the hegemony of the Peloponnesian League without interfering in the internal politics of its allies. Thus, in both mythical and historical accounts, ostentatious naval imperialism is defeated by an austere and moderate land power.

2.3. The tale of Critias: An evocation of the Peloponnesian War

In view of the arguments referred above, linked to the Platonic descriptions of Atlantis and primaeva Athens, it can be said that the account in *Critias* evokes the Peloponnesian War. As already noted, this is an interpretation that is not currently advocated as the only option: Following in the wake of Vidal-Naquet, more recent works on the subject formulate several possible historical equivalents, and of different proportions, which are presented as equally valid. These are mainly the Battle of Marathon and the Peloponnesian War.⁶⁰ Without denying the appeal of the comparisons drawn between the Atlantis narrative and Herodotus' chronicle, I will briefly set out some arguments, beyond those linked to the urban landscape,⁶¹ for the prevalence of Plato's evocation of the Peloponnesian War.

As for the battle of Marathon, I have already referred to several factors that show the impossibility of reconciling the recognition of Atlantis as both Persia and, at the same time, fifth-century Athens. However, beyond the benefit of the readability of *Critias*, the eminently Greek nature of the Atlanteans and their habitat, and the multiplicity of traits that primaeva Athens shares with Sparta, there are other reasons that favour the consideration of the story as a transcript of the Peloponnesian War over the thesis of the Persian Wars.

First, let us consider the shortcomings of the latter interpretation as presented by Broadie, who is the author who has most fully developed it. According to her, the allusion to Marathon through the Atlantis story is so obvious that the fact that the characters in *Critias* make no explicit reference to this event can only be explained by assuming that the setting of the dialogue is a world without Marathon ("a world in which that event has never been heard of") and therefore a fictional setting.⁶² However, it is much easier to think that the characters do not refer to the similarities between the narrative and its historical equivalent because they do not yet know the outcome of the latter, especially since this option is consistent with most proposals for the date of the events in *Critias*, all of which predate the end of the Peloponnesian War.⁶³

⁶⁰ Cf. Broadie 2012, 130, 140-141; Gill 2017, 27-28. Note, however, Gill's reservations about interpreting the Atlantis story as a narrative "about Athens in a strong sense", or his reluctance to see *Critias* as containing a political message for fourth-century Athens (as argued by Pradeau 1997, 224-229, or Morgan 1998, 114-118); cf. Gill 2017, 30. As for other proposals, such as the one paralleling the Atlantis story and the Sicilian disaster, the link between this event and the presence of the character of Hermocrates in *Critias* is very attractive (cf. Gill 1977, 298; Broadie 2012, 140; Gill 2017, 28); nevertheless, the significance that this character adds to the dialogue can remain within the evocation of the Peloponnesian War as a whole. I will not, however, discuss Dušanić's hypothesis (1982), as his interpretation requires a very specific dating of the composition of the text which cannot be proven. On the weaknesses of the different methodological approaches to the order in which the dialogues are written, see Nails 1995, 53-135.

⁶¹ See above, pp. 577-583.

⁶² Broadie 2012, 130-140.

⁶³ Some proposals: In favour of the year 421, see Taylor 1928, 14-17, and Lampert – Planeaux 1998, 93-95; in favour of the year 429, see Welliver 1977, 44, n. 11, and Nails 2002, 107; in favour of a time range between 430 and 425, see Brisson 2001 [1992], 71-72.

In fact, the common dramatic dating of *Critias* within the framework of the course of the aforementioned war is the second reason I will add to support Plato's evocation of the conflict between Athens and Sparta. This dating makes sense, moreover, if one considers that Plato situates many of his dialogues within this same time frame, in which his characters are unaware of the development of a conflict (the Peloponnesian War) which for him and his readers is already part of a shared "historical" knowledge.⁶⁴ Undoubtedly this recent past, which profoundly marked the context of the fourth century, was more vivid in the memory of the Athenians than the battle of Marathon at the time of the composition and reception of *Critias*. It is therefore more likely that, when composing or reading the text, both Plato and his contemporaries had the Peloponnesian War in mind as a first choice.

Thirdly, the reference to the sides that took part in the conflict narrated by *Critias* is more consistent with a confrontation between leagues, such as the one that occurred in the Peloponnesian War, than with a battle in which Athenians and Plataeans engage against the Persian army.⁶⁵

Fourthly, another factor in favour of the recognition of the Peloponnesian War as a conflict concealed under the story of Atlantis is the appropriateness of *Critias*, and specifically *Critias IV*, as a narrator.⁶⁶ Gill points to the link between *Critias IV* and the defence of the "ancestral (pre-democratic) constitution", by arguing that this regime was sometimes identified with the Solonian system, which in turn would be the basis of the Athenian constitution at the time of the battle of Marathon, to show the relevance of *Critias* "the tyrant" as the narrator of a story that idealises the Athens of 490. However, Gill himself warns of the ambivalence and different appropriations of the appeal to Solon:⁶⁷ as Morgan points out, in 403 Athens there was also an appeal to the "ancestral constitution" as a guide to the restoration of democracy; moreover, she follows Finley when he disassociates Plato and his disciples from the intellectual current that alludes to the "ancestral constitution" to oppose democracy.⁶⁸ It is therefore difficult for Plato to connect the pro-oligarchic ideology of *Critias* with an idealisation of Athens in 490 based on indirect (and therefore tenuous) links between the "ancestral constitution", Solon's regime, and the times of Marathon. It seems much more likely that Plato, in recalling the Spartan victory in the Peloponnesian War, chose *Critias* as the narrator because of his undeniable status as a philolaconian, so that primaeval Athens actually represented the Sparta he praised in his writings.

In short, this series of arguments complements what has already been adduced on Plato's use of the urban landscape and, in general, of the descriptions of the cities in *Critias*, in order to identify in it an implicit account of the Peloponnesian War. I will

⁶⁴ Despite the divergence of proposals, some examples of dramatic dates of dialogues spanning the course of the Peloponnesian War include *Charmides*, *Gorgias*, *Republic*, *Laches*, *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* (see Nails 2002, appendix I). A notorious exception is, for obvious reasons, the collection of dialogues linked to the trial and death of Socrates (*Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, *Phaedo*), dated to 399.

⁶⁵ Pl. *Criti.* 108e; Th. 1.1; Hdt. 6.111.

⁶⁶ On the discussion of the identification of this character, I refer to Rosenmeyer 1949, 404-410; Davies 1971, 325-326; Dušanić 2000, 57, n. 23; and Nesselrath 2006, 43-50, to argue that it is more likely that Plato chose *Critias IV* as the narrator of the struggle between Atlantis and primordial Athens (cf. Procl. *in. Ti.* 1.70.20-25).

⁶⁷ Gill 2017, 19.

⁶⁸ Morgan 1998, 111-112; cf. Finley 1971, 50-51.

now propose an interpretation, also urban landscape-based, of how Plato explains the cause of this conflict.

3. The cause of the conflict: The corruption of the circle

In light of the above, Plato's message is clear: Atlantis deserves to be punished for not demonstrating the *sophrosýne* of primaeval Athens.⁶⁹ But what is the root cause of the conflict? If, in fact, Plato's account conceals a warning against the imperialism inherent in Athenian democracy, represented by Atlantis, and in favour of a laconizing regime, represented by primordial Athens, it makes sense that the cause of the conflict parallels the one set out by Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*: The advance of the Athenian empire or, in the case of the story in question, the expansion of the Atlantean territory.⁷⁰ I will now propose that Plato conveys this cause by resorting, once again, to the urban landscape and, in particular, to the geometry of the town plan.

The architectural historian Vidler had already drawn on Pradeau's study to point out the resistance of the circle that configured primaeval Athens and the corruptible character of the orthogonal layout of Atlantis.⁷¹ Following in the wake of these authors, I will propose that Plato establishes a conscious opposition between these two types of urban layout, which are more or less extensible to the *chórai* of the cities he designs. Following on from this, I will argue that the symbolic origin of the hostilities in Critias' account lies in the corruption of the primordial layout of Atlantis, that is, in the corruption of the circle, the significance of which parallels the advance of the Athenian empire that Thucydides sees as the cause of the Peloponnesian War.

3.1. The circular layout

Although the characteristics of the town plan of primordial Athens are not made explicit in *Critias*, following the description of the limits of its acropolis it is possible to perceive a circular geometrical base, since the points that delimit it are equidistant: The Eridanus to the north, the Ilissos to the south, the Pnyx to the west and the Lycabettus to the east. It is more complex to define, in geometrical terms, the general layout of primaeval Athens, which extends to the natural boundaries where its inhabitants repel the Atlantean invasion.⁷² However, it is precisely the natural character of these borders, together with the lack of walls and navy, that makes primordial Athens the paradigm of a self-sufficient city that is enclosed upon itself. This image allows to conceive it, at least metaphorically, as a circle, "enclosed and thereby resistant to decay".⁷³

Plato's preference for this type of plan can be seen in the design of the ideal city of Magnesia, whose pattern of settlement is dominated by the geometric shape of the

⁶⁹ Parallel to Spartan *sophrosýne* (Plu. *Lyc.* 31.1-2).

⁷⁰ Th. 1.23.6, 1.88, 1.118.2. For Thucydides, this war would constitute "la conséquence logique de l'impérialisme athénien". Thucydides suggests a concept close to imperialism in 4.21.2, 4.61.5 or 4.92.2; cf. Lévy 1976, 55, 61.

⁷¹ Vidler 2010, 336; cf. Pradeau 1997, 93.

⁷² Brumbaugh 1954, 56-57.

⁷³ Vidler 2010, 336.

circle. In fact, Piérart describes it as a “succession de cercles imbriqués les uns dans les autres” and affirms that “la cité des *Lois*, sur le plan géométrique, n’est donc pas autre chose que l’expression de la cité grecque idéale”.⁷⁴

But what makes this town plan Plato’s favourite? The circular layout, or, to use a more technical term, “the radial-concentric grid”, is characterised by its “introverted” nature. In order to understand this concept, it is useful to reproduce Mazza’s words:

The radial-concentric grid has by definition a centre from which, and towards which, the radial axes originate and converge; and it is the existence of a centre that determines its introverted nature, which manifests itself in the strain to contain space within the perimeter of the last concentric ring (...). If, in the space considered, there are numerous centres, a moment comes when the outer rings of various grids come close to one another without the possibility of connecting; in that instant, the introverted and limited character of the radial-concentric grid is manifest.⁷⁵

Following Mazza’s explanation, it can be seen that the introversion of the “radial-concentric grid” guarantees the definition of limits and, by extension, the unity of a given space. I believe it is this characteristic that defines Plato’s preference for this type of urban design, for it is the unity of the polis, governed by impassable boundaries, that prevents *stásis*, and this is reflected in the philosopher’s design of his ideal cities. In contrast to this, I will argue that the orthogonal grid, synonymous with infinity, is a feature of cities whose imperialist zeal leads to the extension of their borders and subsequent warfare, thus destabilising the balance of the polis.

3.2. The orthogonal grid

In the framework of what he called “political physiology”, Pradeau emphasised the connection between the mathematical elements of the text of *Critias* and the nature of the cities in the story. Inspired by Brisson’s “réseau mathématique de l’Atlantide”, he related the moral and political stability of primordial Athens to the scarcity of numbers associated with it, which contrasts with the diversity of numbers and measurements that Plato includes in his description of Atlantis and which reflect the vastness of its territory.⁷⁶ This incommensurability, the lack of defined limits, is perceived in Atlantean urban planning: A Hippodamian layout incapable of ensuring the unity of the city, since its regular divisions are constantly multiplying. Thus, in *Critias*, Plato criticises Hippodamian urbanism and, with it, a model of the plan that has been reproduced all around him, both in the colonial world and in his own polis.⁷⁷

Indeed, Plato seems to be surrounded by anti-*paradeigmata*. An example of this in the colonial world is the checkerboard plan of Thurii, a city marked by Athenian political and cultural influence, a Panhellenic foundation, and the democratic nature

⁷⁴ Piérart 1974, 21, 24-25. Note, however, that the description of Magnesia as a “cité grecque idéale” contrasts precisely with the reality of the colonial world contemporary to Plato, where the Hippodamian plan is predominant. In this sense, it is interesting to note Plato’s creation of a colonial alternative with a circular layout such as Magnesia (cf. *Pl. Lg.* 3.702c-d).

⁷⁵ Mazza 2009, 135.

⁷⁶ Pradeau 1997, 91.

⁷⁷ Cf. Pradeau 1997, 273; Videll 2010, 336.

of its constitution.⁷⁸ In this sense, it is interesting to note Plato's determination to create, in *Laws*, a colonial alternative with a circular layout such as Magnesia.⁷⁹

An even closer example of an orthogonal plan is to be found in Athens itself: Plato only has to look at the port of Piraeus, whose design is attributed to Hippodamus of Miletus, to associate this type of plan with a place that symbolised naval development and radical democracy.⁸⁰ In addition, of course, there is the imperialist drive of an Athens that turns the sea into its channel of expansion.⁸¹ At the same time, in contrast to the stability of the "circle" of primaeval Athens, the Atlantean empire would be incapable of containing the different kinetic impulses that shaped it.⁸²

3.3. The corruption of the circle

Despite the above, Atlantis was not always an expanding territory. Atlantis was, in fact, born as a city with a circular plan, as Poseidon fortified the central hill of the island with concentric defensive rings of land and sea.⁸³ At a time when "there were still no ships and no shipping",⁸⁴ Atlantis may still be a prototype of Plato's ideal polis, for it remains closed in on itself. However, the Atlantean kings were not content with the enormous wealth of their island: The monarchs break the congruence of the concentric rings traced by Poseidon by perforating them with rectangular canals.⁸⁵

The design resulting from human intervention on the territory is that of an orthogonal layout, which is superimposed over the previous circular design. Although, at first glance, we might think that the regularity of this new plane is synonymous with balance, the truth is that orthogonal figures, as opposed to circular ones, are not capable of limiting the sensitive elements, as their lines can extend infinitely. To justify this, I refer again to Mazza's study: As opposed to the "introversion" of the radial-concentric grid (defined above),

the orthogonal grid has a quality that we might define as extrovert in so much as its regularity allows it to expand to infinity in each direction, because the abstract concept of space that supports it is limitless. The lack of a central reference point makes it identical in every point of space, just as the "blocks" are identical, and the

⁷⁸ DS 12.11.3, 12.35.1. Ehrenberg (1948, 157) situates the founding of Thurii at ca. 444/3. On the Athenian influence, see Ehrenberg 1948, 153-154, 156-157, 163. Tradition says that the *oikistés* of Thurii was a supporter of Pericles, Lampon of Athens (DS 12.10.3-4; Plu. *Mor.* 812d). According to Diogenes Laertius (9.8.50), the laws of this colony were written by Protagoras of Abdera.

⁷⁹ See above, pp. 585-586.

⁸⁰ On Hippodamus' intervention, cf. Arist. *Pol.* 2.1267b23. On the plan of Piraeus, see Dicks 1968 y Gill 2006. Concerning the novel conception of the city implied by the urbanism of Thurii and Piraeus, see Caliò 2021, 10-11. On the political connotations of the orthogonal plan and the possibility that its geometrical regularity represents democratic isonomy, see Mazza 2009, 127, 130.

⁸¹ As Lévy (1976, 68) argues, maritime states are more prone to imperialism than a continental, inward-looking city like Sparta.

⁸² This movement would be determined by what Pradeau called the "political physiology" of the cities of *Critias*, which corresponds to a politicised urban landscape (Pradeau 1997, 319). On the city as a living being in *Critias*, see Pradeau 1997, 317.

⁸³ On this hill dwelled Cleitus, who, together with Poseidon, gave birth to the lineage of the Atlantean kings (Pl. *Criti.* 113d-114a). On Poseidon as the god of circular fortification, see Darthou 2000, 101-103.

⁸⁴ Pl. *Criti.* 113e.

⁸⁵ Pl. *Criti.* 115c-e.

orthogonal axes that define them. If the axes are always aligned in the same direction, they can be reproduced and extended into space without encountering any obstacles, even if they start from different points far apart.⁸⁶

In Atlantis, this “extroversion” multiplies the elements that make up the empire. The Atlantean city thus seeks immeasurable extensions that make it practically impossible to represent its territory graphically. In short, the orthogonal plan that ends up defining Atlantis perfectly portrays the constant corruption of borders, which clashes with the primitive Athenians’ desire for permanence. When the circle unravels, stability shatters with it.

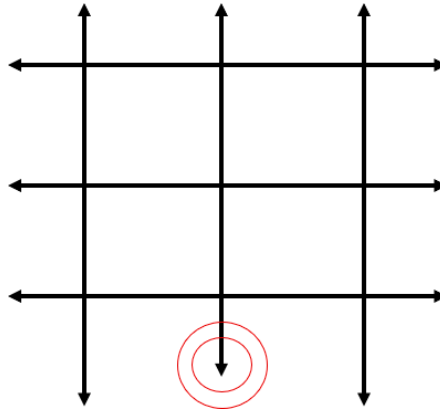


Figure 1. The Atlantean town plan (author’ design).

However, as obvious as it is, it is important to underline that this circle does not break by itself: It is the Atlantean kings who open a way to the outside from the central hill and, consequently, who provide the city with the necessary logistics to expand. It is therefore human intervention that determines the conversion of the ideal town plan, the circular one, into the same kind of plan used by Thurii or Piraeus, Plato’s anti-*paradeigmata*. In this sense, I think it is useful to read this part of the story in connection with a passage from Book 2 of *Republic*:

For there are some, it appears, who will not be contented with this sort of fare or with this way of life (...). Then we shall have to enlarge the city again. For that healthy state is no longer sufficient, but we must proceed to swell out its bulk and fill it up with a multitude of things that exceed the requirements of necessity in states (...). And the territory, I presume, that was then sufficient to feed the then population, from being adequate will become too small. (...) Then we shall have to cut out a cantele of our neighbour’s land if we are to have enough for pasture and ploughing, and they in turn of ours if they too abandon themselves to the unlimited acquisition of wealth, disregarding the limit set by our necessary wants. (...) We shall go to war as the next step. (...) And we are not yet to speak of any evil or good effect of war, but only to affirm that we have further discovered the origin of

⁸⁶ Mazza 2009, 135.

war, namely, from those things from which the greatest disasters, public and private, come to states when they come.⁸⁷

Both in this fragment of *Republic* and in the account of Atlantis, it is human ambition that leads to the search for riches in neighbouring territories and, subsequently, to war. Something similar happens, too, with the expansionist attitude of the Athenians, which, according to Thucydides, was what led to the Peloponnesian War.⁸⁸ So, reading these three texts together (the aforementioned fragment from the *Republic*, the account included in *Critias*, and the Thucydidean chronicle) shows that they all share the same idea of what causes war: Imperialism.

In a sense, this contradicts the interpretation of Pradeau, who states that “considéré comme une représentation de la guerre du Péloponnèse, et comparé à l’histoire qu’en écrit Thucydide, le *Critias* se distingue par l’explication qu’il donne de l’origine du conflit entre les deux puissances”.⁸⁹ In support of this, the author refers to the loss of the divine element among the Atlanteans as the origin of the expansion of their empire and, consequently, of the war.⁹⁰ Indeed, reading the end of *Critias*, it is clear that Plato emphasises the decline of the Atlanteans’ share of divinity as the trigger for Zeus’ punishment and, by extension, for the conflict with primaeval Athens.⁹¹ This makes sense in the context of mythical narrative, that is, the genre Plato uses to convey history, which is of course different from historiography. However, Pradeau forgets to look for the origin of this loss of the divine element: What better representation of this loss than the end of Poseidon’s sovereignty through the breaking, by the kings of Atlantis, of the concentric rings that the god had laid out? So, the first and real cause of the collision between the powers is implicit in the tale of *Critias* and parallels the one described by Thucydides for the Peloponnesian War. As I have argued, Plato conveys it through the way in which Atlanteans affect the urban landscape.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Plato uses both the urban landscape and its political implications to convey, under the guise of the Atlantean story, his own interpretation of a recent past: The Peloponnesian War. Both the features shared by Atlantis and fifth-century Athens, as well as primaeval Athens and the Sparta of the *mirage*, lead to perceive this evocation, which is reinforced by several details of the text and the setting of *Critias*. Following this hypothesis, and combining it again with Plato’s attention to the urban landscape, it can be seen that the origin of the mythical conflict has the same cause which, according to Thucydides, provoked the hostilities between Athenians and Spartans: Athenian expansionism, which the philosopher represents through the distortion of the circles on the town plan of the primitive foundations of Atlantis.

⁸⁷ Pl. *R.* 2.373a-373e (trans. Shorey 1937).

⁸⁸ See above, p. 585, n. 70.

⁸⁹ Pradeau 1997, 188.

⁹⁰ Pradeau 1997, 189.

⁹¹ Pl. *Criti.* 121a-b.

And so, despite the obvious differences between the Atlantean account and the chronicle of Thucydides, which do not even share the same literary genre, it can be said that Plato had not only read Thucydides' work, but that the content of the latter, and so the recent history of Athens, formed a part of his philosophical reflection, in which the urban landscape plays a fundamental role in conveying messages that are suggested, camouflaged or apparently hidden.

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