

# Paul Kalligas, Chloe Balla, Effie Baziotopoulou-Valavani, and Vassilis Karasmanis, Plato's Academy: Its Workings and Its History

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Volume 2, Number 2, 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1095448ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/aestimatio.v2i2.39103>

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## Publisher(s)

Institute for Research in Classical Philosophy and Science

## ISSN

1549-4470 (print)

1549-4497 (digital)

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## Cite this review

Veres, M. (2021). Review of [Paul Kalligas, Chloe Balla, Effie Baziotopoulou-Valavani, and Vassilis Karasmanis, Plato's Academy: Its Workings and Its History]. *Aestimatio*, 2(2), 213–219.  
<https://doi.org/10.33137/aestimatio.v2i2.39103>

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*Plato's Academy: Its Workings and Its History* edited by Paul Kalligas, Chloe Balla, Effie Baziotopoulou-Valavani, and Vassilis Karasmanis

Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. xi + 434. ISBN 978–1–108–57428–0. eBook USD \$31.94

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When it comes to ancient Greek philosophy, the story of Plato's Academy is as romantic as it gets. In a familiar version, the story begins with Plato's return from his travels around the Mediterranean. Having acquired a piece of land in a public Athenian garden bearing the name of the mythical hero Hecademos or Academos, Plato established a community that attracted leading intellectuals of the day as well as promising youngsters, male and female, of the Greek elite. For the last four decades of his life, he conducted philosophical conversations with them, gave the occasional public lecture, and supervised various research projects in dialectics and in higher geometry. Upon his death and burial onsite in 348/347 BC, the school went on to exist under successive leaders for three centuries, becoming the first enduring institution of its kind in the Greek world and giving its name to subsequent institutions of learning and higher education.

Unfortunately, scholarly rigor knows little romance. The study of Plato's Academy is no exception, as hardly anything about the school has been established beyond reasonable doubt. For example, its foundation is variously dated from 387 to 383 [68 n12]; its precise location and structures are unknown; it might even be the case that the figure of Academos was invented to account for the name of the area [46]. Uncertainty surrounds the activities of the school as well. In what manner did Plato participate in the life of the Academy, and what goals did he have in mind? Was there a

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formal curriculum or an intent to design one? How did the institution acquire its preconditions for longevity, what changes and developments took place within its physical or metaphorical walls, and how did it eventually cease to exist?

The volume being reviewed, *Plato's Academy: Its Workings and Its History*, which derives from a conference held in December 2012 in Athens, brings together archaeologists, intellectual historians, and historians of philosophy to discuss anew some of these outstanding questions. The life and works of the founder, other than what is immediately relevant for institutional history, are prudently set aside. As to the available sources, Paul Kalligas suggests in his editorial introduction [ch. 1] that, once we come to terms with the paucity of evidence, we will be better able to “appreciate how indeed precious the little we know about it is” [8].<sup>1</sup> The scholarly mindsets of scarcity and of abundance recognized in this remark are variously on display in the individual chapters that follow.

The result is neither a comprehensive survey of matters Academic nor an advanced introduction to the topic at hand, but rather a snapshot of the current state of eminent research in each of the fields involved. Altogether, the collection successfully demonstrates that the Platonic Academy is still very much a subject of justifiable puzzlement and fascination. The collection's other major accomplishment is that it makes widely available, with the Greek text of Tiziano Dorandi and an English translation by Paul Kalligas and Voula Tsouna, those sections of Philodemus' *History of the Philosophers* that are devoted to the history of the Academy [PHerc. 1021 and 164].<sup>2</sup> Myrto Hatzimichali's notes and companion chapter [ch. 15] provide ample information about the text and its reception, highlighting its significance as a document of the history of the school from the point of view of a well-informed and attentive opponent.

The first three chapters look at the archaeology and topography of the Academy. Daniela Marchiandi [ch. 2] tentatively ties Plato's choice of location

<sup>1</sup> This contrasts favorably with the more optimistic assessment of Matthias Baltes, who gave a vivid description of the Academy [1993]. There are, of course, numerous evaluations with comparable confidence of the school's topography and of its intellectual activities, many of them mentioned in the volume.

<sup>2</sup> This review was already in the copyediting stage when, in another review, Tiziano Dorandi [2021] expressed reservations about the use of Dorandi 1991 and suggested instead that one should wait for an improved edition which will take into account the progress made by Kilian Fleischer and Holger Essler [see 2021, 453].

to the civic significance of the garden hosting the Academy, especially its importance for the education of Athenian youth in the spirit of democratic imperialism. Plato's attitude to this heritage, whether he meant to take it onboard or to reappropriate it, is not discussed, and the argument of the chapter is ultimately qualified as only a "starting point to understand" Plato's decision to set up shop in this particular spot [27].

Manolis Panayiotopoulos and Tania Chatziefthimiou [ch. 3] take stock of the meager physical evidence for the Academy, the most noteworthy item being an inscribed boundary stone from the late sixth century. They also delve into the history of the investigation of the site, stating that "the modern Academy of Athens considered this task as a duty, to seek the cradle, the birthplace, of the Academies" [30].

Eutychia Lygouri-Tolia [chapter 4] argues quite boldly that, even if we cannot locate the precise place of the Academy within the Sacred Grove, we can surmise that its main building was conceived with a unity of purpose: to serve the educational program of Plato and to house a library.

The focus of Matthias Haake's wide-ranging contribution [ch. 5] is the institutional life and public standing of the early circle of individuals associated with the Academy. Haake argues that Plato's creation of a nonreligious private association with exclusive membership, a unique organizational structure, and a set of common practices led not only to the emergence of an enduring sense of community but also to the increasing hostility of an already apprehensive Athenian public. Academics quickly came to be seen as a clique whose values were at odds with democracy and as members of suspicious international networks in the service of oligarchic agendas. While the otherworldly pursuits of Athenian philosophers were ridiculed in comic theater or targeted with the occasional charge of impiety, their suspected political ambitions were met with the passing of a short-lived piece of legislation, the Law of Sophocles (307/306), which made the running of philosophical schools conditional upon the permission of the Assembly and the Council.

Turning to the question of Plato's educational activities, John Glucker [ch. 6] draws an aporetic conclusion from his clear presentation and judicious analysis of the textual evidence, which he presents in an appendix (although without translation). He convincingly shows that there is no textual basis for any claim as to whether and how Plato taught in the Academy in any formal sense of the term, nor do the sources vouch for more than a single public lecture given by Plato. Glucker quite reasonably warns against basing one's

interpretation on mere assumptions; yet he makes a minor one in passing, suggesting that one reason to believe that there was only one such lecture is that Plato would not “care to risk repeating such a humiliating performance more than once” [93, cf. 96].

Unlike Glucker, Vasilis Karasmanis [ch. 7] takes it that Plato must have at least partially enacted the curriculum of the Guardians outlined in book 7 of the *Republic* [127]. Karasmanis also urges his reader to trust the later tradition “that presents Plato as playing a significant role in the development of the mathematics of his time” [139]. On this view, one should not discount Plato’s role in the flourishing of mathematical sciences: his encouragement and supervision contributed to methodological and substantive developments, the emergence of new fields of research, and an unprecedented attention to definitions of elementary objects. The only piece of testimony that Karasmanis does not endorse concerns Plato’s alleged solution of the Delian problem. This is surprising only because the chapter started out as a corrective to the view that Plato himself would have been hard-pressed to contribute anything novel to mathematics [108–109].<sup>3</sup>

In chapter 8, Michalis Sialaros urges the reader to distrust a striking claim of the commentary tradition. He examines the grounds for Proclus’ isolated pronouncement that Euclid’s *Elements* is a work of, or at least heavily influenced by, Plato’s philosophy. Proclus would have us believe that the sole purpose of the *Elements* was to examine the five regular polyhedra, which, according to Plato’s *Timaeus*, are the basic constituents of the cosmos. Sialaros in turn offers a series of considerations to ward off this conclusion: quite apart from the lack of any corroborating evidence for Proclus’ claim, the *Elements* is not organized around a single purpose, nor does the mathematical tradition that it relies upon need to be specifically Platonic or even Athenian [148–151].

Xenocrates of Chalcedon is a protagonist of the next two chapters, with the lurking presence of Aristotle as a point of reference. István Bodnár [ch. 9] presents the metaphysical views of Speusippus and Xenocrates as contrasting elaborations of hints in the Platonic dialogues concerning the prospects of studying the natural world. Bodnár argues that Aristotle would have preferred Xenocrates’ view, which accounts for both our perceptual and intellectual access to the heavenly bodies, while in Speusippus’ disjointed universe astronomy simply falls through the cracks. More importantly, he

<sup>3</sup> For the paper that Karasmanis takes to task, the core claim of which is that the image of Plato as a successful research supervisor is an early Academic extrapolation from the dialogues, see [Zhmod 1998](#).

argues that neither of them, nor anyone else in the early Academy, paved the way for Aristotle's extensive interest in the philosophy of natural sciences. Phillip Sidney Horky [ch. 10] relates, if indirectly, Xenocrates' possible interest in the Pythagorean ἀκούσματα to Aristotle's method of endoxic investigation. As he shows, Xenocrates' sympathies are with those who considered it important to collect first and then critically engage with the views and opinions of their predecessors. By contrast, Heraclides of Pontus presented Pythagoras not as an object of criticism but as a quasidivine forefather of doctrinal Platonism. Aristotle, while showing traces of both approaches, has more in common with the former than with the latter.

After Xenocrates, the spotlight falls on Polemo of Athens. John Dillon [ch. 11] investigates the proximity of Polemo's views to those of Zeno, the founder of the Stoic school. He finds that Polemo came quite close to, but stopped short of, offering a proto-Stoic outlook in two respects: first, he posited αἰθήρ as the first principle, and, second, he refused to label bodily and external goods as indifferents despite proclaiming the self-sufficiency of virtue.

Harold Tarrant [ch. 12] argues that the school's "Sceptical turn" under Arcesilaus of Pitane is less of an oddity than it seems, first and foremost because it followed upon a revival of Socratic spirit under Polemo's leadership. On Tarrant's view, Arcesilaus' philosophical stance resulted from a combination of the Academic practice of arguing on either side with his original training to serve not as head of the school but as librarian and scholar of Plato's works. Consequently, Cicero's repeated claim that Arcesilaus revived a Socratic mode of argumentation would mean only that he did not reveal any preference for or against the views discussed in debate.

There is a tendency among some ancient opponents of Academic sceptics to presume that they were in fact esoteric Platonists. Tarrant's account aims to strike a balance between the emphatic endorsement and the wholehearted rejection of this later allegation: there was indeed a confidential school tradition, one informed by the study of Plato's writings, but it was not at all a matter of accepting any particular doctrine. Perhaps this account is also meant to explain a crucial feature of the eventual disintegration of a shared Academic identity. On Tarrant's view, when Philo of Larissa enraged Antiochus of Ascalon by claiming that the Academics rebut only the Stoic theory of knowledge and not the overall possibility of making justified claims to knowledge, he would only have revealed something of which everyone in the Academic orbit other than Antiochus was already aware [217].

In contrast, David Sedley [ch. 13] argues that Philo's fallibilism was a departure from the Academic position of at least Carneades of Cyrene. Sedley's case is confined to the theological arguments developed by Carneades and preserved by both Sextus Empiricus and Marcus Tullius Cicero. In Cicero's *De natura deorum*, Carneades put forward these arguments with the specific goal of demolishing the Stoic system of theology while leaving traditional Roman religious beliefs and practices intact. In the first book of Sextus' *Against the Physicists*, however, Carneades' polemics amounted to a dialectical defense of atheism intended to counterbalance the theistic consensus of philosophers and nonphilosophers. Sedley successfully shows that Sextus' presentation is more faithful to the original [230] and makes a strong case for the dependence of Cicero's version on Philo's revision. The fallibilistic position, on this reading, is in fact a form of fideism grounded especially in the *Timaeus*, put forward with the intention of denying the philosophers' conception of knowledge only in order to make room for πίστις.

Mauro Bonazzi [ch. 14] brings the history of the original Academy to its narrative closure. He revisits the topic of the end of the institution and of the nearly coeval emergence of several competing Academic identities. He cautiously sides with those who think that Philo of Larissa died as the last elected head of the Academy in Rome in 84/83 BC, having fled from Athens in the wake of Sulla's capture of the city two years before. Once the center did not hold, newer and newer doctrinal schools of Platonism were loosed upon the world, starting from the Eastern Mediterranean. If there was indeed a school closed down by the edict of Emperor Justinian in AD 529, it was probably a school of this sort, rather than an institution that could trace its story back to the one founded by Plato nearly a millennium before.

Judging by its stated goals, the volume is an overall success. It does manage to "represent the multifarious character of Plato's school", informing the reader about the state of research in a variety of fields, although perhaps it does not entirely "integrate the multiple approaches involved into a comprehensive narrative" [xi]. It will undoubtedly become a standard point of reference for researchers working on Plato's Academy. At the same time, since the level of accessibility (both in terms of content and of the presupposed knowledge of Greek) varies from one chapter to another, the relative newcomer might occasionally feel frustrated. As for its size, the volume is just short of monumental, and it provides an exhaustive overview of most issues relevant to its subject matter.

Regrettably, due to the (hopefully temporary) measures enacted by the press in the midst of a worldwide health emergency, I have only been able to

consult the volume in its digital format. As far as I am able to see, the book appears to be excellently produced, with a negligible number of minor typos.<sup>4</sup> On occasion, articles of the same author published in the same year are disambiguated in the bibliography but not in the chapters that refer to them,<sup>5</sup> and one can notice the occasional vacillation between different transliterations of modern Greek names. It goes without saying that none of this is of any significance for the overall value of the collection. *Plato's Academy: Its Workings and Its History* is an engaging and thought-provoking volume, which is sure to find its place on the shelves, physical or virtual, of anyone with a serious interest in Plato and his early followers.

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<sup>4</sup> E.g., "Athenes" [23 n80]; "philosopherstatesman" [80]; "T. Trabbatoni" instead of "F. Trabattoni" on 200 n1 as well as in the bibliography; "phil-osophy" [281]; "Shule" in the title of Erler 1994, "Titiziano" and "Neueedition" in the title of Burkert 1993, "Arriggetti" instead of "Arrighetti", all in the bibliography.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Huffman 2014, 178 n50; Karasmanis 2012, 127 n60; Tarrant 2005, 91 n11. Note also that "Allen 2004" [23 n80] should be "Allan 2004".