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# Articles

## Scipio's Rome and Critias' Athens: Utopian Mythmaking in Cicero's *De Republica* and Plato's *Timaeus*

EVAN DUTMER

**Abstract:** Scholarly debate on the relationship between Cicero's *De republica* (*On the Republic*) and *De Legibus* (*On the Laws*) and the thought of Plato tends to focus on the supposed congruities or incongruities of the *De republica* and *De legibus* with Plato's own *Republic* and *Laws*. Still, Plato's discussion of ideal constitutions is not constrained to the *Republic* and *Laws*. In this essay I propose that we look to another of Plato's dialogues for fruitful comparison: the *Timaeus-Critias* duology. In this essay I bring these two texts into substantive dialogue to illuminate mysterious features of both. Sketched in these complementary passages, I think, is an outline for a particular kind of approach to political theory, one proposed as novel by Cicero's Laelius, but, as this essay hopes to show, with an interesting forerunner in Plato. I've called this approach 'retrospective ideal political philosophy' (RIPP). I end my essay with a few prospective theoretical notes on how this approach binds these two texts together.

**Keywords:** Cicero, Plato, Republic, Timaeus, Utopia, Ideal, Political Philosophy.

### 1. Introduction

Scholarly debate on the relationship between Cicero's *De republica* (*On the Republic*) and *De legibus* (*On the Laws*) and the political thought of Plato tends to focus on the supposed congruities or incongruities of the *De republica* and *De legibus* with Plato's own *Republic* and *Laws*.<sup>1</sup> Understandably so: the titles of the *De republica* and *De legibus* themselves pay homage to Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*, and there are certain notable similarities in form and content. Still, Plato's discussion of ideal constitutions is not constrained to the *Republic* and *Laws*.<sup>2</sup> In this essay I propose that we look to another of Plato's dialogues for fruitful comparison: the *Timaeus-Critias* duology.

In particular, I focus on the enigmatic introductory discussion of the *Timaeus* (17a-28b). In it, Socrates and his interlocutors review their conversation on an ideal constitution from the day before and detail its attendant societal classes and political offices (reminiscent, in some respects, to those of the *Republic*, but importantly different in others).<sup>3</sup> A desirous Socrates then asks his companions, whom he views as uniquely versed in philosophy and politics, for a speech which shows this city—static in their previous discussion—exercising

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For a representative sampling of current scholarly literature on comparison of Cicero and Plato's political thought, consult: Annas 2013, Atkins 2013a/2013b, Glucker 1988, Görler 1995, Powell 2001, Rawson 1973, Sharples 1986, Steinmetz 1989, Zetzel 1995. Abbreviations throughout this essay follow the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed.

<sup>2</sup> Discussions of ideal constitutions, in fact, proliferate. For a helpful list of potential candidates for the ideal city in Plato, consult Morrison 2007, sec. 3, and McKeen 2004 for a memorable description of the so-called "city of pigs", a perennial candidate for a sort of concealed ideal city.

<sup>3</sup> The differences have produced their own substantial scholarly literature. For introductions into the debate (and for reasons why Plato may have chosen to adapt the Callipolis to the context of the *Timaeus-Critias*), see Pradeau 1997, Sallis 1999.

its abilities in war (19b-d). Critias, answering Socrates, breaks off into a speech in which he idealizes ancient Athens in a mythological account of its history and claims that ancient Athens is an actualized example of the ideal constitution discussed the day before (21a-26e).

Readers of Cicero's *De republica* will notice familiar elements in this discussion. In *Rep.* 1, Cicero's Scipio Aemilianus discourses on the ideal constitution, concluding that the mixed constitution is best (1.69), and declares that the ancient Roman constitution, exemplifying the ideal constitution just arrived at, is without equal (1.70). Then, in Book 2, he delivers an account of the genesis of the constitution that blends myth, history, and political theory.

In this essay I bring these two texts into substantive dialogue to illuminate mysterious features of both. First, I present and examine the introductory discussion of Plato's *Timaeus* (17a-28b), paying special attention to Socrates' note on method (19b-20c), the understudied speech of Critias (21a-26e), and the transition to the speech of Timaeus (26c-e). Striking parallels are drawn between Critias' history of ancient Athens and Scipio's history of early Rome. Second, I briefly review relevant portions of Books 1 and 2 of Cicero's *De republica*, where Cicero's Scipio discusses the ideal constitution and proposes ancient republican Rome as its *exemplum*.

But what's the distinctly philosophical payoff? Sketched in these complementary passages, I think, is an outline for a particular kind of approach to political theory—(one proposed as novel by Cicero's Laelius, but, as this essay hopes to show, with an interesting forerunner among Plato's characters in the *Timaeus*). I've called this approach 'retrospective ideal political philosophy' (RIPP). This approach, I'll show, combines ideal political theory with a myth of an ancient, localized utopia as a sort of actualized past model of the ideal city.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Ancient Athens in the Prologue to the *Timaeus*

As mentioned, my discussions of both the *Timaeus* prologue and *De republica* 1-2 shall concern what I take to be mythologized ancient utopias in Plato and Cicero, respectively. Before I continue, then, I will say what I mean by 'utopia' and 'myth': I call a description of a city 'utopian' if it is an imagined ideal city, past, present, or future, conceptual or actualized.<sup>5</sup> By 'myth', I follow the more or less neutral ancient Greek notion of myth as 'story/account' (its truth-value less decidedly false than our current usage) whose subjects and events are beyond our current sense perceptions.<sup>6</sup> I begin with the myth of the ancient utopia (ancient Athens) we find described in Plato's *Timaeus*, found at the very beginning of the dialogue.

The prologue of the *Timaeus* has long puzzled scholars.<sup>7</sup> The confusion is multi-faceted. First, there has been much debate as to whether the city described by Socrates and his companions—Critias and Timaeus—is in fact the same city described in the

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<sup>4</sup> Cp. Asmis 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Considerable debate surrounds the use of this liquid term. Thomas More, who of course coined the term for his 1516 *Utopia*, seems to emphasize Utopia's being imaginary in nature, an *ou-topos*, "no-place". Subsequent usage has been considerably more inclusive—see, for instance, Klosko 2003, where utopianism (including the case of More) is explicitly connected with moral reforms to be realized in existent societies in Plato, the Jacobins, Marx—with many loosening the requirements for what might count as a 'utopia'. Indeed, a number of interpreters use 'utopia' and 'ideal city/government/constitution' interchangeably. Others, such as Morrison 2007, want to reserve 'utopia' for the *best* imagined society, resisting a proliferation of genuine candidates to the title of Plato's utopia. Given the number of times Plato's characters discuss a potential candidate for the ideal city across the dialogues, I prefer the inclusive approach. The classic source for utopianism in Western thought is Manuel and Manuel 1979.

<sup>6</sup> Hence I largely follow Partenie 2018. See Nakazawa 2015, ch. 2, for helpful statistics and the ambiguity between *muthos* and *logos*.

<sup>7</sup> See Annas 2011 for a helpful summary of the continued puzzlement and further reflections on the mysterious omissions of the prologue. Morgan 1998 contains a helpful, brief summary of the questions surrounding setting and *dramatis personae*. Similarly, consult Lampert and Planeaux 1998 for a miniature prosopography. For a classic investigation into the preface to the *Timaeus* seeking to establish its dramatic date, see Cornford 1937. For more wide-ranging interpretations of the earlier sections, see Calvo and Brisson 1997.

*Republic* or not.<sup>8</sup> Second, what Socrates says about ideal political theory toward the beginning of the conversation, Critias' description of Solon's received wisdom from the ancient Egyptians, and, ultimately, Critias' praise for an ancient, idealized Athens (which speech he and Socrates describe as entirely true) have proven similarly difficult to interpret.<sup>9</sup> Last, the Atlantis myth, described later in the *Critias*, has of course received the greatest attention.<sup>10</sup>

In this section I will present a few crucial passages from this introductory exchange in the *Timaeus* for fresh interpretation. These passages, I think, establish the methodology for a retrospective ideal methodology for political philosophy in the *Timaeus-Critias* duology. We will come to see a striking similarity to the project outlined by Scipio and Laelius in *Rep.* 1 and 2 in my next section.

I will begin with a passage where Socrates reflects on the ideal city that he and his companions have just discussed the day before (the so-called “city of yesterday”, *Ti.* 19a) and asks Timaeus and Critias for a new kind of portrait of the ideal city. He wants to see the city “in action,” instead of its being static as it was in their previous discourse. He says:

Socrates: All right, I'd like to go on now and tell you what I've come to feel about the political structure (πολιτείας) we've described. My feelings are like those of a man who gazes upon magnificent-looking animals (ζῶα καλὰ), whether they're animals in a painting or even alive but standing still, and who then finds himself eager to look at them in motion or engaged in some struggle or conflict that seems to show off their distinctive physical qualities. I felt the same thing about the city we've described. I'd love to listen to someone give a speech depicting our city in a contest with other cities, competing for those prizes that cities typically compete for. I'd love to see our city distinguish itself in the way it goes to war and in the way it pursues war: that it deals with the other cities, one after another, in ways that reflect positively on its own education and training, both in word and deed (τῆ παιδείᾳ καὶ τροφῇ κατὰ τε τὰς ἐν τοῖς ἔργοις πράξεις)—that is, both in how it behaves toward them and how it negotiates with them. (*Ti.* 19b-c)<sup>11</sup>

Socrates here desires not just an outline of the mere *potential* of the ideal city, not to behold it as artifact, but to witness it living, moving, breathing, and excelling as an actualized political power.<sup>12</sup> Socrates compares this to beholding a beautiful painting of an animal or an alive but resting one, commenting on the almost sad inactivity contained in both. Socrates desires a city in motion and engaging in things characteristic of great cities—in this case, in the contests of war. Kathryn Morgan likens Socrates' complaint to someone looking at a “still

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<sup>8</sup> Taylor 1928 and Cornford 1937 represent helpful short hands to the philological reasoning on either side of the debate: On the one hand, Taylor (following the commentary tradition, including Proclus) sees the prelude establishing continuity with “yesterday's discourse”—namely, the dramatic action of the *Republic*; on the other, Cornford notes the unlikelihood that the festival of Bendis would precede the Panathenaea by just two days (the *Republic* occurring on the first holiday and the *Timaeus* on the second, respectively). For more, see Zeyl 2000, xxvii, Calvo and Brisson 1997.

<sup>9</sup> Comparatively less has been written on these topics, but Johansen 1998 is comprehensive; Rowe 1999 situates these themes against the *Republic*; Morgan 1998 attends to the historiographical questions surrounding the prologue, connecting Critias' speech to the panegyric genre (as in Isocrates' *Panegyricus*); Morgan 2010 develops an original, rich reading of the narrative structure of the *Timaeus-Critias* and a possible interpretation of the fragmentary nature of the latter.

<sup>10</sup> Gill 1977, 1979a/b are both influential interpretations of the Atlantis myth and contain helpful introductions to a large scholarly literature. Gill 2017 represents an invaluable update with a rich commentary on the Greek text of the Atlantis myth in the *Timaeus* and *Critias*.

<sup>11</sup> Translations throughout follow Zeyl's standard Hackett translation (2000) besides minor typographical alterations. The Greek text matches John Burnet's standard critical edition for Oxford Classical Texts (1903).

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Porphyry and Proclus think Socrates is asking for a tantalizing potency to become act, anticipating Aristotle (see fr. VII in A. R. Sodano, *Porphyry, In Platonis Timaeum Commentariorum Fragmenta*, Naples 1964, cited in Johansen 1998).

life” and wanting more—wanting to taste the fruit displayed on the table; wanting to see the smile of a person in a portrait; wanting to see the trees of a landscape rustling in the wind.<sup>13</sup>

Socrates then considers who might be up to this task. This sort of inquiry would require those who can excel in both philosophy and politics, admittedly a rare sort (and, of course, a perennial Socratic-Platonic theme). Fortunately, he thinks, his compatriots are uniquely qualified for this sort of philosophical discussion:

So that leaves people of your sort, then. By nature as well as by training (φύσει καὶ τροφῇ) you take part in both philosophy and politics at once. Take Timaeus here. He’s from Locri, an Italian city under the rule of excellent laws. None of his compatriots outrank him in property or birth, and he has come to occupy positions of supreme authority and honor in his city. Moreover, he has, in my judgement, mastered the entire field of philosophy. As for Critias, I’m sure that all of us here in Athens know that he’s no mere layperson in any of the areas we’re talking about. And many people whose testimony must surely be believed assure us that Hermocrates, too, is well qualified by nature and training to deal with these matters. Already yesterday I was aware of this when you asked me to discuss matters of government, and that’s why I was eager to do your bidding. I knew that if you’d agree to make the follow-up speech, no one could do a better job than you. No one today besides you could present our city pursuing a war in a way that reflects her true character. (*Ti.* 20a-b)

Socrates here praises his counterparts as accomplished in both philosophy and politics. They alone can accomplish the task Socrates sets out: to describe the virtuous city competing and excelling in warfare. These figures (Timaeus, Critias, Hermocrates), then, may serve as their own kind of exempla, enlivened models of the sort Socrates requested—able to study philosophy and political science at the highest level of complexity and capable, too, to bring that philosophy to life. We will see a similar claim made of Cicero’s character Scipio in the coming pages. Further, Cicero’s characters think that, as Socrates does here, discourse on the ideal city is somehow incomplete if not combined with a real-life embodiment of that city (whether past, present, or future).

To return: Critias breaks in and changes the tenor of the conversation in an unexpected way. Critias interrupts the conversation and presents an elaborate story of ancient Athens and its contest with Atlantis (to be finished in the *Critias*, which Plato left incomplete). Famously, he says it’s a strange one (ἀτόπου)—but that it’s also *true* (ἀληθοῦς):

Critias: Let me tell you this story then, Socrates. It’s a very strange one, but even so, every word of it is true (λόγου μάλα μὲν ἀτόπου, παντάπασί γε μὴν ἀληθοῦς). It’s a story that Solon, the wisest of the seven sages, once vouched for ... The story is that our city had performed great and marvelous deeds in ancient times, which, owing to the passage of time and to the destruction of human life, have vanished. Of all these deeds, one in particular was magnificent. It is this one that we should now do well to commemorate and present to you [Socrates] as our gift of thanks. In so doing we shall also offer the goddess a hymn, as it were, of just and true praise (ἐν τῇ πανηγύρει δικαίως τε καὶ ἀληθῶς) on this her festival. (*Ti.* 20e-21a)

Critias then relates a story supposedly told to Critias’ father, Critias, through his father, Dropides, who heard the story firsthand from Solon. The story tells of a conversation between Solon and a wise Egyptian priest in which the priest tells Solon about the founding

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<sup>13</sup> See Morgan 270.

of ancient Athens.<sup>14</sup> In it, ancient Athens and Egypt are compared and lauded, both being said to have been founded under Athena's dual love of war and wisdom. (*Ti.* 22d-24d) In addition, the priest mentions some similarities in societal structure, especially in the division of social classes—e.g., the elevation of a priestly class, the institution of a warrior class, a class of artisans, etc. Critias then remarks on the marvelous agreement between the philosophical conversation of the day before—among Socrates and the others on the ideal city—and the story related by Solon of ancient Athens.

Supposedly (though we are not given a full picture of what that story from yesterday looked like), the city decided upon as ideal by Socrates and the others looked just like the city of ancient Athens described by Solon. Critias continues:

[Critias:] What I've just related, Socrates, is a concise version of old Critias' [Critias' grandfather] story, as Solon originally reported it. While you were speaking yesterday about politics (περὶ πολιτείας) and the men (τῶν ἀνδρῶν) you were describing, I was reminded of what I've just told you and was quite amazed as I realized how by some supernatural chance your ideas are on the mark, in substantial agreement with what Solon said. (*Ti.* 25e)

Zeyl's translation emphasizes the possible divine implications of *tuche* (chance, fortune), pointing to the seriousness with which Critias entertains the wondrous alignment of the ideal constitution (*politeia*) and its leaders (*andres*) to the city of ancient Athens. Building on this unexpected harmonization of philosophical discourse and Solon's ancient wisdom, Critias then finally introduces his plan for these ancient Athenians he's described, and Socrates expresses his approval:

[Critias:] We'll translate the citizens and the city you described to us in mythical fashion (ἐν μύθῳ) yesterday to the realm of fact (ἐπὶ τᾶληθές), and place it before us as though it were ancient Athens itself. And we'll say that the citizens (τοὺς πολίτας) you imagined are the very ones the priest spoke about, our actual ancestors. The congruence will be complete, and our song will be in tune if we say that your imaginary citizens are the ones who really existed at that time ... Socrates: Well, Critias, what other speech could we possibly prefer to this one? ... And of course the fact that it's no made-up story (μὴ πλασθέντα μῦθον), but a true account (ἀλλ' ἀληθινὸν λόγον), is no small matter. (*Ti.* 26c-e)

Critias inverts our common notions of the mythical and the true in this passage.<sup>15</sup> He says that it was the philosophical discourse of the day prior which was in fact a display of the city *in myth* (ἐν μύθῳ) and that his own eventual recounting of the deeds of ancient Athens will establish the city in fact (τᾶληθές). He again emphasizes that Critias and Timaeus' joint labor will produce a pleasing harmony (ἀρμόσουσι). Socrates agrees on the said plan, bringing attention again to Critias' insistence that this is no *myth*, but a true account (ἀληθινὸν λόγον).

Critias' insistence throughout his speech—the special urgency with which he asserts its veracity—and Socrates' wholehearted approval of the plan have uncanny similarities with the determination of the characters presented in Cicero's *De republica*. Both sets of characters regard the veracity of these stories as crucial to the dialogic narrative, establishing the foundation for later stages in the discourse. Both regard as central that these cities of the ancestors maintained harmony through their order and stability. That they serve only as convenient myth, they might think, does not explain the pervasive power of the collective

<sup>14</sup> For more on the depiction of the Egyptians in the prologue narrative, consult Voeglein 1948, Griffiths 1965.

<sup>15</sup> A common inversion, of course, across Plato's works. See Catalin Partenie's introduction in Partenie 2009, Burnyeat 2009 in that same volume, also Mourelatos 2009, 2014.

memory and its permeation all the way to the present. John Gunnell, who produced one of the most original interpretations of the *Timaeus* prologue before renewed interest in the function of genre in the Atlantis myth, writes of this urgency:

Critias' journey back into the collective memory of the Greeks is above all to give virtual reality to the idea of the best society and to demonstrate the frailty of historical embodiment. The past of a dying Athens regained, and on the level of the myth the substance of Attic spirit is self-consciously revitalized and the temporal gap eliminated as in the choral lyric; this is a paean in memory of a city and its citizens once ripe with the fruit of the Idea ... Here, then, at the moment when time has run out ... the innate vitality has been expended and the eternal ceases to animate the temporal, the mythic motif of a return to the primordial time of the beginning asserts itself in the *Timaeus-Critias* nexus ... The origin of the story in Egypt points to Plato's continuing concern ... with this static culture ... which, as modern scholarship has confirmed, remained relatively unaffected by the upheavals that were so determinative for the Hellenic world. Egypt becomes Plato's symbol for a political order that, unlike the Attic states, stood beyond the reach of historical decline, and he turns to Egypt to posit the source of this account of the Hellenic past ... It is these old men who have within their lifetime witnessed the rise and fall of Athens and who now descend through *mnemosyne* and *mythos* to the beginning of the *aion* of the Attic civilization.<sup>16</sup>

Having established this regained "virtual reality" and its revitalized characters, Critias then outlines his own project for the unfinished *Critias* and begins to hand off the conversation to Timaeus, where Timaeus delivers the prolonged cosmological account of the universe and the human body and soul most commonly associated with the *Timaeus*. Critias promises to come back to the topic of his speech once the adequate groundwork has been laid by Timaeus.

I will close with a final passage from the prologue to the *Timaeus*, outlining how Critias and the dialogue participants do not think that neither Critias' introductory account regarding ancient Athens nor Timaeus' account of the origin of human beings nor Critias' story regarding Athens and Atlantis are somehow incongruent, but rather very much according to plan and arrive at the harmonization desired:

Critias: We thought that because Timaeus is our expert in astronomy and has made it his main business to know the nature of the universe, he should speak first, beginning with the origin of the world and concluding with the nature of human beings. Then I'll go next, once I'm in possession of Timaeus' account of the origin of human beings and your account of how some of them came to have a superior education. I'll introduce them, as not only Solon's account but also his law would have it, into our courtroom and make them citizens of our ancient city—as really being those Athenians of old whom the report of the sacred records has rescued from obscurity—and from then on I'll speak of them as actual Athenian citizens. (*Ti.* 27a-b)

Here Critias makes explicit the plan for the *Timaeus-Critias*: the account of the ancient Athenians having been delivered, Timaeus will now establish the origin of the cosmos and the nature of the human beings, whereupon Critias will translate these human beings and the story of their education into the actors of the ancient Athenian citizens, all to accomplish what Socrates asked for in *Ti.* 19b, namely, to provide a living model. The *Critias* will complete the task, showing the city of ancient Athens engaging Atlantis in a battle for survival.

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<sup>16</sup> Gunnell 1968, 172-173.

What is the methodological account sketched in these passages? As we shall see more fully delineated in my next section, I think Socrates and his companions in the *Timaeus-Critias* are exploring the possibility of a sort of model-informed ideal political theory, importantly adapted from the methodology in Plato's *Republic* with which we are more familiar. There, the theoretical model (*paradeigma*) upon which the philosophers construct the ideal city and introduce reform are the Forms (*Rep.* 7; see 484c). Here, in the context of the investigation laid out by Socrates and Critias, the *paradeigmata* are directly translated to enlivened models, namely, the city of the ancient Athenians.

What advantage does this methodological move present? Jonny Thakkar, in his discussion of the "beautiful city" in his recent *Plato as Critical Theorist*, lays out the motivations for both types of models succinctly, building on Plato's image of the philosopher-founders as painters of constitutions (*Rep.* 501b-c1):

Although goodness is an existing model, it is obviously not available to sensory perception in the way an existing triangle would be. When philosopher-painters look away from their canvases toward goodness, what then is the object of their perception? ... To look toward the past, rulers would have to speak to eyewitnesses, consult historiography, and dig up old documents; to look toward goodness, they would have to engage in dialectical investigation, working out the form of a given object in light of its place within a chain of parts and wholes ... [W]hen we speak of goodness as a perfect harmonic order, a cosmos, we do thereby picture it in a certain sense: we construct a theoretical ideal that is visible to our mind's eye. If all goes well, we will have what Socrates calls a 'clear model in our souls' (484c). Although this mental picture is by no means equivalent to the thing itself, we can make cognitive progress by investigating it and thereby testing our understanding ... Generalizing ... we can say that theoretical models allow us to visualize our understanding and thereby test and expand it.<sup>17</sup>

Thakkar gives voice to considerations similar to those presented by Proclus and Porphyry above: that the virtuous city considered now to be actualized serves as a real, sensory model which thus has attendant advantages. For one, it exists or has existed (and so has indeed gone from potency to act) and it functions as a clearer perceptible model for testing our understanding, besides. Medieval Islamic commentators touch on both points. Averroes in the third treatise of his commentary on the *Republic* notes that the first four caliphs achieved good governance through imitation of the model of virtue contained in the rule of Muhammad.<sup>18</sup> The ancient Persians, too, achieved virtuous government in the distant past.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Alfarabi in *The Philosophy of Plato* describes the purpose of both the *Critias* and *Epinomis* as realizing the "city in deed" so as to complete the project of the *Republic* (9.33-35). In contemporary scholarship, G.R.F. Ferrari sees this sort of proto-Aristotelian logic at work in *Republic* 9 in Socrates' descriptions of why the philosopher will engage in politics at all: It will be the greatest (*megiston*) achievement for the philosopher, saving himself and his country, to actualize his political achievement (even if it fails to be as *kalon* as the imagined city in speech).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Thakkar 2018, 142.

<sup>18</sup> Averroes, *Commentary on Plato's Republic* 3.89.28-31. Also see 2.79.8-10, where Averroes describes the virtuous cities of the early Persians, further examples of idealized ancient rule.

<sup>19</sup> Averroes, *Commentary on Plato's Republic* 2.798-10, *Rhetoric*, 137.7-138.4 (cited in Averroes 1974).

<sup>20</sup> Ferrari 2005, 107, 118.



I don't focus here on Timaeus' comment that the account of creation and the universe contained in the *Timaeus* will constitute an *eikos logos/muthos* (a 'likely account/story').<sup>21</sup> Rather, so far and throughout this essay I have and will continue to focus on Socrates' and Critias' proposals for the participants' eventual return to a discussion of this retrospectively ideal city and how *this* is meant to function as an instructive *muthos* in the argument of the *Timaeus-Critias*.

To do this, at this point it helps to turn to Cicero's aims in *De republica* 1-2, where, I think, we will see a much more fleshed out picture of "retrospective ideal political philosophy" (RIPP), an interpretive lens which may help us make sense of some of Plato's motivations here in the *Timaeus*.

### 3. Scipio's Project in *De Republica* 1 and 2

As I made clear in my introduction, the principal aim of this section will be to establish a clear thematic connection between the form, content, and methodology of Cicero's *De republica* and the introductory prologue to Plato's *Timaeus*. Before I discuss the resonances between the project I have just outlined in the *Timaeus-Critias* and what we find in the *De republica*, I will address an obvious question: How familiar with the *Timaeus* was Cicero, anyway?

Happily, that Cicero was well-acquainted with the *Timaeus* is beyond doubt. It receives substantive philosophical attention at four different places in the Ciceronian corpus.<sup>22</sup> In addition, most notably, Cicero drafted a partial translation of the *Timaeus* sometime between June 45 and December 43.<sup>23</sup> However, Cicero's translation covers *Ti.* 27c-47b, which, crucially, does not include the prologue to the dialogue—none of Socrates' introductory comments on method and his hopes for the conversation, nor Critias' speech on ancient Athens, Egypt, and Atlantis, nor Timaeus' transition to his own speech, are included.

The partial nature of Cicero's translation, however, likely does not result from unfamiliarity with the entirety of the Platonic text. David Sedley convincingly argues that the *Timaeus* is partial by intent, being part of a planned dialogue project on Pythagorean and Peripatetic cosmology (to be staged between Publius Nigidius Figulus and Cratippus).<sup>24</sup> Chalcidius' Late Antique Latin translation of the *Timaeus*, in contrast with Cicero's, does include the prologue, giving us some evidence of its continuous availability throughout antiquity.<sup>25</sup>

Despite Cicero's general familiarity with the *Timaeus*, the burden of proof, then, is on the case made for the similarity of methodology sketched in these two projects. This is what I hope to establish over the next few paragraphs.

I begin with a brisk introductory overview of Cicero's *De republica*. Though coming to us in a fragmentary state, we can get a good sense of its structure from the preserved books and fragments through the textual evidence available to us.<sup>26</sup> It is a work ordered around certain central questions concerning good governance and its relation to the healthy, happy lives of both citizens and politicians within a state (*res publica*). These questions turn out to be (in the order presented in the text of the *Rep.*): What is the best form of government (Book 1)? Has this form of government ever been seen in the world (Book 2)? Is justice required for a city to be a city (Book 3)? Who is the ideal statesman, *rector rei publicae* (Book 4)? How is

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<sup>21</sup> For helpful introductions to the large scholarly literature, see Betegh 2009, Burnyeat 2009, McBride 2005, Mourelautos 2009. The cosmological account is referred to as both *muthos* and *logos*: *eikōs muthos* at 29d, 59c, 68d; *eikōs logos* 30b, 48d, 53d, 55d, 56a, 57d, 90e; cited in Partenie 2018.

<sup>22</sup> At *Fin.* 2.102 (*Ti.* 39); *Sen.* 44 (*Ti.* 69d); *Nat. D.* 2.32 (*Ti.* 89); *Tusc.* 1.20 (*Ti.* 69c). For this listing, see Long 1995, 44, n. 14.

<sup>23</sup> For dating, see Sedley 2009, 189.

<sup>24</sup> Sedley 2009, especially 199-204. See, too, Reydam-Schils 2013 and White 2015.

<sup>25</sup> For more on the differences between Cicero's and Chalcidius' translations, see White 2015, starting at 253.

<sup>26</sup> A full summary of the aims and subtleties of the work are outside the scope of this essay. The best contemporary scholarly introduction and analysis are found in Atkins 2013b and J.G.F. Powell's introduction in Rudd 2008.

he educated (Book 5)? How will he lead and why will he enter politics at all (Book 6, which contains the famous *Somnium Scipionis*)?

As in Plato's *Republic*, the discussion of these questions takes the form of a (somewhat) organic question-and-answer philosophical dialogue (with intervening bits of more protracted exposition by Scipio, the main dialogue participant, and, distinctive to Cicero's style, prefaces to books 1, 3, 5 in his own voice), all contained in six books.

Cicero begins the *De republica* in his own voice, arguing against perceived opponents to political service (presumably, the Epicureans) and defending his own decision to enter into political life (and emphasizing his considerable influence and achievement).<sup>27</sup> (*Rep.* 1.1-12) He mentions this achievement and dual expertise (in both political matters and philosophy) as reasons that he should craft a treatise on political principles (*rationes rerum civilium*) (1.13):

Since I have had the good fortune to achieve something of note in government, and also possess a certain ability in expounding political principles (*in explicandis rationibus rerum civilium*) not only as a result of experience but also through my enthusiasm for learning and teaching (*studio discendi et docendi*) I am not unqualified for this task. This is not true of most authorities; for some of my predecessors have been highly accomplished in theoretical discussion, without any discernible achievement in practice; others, with a creditable practical record, have lacked analytical skill.<sup>28</sup> (*Rep.* 1.13)

But he does not there give an overall plan for the work—statements to that effect are found in the text of the discussion itself he “recalls” between Scipio Aemilianus and his associates at Scipio's countryside villa during the Latin holidays.

The first of these comes from Laelius, Scipio's best friend and close advisor, who gives us the clearest and most succinct statement of the overall shape of the *De republica*. His comment as to where the discussion will lead is particularly useful in that it is not itself a statement on *method*, which, as we shall see, will be something Scipio's comments will often express.<sup>29</sup> Laelius' initial comment on the direction of the discussion instead simply tells us what the dialogue is *about* and where it will end up.

But the initial discussion in the *Rep.* before Laelius asks for a new direction is curious, and already brings to the fore uncanny resemblances with the *Timaeus-Critias* project. In some ways, it is a sort of inversion of the prologue to Plato's *Timaeus*. Instead of discussing politics from the outset, as we might expect from the title of the work, Scipio and his companions begin their philosophical discussion on the nature of the universe, only moving on to political matters after Laelius' continued prodding. They remark on the bad omen of the “two suns”, and Philus notes the importance of the study of physics and cosmology to the study of political problems:

Don't you think it relevant to our homes to know what is going on and taking place in the house—not the one surrounded by our walls but this whole universe (*mundus hic totus*) which the gods have given us to share with them as a dwelling-place and fatherland? After all, we must remain ignorant of many things if we are ignorant

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<sup>27</sup> Cicero notes that such a combination is exceedingly rare. One example Cicero finds is Demetrius of Phalerum. Throughout the Ciceronian corpus, Cicero compares himself to Demetrius, disciple of Theophrastus and lifelong Peripatetic philosopher, who maintained his studies and literary output in the midst of a busy and successful political career in Athens. Cicero praises his style and life on numerous occasions, notably but not limited to *Brut.* 8, 9, 37, 82; *Off.* 1.1.3; *Fin.* 5.9; *Rep.* 2.3.

<sup>28</sup> Translations throughout are from Rudd 2009 with minor typographical changes by the author. The Latin text is drawn from the 2006 OCT critical edition (Powell).

<sup>29</sup> See *Rep.* 1.70 for one of Scipio's more general programmatic remarks (but still seems to outline his method).

of these. I myself, yes, and even you, Laelius, and indeed all who aspire to wisdom, take pleasure in learning about and pondering the physical world. (*Rep.* 1.19)

Interestingly, Scipio, at first, continues in this line of thought. He shows himself to be equally interested in the cosmos and in politics, relating stories of political figures using scientific explanations of celestial phenomena among common people to quiet the anxieties and emotions of unruly populaces. (1.23-25) Anticipating the cosmic visions contained in the last book of the *De republica*, the so-called *Somnium Scipionis*, Scipio remarks on the insignificance of human matters (*rebus divinis*) when one has contemplated the divine realm (*regna deorum*) or eternity (*aeternum*). (1.26)

After continuing to criticize this initial exchange between Scipio, Tubero, and Philus for being too concerned with celestial matters at the expense of national safety, Laelius suggests that the persons present direct their attention to matters more clearly affecting the state (particularly, as Laelius says, the Gracchan land reforms have almost divided the state in two [1.31-2]). I draw from an exchange between Mucius and Laelius:

Mucius: So what do you think we should learn, Laelius, in order to achieve what you require?

Laelius: Those skills which make us to serve the community (*eas artes quae efficiant utu sui civitati simus*). That, in my opinion, is the finest duty that wisdom has, and the greatest proof and function of moral excellence (*id enim esse praeclarrissimum sapientiae munus maximumque virtutis vel documentum vel officium puto*). So then, to make sure that we spend this holiday in discussions that are primarily of benefit to the state, why don't we ask Scipio to tell us what form of government he regards as best (*optimum statum civitatis*)? Then we'll go on to other questions. After clarifying them, we will come step by step, I hope to these very problems, and will get a systematic understanding (*rationem*) of the difficulties that now beset us. (*Rep.* 1.33)

Here Laelius gives us a rough picture of the sequence of contents in the *De republica*. Owing to the state of crisis in which the Roman state finds itself in, Laelius proposes that the dialogue participants spend their time talking about something which could serve the ailing state. First, Laelius and the others will ask Scipio—someone who is both successful and practiced in politics and himself learned—what he thinks the best form of government (*optimus status civitatis*) is (which, as it turns out, will make up the subject matter of Books 1 and 2). Then, other questions will be entertained. These turn out to be questions relating to the justice's relationship to the state (Book 3); the nature of education (Book 4); the ideal statesman (Book 5); and the challenges and rewards of the statesman (Book 6). The result of this discussion, Laelius says, will be a *ratio* of the problems that face the Roman republic (and, presumably, answers to said problems). These dangers, he thinks, are the ones he has just had reason to mention: civic discord and the threat of total governmental collapse. (1.31-2)

We shall see that Scipio's answer to Laelius' request—to discourse on the *optimus status civitatis*—takes a curious turn, quite in line with the methodology for ideal retrospective political philosophy outlined by Socrates and his companions in the *Timaeus-Critias*. In fact, it turns out that ancient republican Rome becomes the very *exemplum* of the *optimus status civitatis*, analogous to ancient Athens' transformation into a sort of living model in the speech of Critias.

After Laelius asks Scipio for this philosophical exposition, in *Rep.* 1.37-69 Scipio more or less continues in a familiar, abstracted theoretical discussion on the ideal constitution. He remarks on the benefits and demerits of each of the simple forms of government in relation to property distribution, freedom, equality, and stability. He then concludes that the so-called "mixed" constitution, which incorporates something of each of the simple forms in its structure of political offices and powers, is best (fairest and most stable). (1.69)

We might expect Scipio to further elaborate in abstract philosophical terms on why he thinks the mixed constitution is best. Instead, he stops himself, and suggests that his treatment of the topic so far has been incomplete. Their discussion has lacked a particular example—an actualized ideal city. Scipio says:

... I shall move on to matters which are familiar to everyone, and which indeed we have long been working towards. I hold, maintain, and declare (*sic decerno, sic sentio, sic adfirmo*) that no form of government (*nullam omnium rerum publicarum*) is comparable in its structure (*constitutione*), its assignment of functions (*discriptione*), or its discipline (*disciplina*), to the one which our fathers (*patres*) received from their forebears and have handed down to us. So, if you approve (because you wanted me to talk on a subject which you yourselves knew well), I shall describe its nature (*qualis sit*) and at the same time demonstrate its superiority (*optimam esse ostendam*). Then, after setting up our constitution (*nostra re publica*) as a model (*exemplum*), I shall use it as a point of reference, as best as I can, in all I have to say about the best possible state (*de optimo civitatis statu*). If I can keep this aim in view and bring it to a conclusion, I shall have amply fulfilled, I think, the task which Laelius assigned me. (*Rep.* 1.70)

Scipio suggests that a treatment on the best state that excepts such an example is in some sense incomplete or less good than it could be. (And, as I think we've seen, this point is echoed in Socrates' desire expressed toward the beginning of the *Timaeus*, discussed in section 1). But in Book 1 this methodological point is not fully developed.

It is made clearer with the programmatic statements in Book 2 of the *De Republica*, where Scipio begins his historical and anthropological analysis of the Roman people. Scipio means to put forward a political treatise that differs with respect to *methodology* from that adopted by Socrates in Plato's *Republic*, but *desired* and *adopted* by the Socrates of the *Timaeus* and his companions. This methodology (which I have called a kind of *retrospectively-oriented* ideal political philosophy) consists in this: his characters set out to combine both i) abstracted, ideal philosophical discussion on the best constitution with ii) an historical instance of the constitution thus described. This is made even clearer in the next two passages from Cicero's *De republica* that I'll discuss.

In the first passage, Scipio begins his retelling of the history of the Roman people. Scipio says:

Accordingly in my discourse I shall go back, as Cato used to do, to the "origin" of the Roman people (I gladly borrow his actual word). Moreover, it will be easier to carry out my plan if I describe for you the birth, growth, and maturity of our state (*nascentem . . . crescentem . . . adultam*), which eventually became so firm and strong (*firmam atque robustam*), than if I deal with some imaginary community (*quam si mihi [rem publicam] aliquam . . . finxero*), as Socrates does in Plato (*apud Platonem Socrates*). (*De rep.* 2.2-3)

We had a glimpse of this earlier. Here, Scipio says that his discourse on the ideal state will be *better served* by interludes on Roman history and cultural development—following a narrative course of birth, adolescence, and maturity in the Roman state—than if he restricts his discussion to an "imaginary community" (Rudd's loose translation) as Socrates does in Plato's *Republic*. Contrarily, as we have seen in the prologue to Plato's *Timaeus* (and sketched in the *Critias*), Socrates and his companions engage in just this sort of project in those two works.

This point of contrast with Plato's method in the *Republic* (but, again, in concert with the methodology adopted in Plato's *Timaeus-Critias*) is made even clearer later in Book 2. Scipio begins:

You appreciate, then, don't you, that it was thanks to the good sense (*consilio*) of one man [Romulus] not only that a new people came into being but that, when he departed, it was not a baby crying in its cradle, but rather a youth on the verge of manhood.

Laelius: Yes, we are aware of that, and also of the fact that at the outset you are using a novel method of exposition (*nova ratione*) which is not to be found in any Greek treatise (*in Graecorum libris*). The doyen (*princeps*) of writers [Plato] on this theme chose a stretch of virgin territory (*aream ... praeclaram*) where he could build a state to his own specifications (*arbitratu suo*). It was a remarkable state no doubt, but quite out of touch with men's lives and habits (... *sed a vita hominum abhorrentem et moribus*). His successors have presented their opinions about types and systems of political organization without reference to any definite model or form of constitution (*sine ullo certo exemplari formaque rei publicae*). It looks to me as if you intend to do both. For [1] in your opening remarks you prefer to attribute your discoveries to others rather than, like Plato's Socrates, to claim them for yourself; [2] in talking about the site of the city you discuss in theoretical terms [*ad rationem*] what Romulus did by chance or necessity; and [3] instead of wandering from one state to another you confine your discussion to a single example (*defixa in una re publica*). So carry on as you have begun. As you work your way through the other kings I fancy I can foresee the emergence of a fully-fledged state (*perfectam rem publicam*)."<sup>30</sup> (*Rep.* 2.21-22)

Here, as I have alluded to already, we have the retrospective ideal method for political philosophy laid out in its clearest expression. The method Laelius notes in Scipio's speech, in short, is a sort of inversion of the more familiar Platonic project of ideal political philosophy in the *Republic* (importantly *not* an inversion of the project I think contained in the *Timaeus-Critias*): he suggests that, in contrast to Socrates' *prospective* method adopted in the *Republic*, which assumes an imagined scenario of a new city's founding on an unoccupied tract of land by the dialogue participants (who turn out to be a very specialized set of people, namely, philosopher-founders), the philosophical treatment upon which they have embarked is instead retrospective. He notes that the benefits are multiple: Scipio avoids the problems associated with Plato's Callipolis, idealized without an existent model, making it *praeclaram* (excellent) while nevertheless abhorrent to morals and the life of real human beings; Scipio decides on one single constitution to draw from instead of a confusing catalogue of good states (*defixa in una republica*); he uses theoretical explanations to explain what Romulus did in the past, adding reasonable explanations to the foundations of the Roman state.

Scipio recapitulates this theoretical advantage for his mode of discourse later:

... [Plato/Socrates] constructed a state which was desirable rather than feasible (*civitatem optandam magis quam sperandam*). It was the smallest he could contrive, and, though not actually possible, it enabled the reader to see how politics worked (*quam minimam potuit, non quae posset esse, sed in qua ratio rerum civilium perspicere posset effecit*). I, however, if I can manage it, while using the same

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<sup>30</sup> Laelius' comments here seem to be in tension with my thesis. Namely, that there is a likely resemblance between the prologue to the *Timaeus* and the *De republica* owing, in part, to Cicero's familiarity with the former. In that case, why would Laelius say that the method employed here seems to be *new* (*nova ratione*) and unlike Plato's Socrates? Ultimately, I think this apparent tension is just so: apparent. I think Cicero here probably means that Scipio's method is new and different from the approach adopted in the more well-known *Republic* by Socrates. Cicero may be imagining that Laelius has only read *some* Plato; he may be gesturing to the more well-known of Plato's treatises for the benefit of his audience; he may indeed for purposes of literary vanity and Roman patriotism wish to present his *De republica* as more original and un-Greek than it really is. For whatever reason, Cicero, a close reader of Plato, has Laelius focus on Plato's *prospective* political theory in the *Republic*, and not the retrospective political theory we see outlined in the *Timaeus-Critias*.

principles as he deduced, will try to show them operating, not in a shadowy country of the mind, but in a very great nation. In doing so I shall touch, as though with a pointer, on the cause of every good and every evil in public life (*ego autem, si modo consequi potuero, rationibus eisdem quas ille vidit, non in umbra et imagine civitatis, sed in amplissima re publica, enitar ut cuiusque et boni publici et mali causam tamquam virgula videar attingere.*) (*Rep.* 2.52)

As Socrates desires for the ideal city engaging and excelling in real war and conflict in Plato's *Timaeus*, Scipio and Laelius want dialectical political philosophy that is informed by an existent model (whether of the city, constitution, statesman, or laws). But, rather than assuming that this model is to be sought in a distant, hoped-for future or in the realm of purely conceptual possibility (as we might think Socrates and his interlocutors do in the *Republic*), Laelius notes that Scipio has proposed a new kind of model for their philosophical treatment: namely, one preserved in history.<sup>31</sup> This model will allow Scipio to point—in a way clearer to our senses and thus to our immediate understanding—as a *virgula* (a 'pointer') touches on parts of a page.<sup>32</sup>

What, then, is this model for retrospective ideal political philosophy as sketched between these two works—Cicero's *Republic* and Plato's *Timaeus-Critias*?

#### 4. Retrospective Ideal Political Philosophy (RIPP) in the *Timaeus-Critias* and *De republica*

We have now examined the passages central to my argument. To flesh out the *Timaeus-Critias* and *Republic*'s picture of RIPP in more detail, I will address a few of the central claims made by Laelius, Scipio, and Socrates here, as they make up the heart of my interpretive approach to both works. This approach centers on Cicero's claim (through Scipio and Laelius) that he puts forth a treatise on the best state that exceeds its predecessors in its superior methodology, and on Socrates' desire for a new kind of political treatise at the beginning of the *Timaeus*, to be fully realized in the *Critias*.

First, Laelius gives fuller expression to Scipio's earlier comments on the superiority of his method to Plato's in the *Republic* and expands the criticism to the whole of Greek philosophical and historical writing. He calls into question the "blank slate" approach to political theory that Socrates endorses in the *Republic*, and even makes a substantive criticism of it. As we saw, he suggests, that it is perhaps "to be hoped for," but not itself feasible.<sup>33</sup>

But the real point of this criticism is made clear in the succeeding line, where he charges subsequent Greek philosophers with failing to provide a *definite* model, exhibited in history, as a referent to their theorizing. Scipio's mode of exposition, obviously, is not defective in this way, as Laelius notes. (Nor, of course, is the prologue to the *Timaeus* and the action of the *Critias*.) Accordingly, Scipio's and Critias' discussion of the best state make liberal use of examples from Rome's and Athens' own cultural and mythological history, and Scipio's treatment of the ideal city does not stray far from Rome's traditional political arrangement, once Rome has been introduced as the ideal.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Again, in concert with Asmis 2005.

<sup>32</sup> Scipio does contrast this with the purely theoretical model (*imago naturae*) of the *optimus status civitatis* at 2.65-6 at the prodding of Tubero. Scipio says that a purely abstracted discussion on the best possible state is of course possible—building off the *imago naturae*—but that his *exemplum* of the Roman state was meant to aid our understanding for the reasons mentioned above in Book 2. Abstract philosophical discussion building off the *imago naturae* is, in some sense, inert. (In this passage, Scipio uses *imago* and *exemplum* nearly interchangeably.)

<sup>33</sup> This is made clear at *Rep.* 2.52. Ultimately this line of Cicero's thinking—substantive criticism of Plato's ideal in the *Republic*—will have little treatment in this essay. He does seem to think that the Callipolis suffers from infeasibility (2.52), but at other points he makes it clear that he does not mean to surpass Greek thinkers in their positive theorizing on the best state (1.36).

<sup>34</sup> See Asmis 2014. Asmis claims (in concert with my claims here) that Cicero aims to mythologize the state and persons of the ancient Roman republic.

Both Cicero and Plato in this way *mythologize* the origins of their home cities into ancient *utopias*. These cities are repeatedly suggested to be ideal in their political arrangement—exhibiting the defining features of ideal cities already arrived at via theory alone—but, as I said in my introductory comments, the facts surrounding these cities are beyond our current sense perception. Hence, these cities inhabit the realm of *myth*.

What, then, are the advantages of the mythologized approach to political philosophy?

Socrates in the *Timaeus* and Scipio in the *De republica* propose a retrospective approach to ideal political theory to *activate* the inherently inert model of the best state contained in Plato's *Republic* and Book 1 of Cicero's *De republica*. They think that an *exemplum* of an ideal *past* state best brings into relief the real-world possibility of the *optimum status civitatis*. Furthermore, with respect to illustrative and educative power the model contained in Critias' ancient Athens and Scipio's ancient Rome is easily superior.<sup>35</sup>

With it, Socrates thinks we may very well witness ideal political theory actualized (just as we would want to see a charioteer complete and win a race, not just stand at the ready), and Scipio thinks he may be able to point out every element of the public good and public evil as easily as he might point out words on a piece of paper with a pointer. The mythological histories of ancient Athens and Rome crafted by Scipio and Critias, then, rather than serving as purely fanciful fables to be debunked, provide abundant illustrative resources to complete a philosophical treatment of politics. In fact, we ignore these enlivened models of the ideal state, contained in our collective mythological histories (whether in Critias' Athens or Scipio's Rome), at our own peril.

Cicero himself says as much in a fragment of the *De republica* contained in Augustine's *City of God* (which Augustine emphasizes is delivered in Cicero's voice itself 'Tullius non Scipionis'):

'On ancient customs and old-fashioned men the state of Rome stands firm.'  
(*Moribus antiquis res stat Romana virisque.*) The compactness and truth of that line are such that the poet who uttered it [Ennius] must, I think, have been prompted by an oracle. For neither the men on their own (in a state which lacked such a moral tradition) nor the state on its own (without such men in charge) could have founded or long maintained so great and wide-ranging an empire (*nam neque viri, nisi ita morata civitas fuisset, neque mores, nisi hi viri praefuissent, aut fundare aut tam diu tenere potuissent tantam et tam fusa lateque imperantem rem publicam*). Long before living memory our ancestral way of life produced outstanding men, and those excellent men preserved the old way of life and the institutions of their forefathers. Our generation, however, after inheriting our political organization like a magnificent picture now fading with age, not only neglected to restore its original colours but did not even bother to ensure that it retained its basic form and, as it were, its faintest outlines (*nostra vero aetas, cum rem publicam sicut picturam accepisset egregiam sed iam evanescentem vetustate, non modo eam coloribus eisdem quibus fuerat renovare neglexit, sed ne id quidem curavit ut formam saltem eius et extrema tamquam lineamenta servaret*). What remains of those ancient customs on which he said the state of Rome stood firm? We see them so ruined by neglect that not only do they go unobserved, they are no longer known. It is the lack of such men that has led to the disappearance of those customs. Of this great tragedy we are not only bound to give a description; we must somehow defend ourselves as if we were arraigned on a capital charge. For it is not by some accident—no, it is because of our own moral failings—that we are left with the name of the Republic, having long since lost its substance (*nostris enim vitiis, non casu aliquo, rem publicam verbo retinemus, re ipsa vero iam pridem amisimus*). (*Rep.* 5.1-2)

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<sup>35</sup> Cp. Asmis 2005, 2014.

We see the conservative dimension of Cicero's political thought on display in the above passage. This leaning, I think, helps to explain the philosophical moves made throughout the *De republica*. In addition, the political leanings of the characters are not surprising. Scipio and his companions are members of the conservative senatorial elite at Rome (as was Cicero even as a *novus homo* in the Senate); similarly, Plato, most of Socrates' allies in the dialogues, and, notably, Timaeus and Critias, are conservative and oligarchic in their politics.<sup>1</sup>

Cicero's warning above—that traditions fade at our own peril—finds another analogue in the *Timaeus*, again bringing the conservative, retrospective ideal political philosophy of both works into clearer relief. In Critias' speech, he relates the speech of an Egyptian priest that Solon encounters on a trip to the ancient society. This priest both admonishes him and the Athenians for their cultural forgetfulness, and also informs him of the great achievements of Athenians past as an illustration of the damages done by their oblivion:

Now of all the events reported to us, no matter where they've occurred—in your parts or in ours—if there are any that are noble or great or distinguished in some other way, they've all been inscribed here in our temples and preserved from antiquity on. In your case, on the other hand, as in that of others, no sooner have you achieved literacy and all the other resources that cities require, then there again, after the usual number of years, comes the heavenly flood. It sweeps upon you like a plague, and leaves only your illiterate and uncultured people behind. You become infants all over again, as it were, completely unfamiliar with anything there was in ancient times, whether here or in your own region. And so, Solon, the account you just gave of your people's lineage is just like a nursery tale. First of all, you people remember only one flood, though in fact there had been a great many before. Second, you are unaware that the finest and best of all the races of humankind once lived in your region. This is the race from whom you yourself, your whole city, all that you and your countrymen have today, are sprung, thanks to the survival of a small portion of their stock. But this has escaped you, because for many generations the survivors passed on without leaving a written record. Indeed, Solon, there was a time, before the greatest of these devastating floods, when the city that is Athens today not only excelled in war but also distinguished itself by the excellence of its laws in every area. Its accomplishments and its social arrangements are said to have been the finest of all those under heaven of which we have received report. (*Ti.* 23a-c)

The Egyptian's warnings here regarding the cycles of flourishing and oblivion pick up on familiar Platonic themes (recall, for instance, the cyclical nature of politics as described in Plato's *Republic*). Nevertheless, striking here is the Egyptian's insistence that this cycle of generation and corruption has in fact obscured ancient Athens' already having achieved a Golden Age, a period when it was known to excel in war and have the best political constitution and laws. The Egyptians' record-keeping lets them know this—whereas the Athenians' carelessness with their history leaves them in the dark about their 'true nature' and genealogy, descended as they are from the "the finest and best race of people" (τὸ κάλλιστον καὶ ἄριστον γένος ἐπ' ἀνθρώπους) in those days. A similar fear of cultural forgetfulness permeates Cicero's warning in *Rep.* 5.

In the hands of Cicero and Plato, this anxiety (of cultural decay through ignorance and, perhaps, even open flouting of customs and traditions handed down from 'better days') becomes richly encoded into the methodology of both the *De republica* and *Timaeus-Critias* projects, not simply as a sort of unthinking, statist nostalgia, but as a response to genuine worry regarding the feasibility and realizability of ideal political proposals. That is, if such an *optimus status civitatis* has never existed, who's to say it ever will—or that it even resembles

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<sup>36</sup> The political lives of individual characters in the Platonic dialogues are notoriously complex. For helpful summaries of Timaeus, Critias, and Socrates' entanglements, see Nails 2002.



actual, existing human governments? Instantiating the mixed constitution in the Roman republic as Scipio does, for instance, does not simply satisfy Cicero's conservatism: it, as he says, *fixes* his political theory on a particular example; focuses it.

To put it another way: For both Scipio and Socrates' companions in the *Timaeus-Critias* retrospective political philosophy provides a natural solution to the problems of practicability. That is, how ought we to *solve* our current political problems now that we have analyzed the nature of the state? We ought to use a model of that ideal state that has already existed (Athens, Rome) and reform based on that model (*exemplum, imago; muthos, even*).

This picture for political theory—as I have outlined it in these two works—brings to mind, of course, numerous other conservative methodologies for actual political practice. But it also has a happy resonance with other theorists within the republican tradition (of which Plato and Cicero are both a part). In particular, one is reminded of Machiavelli's reflections in the *Discourses on Livy*. There, Machiavelli notes that Rome's renewal coincided with efforts for it to be “taken back frequently to its origins” (*ritarla spesso verso il suo principio*).<sup>2</sup> Further (and on this point I conclude):

That all things in the world have a term to their lives is very true. But the ones that go through the entire cycle that heaven ordains for them are usually those not disordering their body but keeping it so ordered that it either does not change or, if it does change, it is healthy for them and not harmful for them. Because I am speaking of mixed bodies such as republics and religions, I say that those changes taking them back toward their origins are healthy for them. Hence, those that are better ordered and have a longer life can frequently renew themselves through their institutions, or else arrive through some event at such renewal outside of these institutions ... The way to renew them, as has been stated, is to take them back toward their origins. For the origins of all religions, republics, and kingdoms must have some goodness, thanks to which they regain their original prestige and expansiveness. (*Discourses* 3.1)

## 5. Conclusion

In this essay I brought these two texts into substantive dialogue to illuminate mysterious features of both. First, I presented and examined the introductory discussion of Plato's *Timaeus* (17a-28b). I showed how Socrates' desire for an actual model for ideal political philosophy precipitated Critias' utopian myth of the city of ancient Athens (and, eventually, the content and action of the *Critias*). I then introduced a similar methodology found in the *De republica*, where Cicero's Scipio discusses the ideal constitution and proposes ancient republican Rome as its *exemplum*—a *re publica defixa* (a ‘fixed republic’, as in, motionless or fastened).

But what are the advantages of this approach? Why did Plato and Cicero both adopt it in these works? I showed that this approach to political philosophy contains solutions to genuine philosophical problems regarding the realizability and feasibility of the ideal city, and offers solutions to even more general problems regarding the relationship between ideal models inert in their perfection and ideal models which have been actualized in the real world. I've called this methodology ‘retrospective ideal political philosophy’ (RIPP).

Most important: I've introduced a framework for understanding the obscure methodologies of both Plato's *Timaeus-Critias* and Cicero's *De republica*, two works whose underlying coherence has proven continuously mysterious. This piece brings greater understanding to both as works of political philosophy.

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<sup>37</sup> Atkinson and Sices 2002, 259.

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