



# PLATO

## THE REPUBLIC



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THE PENGUIN CLASSICS

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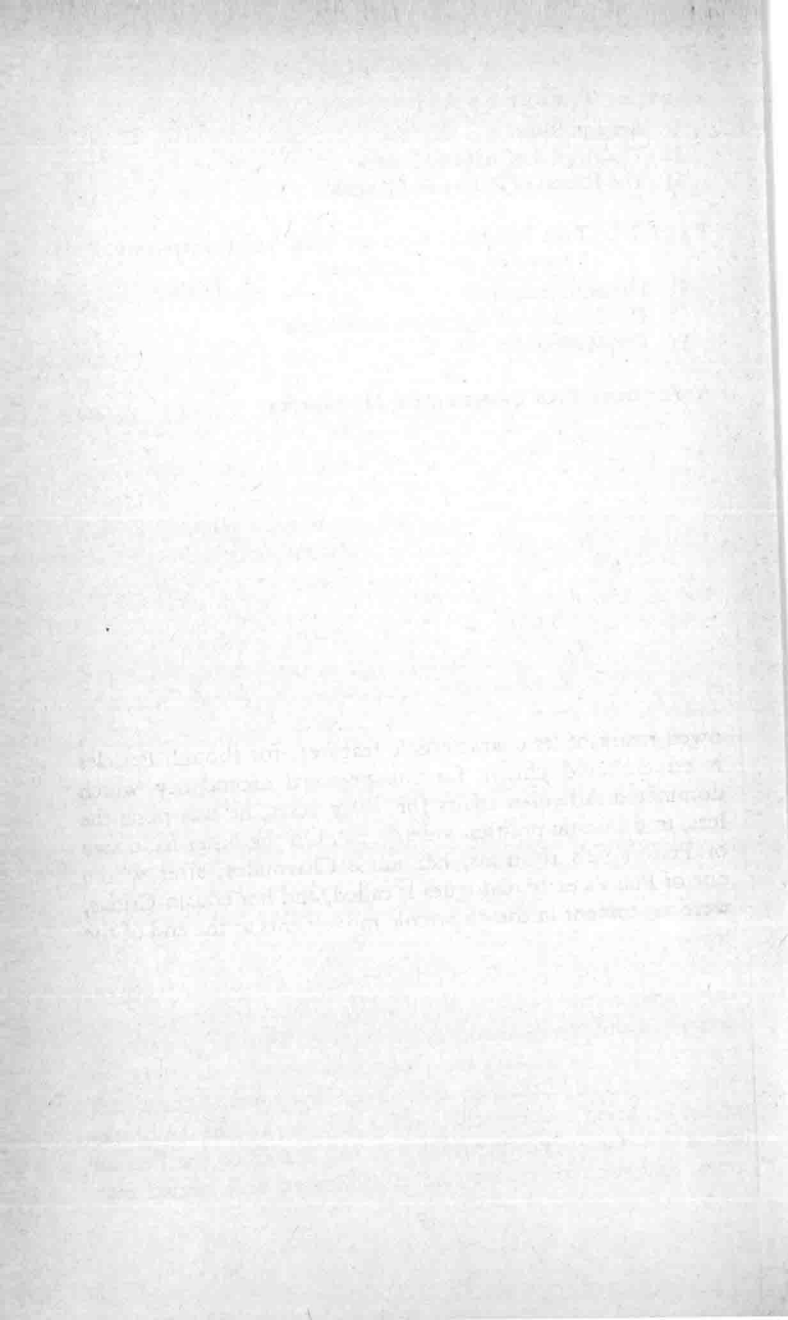
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# TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION



## I. PLATO'S LIFE AND TIMES

PLATO was born in 427 B.C., some three years after the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War and just over a year after the death of Pericles. His father, Ariston, who died when he was a few years old, was a member of an old and distinguished Athenian family, as was also his mother Perictione. Ariston and Perictione had two other sons, both older than Plato, Adeimantus and Glaucon, who are two of the main characters in the *Republic*. After Ariston's death Perictione married again, as was the normal Greek custom, her second husband being Pyrilampes, a close friend and supporter of Pericles and himself prominent in public life.

Plato thus came of a distinguished family with many political connexions. Through his stepfather he had a link with Pericles, who gave his name to the great age of Athenian history, and to whom Athenian democracy, as Plato knew it, owed many of its characteristic features; for though Pericles is remembered chiefly for the personal ascendancy which dominated Athenian affairs for thirty years, he was none the less, in domestic politics, a democrat. On the other hand two of Perictione's relations, her uncle Charmides, after whom one of Plato's early dialogues is called, and her cousin Critias, were prominent in the oligarchic movements at the end of the century.

Of Plato's early years we know little. He presumably received the normal education of a Greek boy, learning to read and write and study the poets (cf. p. 113). More important, he grew up in a city at war. The Peloponnesian war, which began just before his birth, lasted until he was twenty-three and ended in defeat and humiliation for Athens, and in the break-up of the confederation which she had led since the Persian wars, and which Pericles had consolidated and turned into

something more like an empire than a confederation. Pericles himself died in 425 B.C., a victim of the plague which visited Athens in the early years of the war and brought death and demoralization with it, a demoralization described with vivid terseness by Thucydides. After Pericles' death the more radical democrats were the most influential force in Athenian politics. They were men of a very different kind. Their origins were comparatively humble – Cleon was a tanner, Hyperbolus a lamp-seller; they relied for their power, as Pericles had done, on their ability to sway the popular assembly. But whereas he never sacrificed his independence of judgement, they felt themselves to be dependent on popular favour, and their policies were too often those which they thought the people would like rather than those which the situation demanded. Such at any rate is the judgement of Thucydides;<sup>1</sup> and though he had little cause to love them, and though they certainly did not lack energy or courage or ability, the judgement is not unfounded, and it was under their leadership that Athens finally lost the war. Their external policy is commonly called imperialist. They recognized more clearly than Pericles the element of force in the Athenian confederation, and they were prepared to use it more ruthlessly; they were ready to act on the belief which Thrasymachus expresses in Book I of the *Republic*,<sup>2</sup> that it is natural and right for the strong to exploit the weak.

The first stage of the war ended in a stale-mate in 421 B.C. A few years later Athens embarked on a great expedition against Syracuse in Sicily, another step in the policy of expansion. The expedition was a disastrous failure and by 412 B.C. the men, ships, and money devoted to it were irretrievably lost. The strain of external disaster can sharpen internal conflict. There was constant opposition to the policies of the democratic leaders; to the better-off their external policy seemed folly and their internal policy exploitation of the rich for the benefit of the irresponsible masses. The shock of the Sicilian disaster gave the opposition, the 'oligarchs', their

1. Bk II, 65. Plato echoes it in the *Republic* (p. 248 ff, p. 254).

2. P. 26 ff.



chance, and in 411 B.C. there was a revolution in which control passed to a Council of Four Hundred. This was succeeded a year later by the so-called Government of the Five Thousand, a constitution of which many moderates approved,<sup>1</sup> and which consisted, essentially, in limiting active citizen rights to those able to equip themselves with arms (the Athenian hoplite or infantryman was expected to provide his own arms), who proved to number about nine thousand, about a quarter to a third of the adult male population. The object was to keep political control in the hands of the more responsible elements in the population; but Athens depended on her sea-power, and could not deprive her poorer citizens, who served in the fleet, of a say in her affairs. The Government of the Five Thousand only lasted a year; the democratic constitution was then restored, and savage measures taken by the democrats against their oligarchic opponents, so that the following six years have been described as a 'democratic terror'. It was in this atmosphere of party bitterness that Plato reached his eighteenth year.

The final downfall of Athens came in 404 B.C. It was again followed by an oligarchic revolution, this time carried through with the help of victorious Spartan arms. A commission of thirty was set up; in theory they were to frame a new constitution, but in practice they retained power in their own hands and used it to settle old scores, and any good they may have done initially in 'purging the city of wrongdoers' was forgotten in the savage tyranny that followed. It was a tyranny that lasted only eight months; the Thirty were driven out and subsequently killed, and the democratic constitution, in all essentials the same, restored. Athens was tired of extremists, and on the whole the restored democracy acted with sense and moderation. But it did one thing which Plato could never forgive: in 399 B.C. it put Socrates to death on a charge of impiety and corrupting the young. We have Plato's own account, in his Seventh Letter, written when he was an old man, of his experiences during these years when he was a young man of about twenty-three to twenty-eight. 'I had much

1. Thucydides and Aristotle thought it the best Athens ever had.