

Dreams, autochthony, and metals:

Why does Plato's ideal city need a foundation myth (Rep. III 414b-415d)

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(abstract of a paper intended for a 20-minute presentation in a parallel session)

In order to persuade the population of his ideal city to accept the necessity and truth of his tripartite class structure Socrates invents a story according to which the citizens of Kallipolis were in reality created and nurtured in subterranean habitats and when they reached adulthood the earth delivered them up into the world. That is why they are all brothers and sisters and expected to take care of and defend their mother-city. At the same time, god has used three different metals to craft their souls in accordance with the class they belong, namely gold for the guardians, silver for the auxiliaries, iron and bronze for the producers. That is why it is imperative for the authorities to allot every citizen to the class dictated by his soul metal and promote or relegate them accordingly if they happen to have been born in the wrong family. Any violation of this rule will ultimately lead to the destruction of the city.

This story is presented as Socrates' first attempt at mythmaking in the *Republic* (415a3) in an explicit rivalry with the poets (414c5). He appropriates and combines two earlier creation narratives: the myth of autochthony, a fundamental constituent of civic identity for both Thebans and Athenians, and the myth of the metals, immortalised by Hesiod as an expression of the decline in the successive generations of mankind. In both cases, Socrates seems to have produced a narrative appropriate for the purposes of social cohesion unlike its poetic predecessors. By positing real earthborn siblings who love each other and their motherland he absolves the self-destructive bellicosity of the Theban Spartoi while turning the Athenian democratic rhetoric of equality into a concrete reality of brotherhood. By sanctioning social mobility between the classes he bypasses the irrevocable deterioration of men's life of the Hesiodic pattern.

In the broader narrative of the *Republic* Socrates' 'Phoenician tale' (414c4) is also structurally related to Glaukon's story about the Gyges' ring (II 359d-360b) and his own allegory of the Cave (VII 514a-517c). The subterranean setting and the motif of ascent/descent are common elements in all three stories. In Gyges' tale the archetypal nudity of the dead giant and, particularly, his gold ring resonates thematically with the assumed pre-natal nudity and the gold soul of the future guardians. On the other hand, the imprisoned dwellers of the cave are in every possible respect the real earth(un)borns, namely children of the earth doomed never to leave their mother's womb. In this case, the released ex-prisoner who climbs up into the surface may be thought to be the only earthborn, resembling the citizens of the ideal city.

In view of these rich inter- and intra-textual references my paper reads Socrates' fiction as a case study for the necessity of charter myths for the construction of collective identities inside and outside the *Republic*. I will focus on (a) manipulation of reality: shortly before adulthood the young Kallipolitans are expected to consider their experiences and memories from their life so far to have been unreal images of a dream-world (414d5); (b) power of persuasion: what does for the first generation sound like an unlikely falsehood in a few generations time will be revered as the truth revealed in a sacred text (415d1-2). Both issues are also relevant for the textual communities of readers of Plato's particular dialogue: whereas the 'truth' behind the founding myth of Kallipolis is revealed as a device (414b8-9) for the inoculation of civic cohesion and political agreement, no such information is available for the master narrative of the *Republic* itself. But a probable meta-authorial rendering of the craftsman god in Socrates' story (ὁ θεὸς πλάττων 415a4) may suggest that mythic discourse is inescapable when it comes to thinking of origins of communities.