

## CHAPTER I

*Introduction**Paul Kalligas*

Plato's Academy is commonly regarded as the most prestigious and most influential of all educational institutions in antiquity. Founded by one of the greatest thinkers of all times, its activity as a centre of philosophical and scientific research spanned at least three centuries (from *c.*387 to *c.*86 BC), while the influence it has exerted on contemporary and later philosophical and scientific thought is almost impossible to overestimate. The Academy's history is supposed to reflect not only the theoretical aspirations of its founder and his followers, but also the manner in which they believed their views should operate within a given social context. For, apparently, it was conceived not merely as a school of philosophical training, but also as a venue for the pursuit of scientific research, as well as a forum offering practical advice on political matters and advocating philosophy as a guide on how to best conduct one's private and civic life. Moreover, the Academy produced some of the most brilliant minds in all these areas, who have greatly influenced the development of human thinking ever since. Its importance has been universally acknowledged, both in antiquity and in modern times, even by thinkers by no means favourably disposed towards the intellectual achievements that emerged within its confines.

Modern researchers are therefore surprised and shocked when they realize how little we actually know today about its history, its development, its organization and its operation; how obscure several crucial aspects of its social profile still remain, and how many of the commonly held beliefs about it are in fact no more than fanciful myths or pious speculations. This is certainly not because there has been a scarcity of eminent scholars willing to expend considerable amounts of energy and dedicate their scholarship to try to assemble the existing evidence into a coherent picture that elucidates the Academy's basic characteristics, institutional status, internal organization and the methods of intellectual training and research that were employed there during the school's

heyday. Names such as those of K. G. Zumpt, U. von Wilamowitz, P. Boyancé, H. Cherniss, J. Glucker and J. Dillon suffice to indicate the high standards of acumen and scholarship that have been brought to bear on solving the so-called 'Riddle of the Academy' over the past two centuries. Nevertheless, the questions that remain stubbornly unanswered or hotly debated still vastly outnumber and heavily overshadow the few certainties that can be accepted as such. Besides, a comprehensive account of the history of the school as a whole, of its philosophical evolution, its scientific contributions and its political and social significance has yet to appear, thus leaving much to be desired in any attempt to form an overall picture of its import. Even the archaeological record appears to be distressingly ambiguous and confusing: at the moment there are no conclusive results on its exact location and the precise character of the structures that have been revealed in the excavations in the larger area of its purported site. The sole incontrovertible find from its locale was accidentally unearthed in 1966. It is a boundary stone (*horos*) excavated *in situ* near the junction of Aimonos and Tripoleos Streets in modern Athens; it bears the inscription Η]ΟΡΟΣ ΤΕΣ ΗΕΚΑΔΕΜΕΙΑΣ and is dated by the style of its lettering to the early fifth century BC, more than a century before Plato became active in the area.

It seems quite remarkable that the Academy receives only one mention in Plato's dialogues, and a rather casual one at that, in the introduction of the *Lysis*: it is described there as one of the places frequented by Socrates. Aristotle never refers to the area as a place where any teaching actually took place. Most of the pertinent information is derived from much later sources, such as Diogenes Laertius, Philodemus' *History of the Academy*, Numenius and the later Neoplatonists, all working at second remove or more from any contemporary testimony. The reliability of these sources is an intensely debated issue, but everyone, I think, would agree that in most cases we have to rely on what would normally be regarded as rather shaky evidence.

What appears to be certain is that the wider area of the grove dedicated to the hero Academus or Hecademus, which in ancient times was known as the Academy (Ἀκαδημεία), was home to one of ancient Athens' public gymnasia; as was customary, it was situated outside the city walls, at a distance of about a mile from the Dipylon Gate to the north-west of the Agora and beyond the famous public cemetery known as the Δημόσιον Σῆμα. Plato, who belonged to the nearby deme of Collytus, is said by Diogenes to have engaged in philosophizing in this area as a young man, even before he acquired any property in the nearby elevation of Hippus

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Colonus; Olympiodorus, on the other hand, seems to report that he eventually established his school in the gymnasium itself (διδασκαλεῖον ἐν Ἀκαδημείᾳ συνεστήσατο). The status of this διδασκαλεῖον and its precise connection to the other activities taking place in the gymnasium, which usually involved physical and military training, remain unclear, but there are certain indications that at least part of the educational process was eventually transferred to Plato's own property, which comprised a modest house (οἰκίσκος) and a small garden (κηπίδιον or χωρίδιον). According to Aelian's testimony (*VH* 3.19), this is where the master confined himself late in his life, when Aristotle and his gang of acolytes bullied him with their dogged questioning, forcing him to abandon his usual, presumably public, walking ground or *peripatos*. No doubt, it would be reasonable to assume that Plato's idea to create a school was to an extent influenced by the comparable Pythagorean institutions of South Italy, on the operation of which he must have had the chance to acquire some information at the time of his first visit to Sicily. However, considerable adjustments were undoubtedly required in order to transplant any such model to accommodate for the requirements imposed by the considerably dissimilar social and cultural context of a public gymnasium in democratic Athens. On the other hand, one should keep in mind that, as his oeuvre amply testifies, Plato's main source of inspiration in promoting engagement with philosophy was always the Socratic manner of conducting a discussion, although this manifestly wanes in his later dialogues.

At any rate, the extent to which the intellectual activities cultivated in the gymnasium of the Academy at the time of Plato and his immediate successors can be said to amount to a systematic or even a consistent educational programme is far from clear. It has been customary to think that the curriculum for the instruction of the Guardians expounded by Plato in book 7 of his *Republic* must reflect, to some extent at least, the teaching practices employed in the Academy. However, such facile extrapolations about the way in which the Academy actually operated can prove precarious, for we need to take into consideration the social conditions prevailing in fourth-century Athens. One has to be reminded, for instance, that the study of dialectic in the *Republic* is postponed until its prospective practitioners have reached the age of thirty, and then pursued only after they have been subjected to certain strict qualifying tests (*R.* 537d). This does not sit well with the fact that the Academy's students are routinely described as 'youngsters' (νεανίσκοι) in our sources (e.g. Philodemus, Atheneaus, Aelian; cf. [Pl.] *Epin.* 990c4–5). It would further

be most inappropriate to introduce such ‘screening’ methods for selecting pupils within the liberal ambiance of a public Athenian gymnasium.

It is also recorded in our sources that, apart from the teaching and research activities that one would expect to be cultivated in such a school, banquets and other social events were also held there, but otherwise the only neighbour we hear being mentioned is none other than the notorious misanthrope Timon, whose tower is known to have dominated the area. It is most probable that some of the school’s activities usually took place near a shrine dedicated by Plato to the Muses in the Academy’s grove, a *μουσεῖον*, where his successor Speusippus later added statues of the Graces and, presumably, even later a Persian admirer of Plato called Mithradates dedicated a portrait of the master crafted by the sculptor Silanion. This, however, would in no way have determined the content or character of the teaching occurring in such an environment. The only aspect of which we can be relatively certain is the persistent use of dialectic as a means for presenting and debating the various views discussed, whereas set lectures appear to have formed the exception rather than a regular feature, if we take into account Aristoxenus’ testimony about Plato’s famous lecture *On the Good*. The available evidence on the precise characteristics of the dialectic method employed on such occasions is rather obscure and by no means conclusive, even though it seems to have conformed to some fairly formal and precise rules. In principle, a more or less authoritative depiction of it might be obtained by examining some pertinent texts, such as the second part of Plato’s *Parmenides* and the detailed account offered by Aristotle in his *Topics*. These sources, however, are fraught with notorious exegetical difficulties, and a systematic analysis of them with the aim of reconstructing the exact framework and the specific rules governing disputations in the older Academy remains a desideratum. One may hope that the present collection of essays will encourage further research on this fascinating topic.

There is a well-known anecdote according to which Plato purchased the property close to the gymnasium of the Academy using the money collected by his friends (i.e., most probably, Dio) with the purpose of reimbursing the ransom paid by Anniceris of Cyrene in order to rescue the master from the slave market in Aegina, after his infelicitous first journey to Sicily. Anniceris, however, subsequently refused to accept that sum. This may well be, in part or as a whole, no more than just another piece of imaginative fiction; however, it accords fairly well with the generally accepted date for the establishment of Plato’s philosophical school in the area, namely the year 387 BC. If this is so, then dialogues such as

the *Meno*, supposedly composed at about this time, could arguably reflect, at least to some extent, the kind of teaching provided in the school itself, which involved systematic exercise in the definitional technique, mathematical training, dialectical argumentation based on hypothetical premises, and the meticulous examination of established views on political, educational and moral issues.

Plato apparently continued to teach until the end of his life and, in the meantime, the school had acquired enough organizational backbone as to require someone to supervise its proceedings during the intervals when the head was absent. We hear, for example, that when Aristotle first joined the Academy in 367 BC, Eudoxus of Cnidus was acting as stand-in scholarch (*Aristot. V. Marc.* II, *V. Lat.* II), since Plato was away on his second visit to Sicily. A further clue concerning the organizational structure underlying the school's operation is revealed by the fact that, after the demise of its founder, its continuity was safeguarded through a regular series of successions, where each new scholarch was appointed in accordance with certain procedures whose legitimacy was recognized even by those left unhappy with the result, as was the case with Aristotle and his abortive candidacy. Indeed, we are in a position to compile a nearly continuous list of the heads of the school from the time of Plato up to that of Philo of Larissa in the first century BC. This betokens an uninterrupted line of succession connecting these two figures, perhaps an unparalleled achievement among the known secular institutions of the ancient world.

Nonetheless, such institutional continuity by no means implies rigid adherence to some fixed body of doctrines. In fact, the Academy is also well known for its lack of a definitive doctrinal core around which cohesion and a common general outlook could be maintained. Already at the very beginning, the first successor of Plato, his nephew Speusippus, is known to have deviated from the teaching of his master on some of the most fundamental tenets of his philosophy, even repudiating his emblematic doctrine, the famous Theory of Forms. Indeed, there is not the slightest indication that, during the long period of the Academy's existence, there was any time that a specific doctrine, or even a certain philosophical attitude, was ever regarded as epitomizing the authentic stance of the school. There is no evidence that any notion of 'orthodoxy' ever emerged among its members (that is, until the final disputes surrounding its ultimate phase), and it is quite remarkable that even the works of its founder, albeit presumably consulted regularly (even if not always consistently), do not appear to have been adduced as containing an

authoritative exposition of the school's official doctrines. Such a pattern of dogged independence vis-à-vis any sort of received dogma seems to permeate the entire history of the school, and on various occasions caused several fierce debates to emerge within its boundaries. It has even obscured the issue of when exactly the Academy ceased to exist. Various answers have been given to this vexed question by different scholars over time, ranging from those who have argued for its nearly millennial continuity until the closure of all the philosophical schools in Athens at the time of the emperor Justinian, in AD 529, to those more recently upholding the view that Plato's school ceased to operate in the area of the Academy after the destruction of that part of the city by the invading forces of Sulla, in 86 BC. The gloomy description of its deserted grounds provided by Cicero at the beginning of the fifth book of his *De finibus* is a strong indication that, at the time of his visit there, less than a decade after the event, philosophical teaching had already become a thing of the past. It should be noted that the very notion of Platonism as a definite set of doctrines is something that emerged only after that period, at a time when individual and independent Platonic teachers active in other parts of the Roman empire felt they needed to organize their teaching around a core of dogmatic positions generally perceived as genuinely 'Platonic', as well as on the basis of a meticulous and systematic reading of the Platonic dialogues.

As far as we know, then, there is no strict continuity to be discerned in the teaching that took place in the Academy during the three centuries of its existence. From the outset, a pattern of repeated radical shifts in the positions and attitudes of its members seems to have been the norm, usually following the direction initiated by each successive scholarch. Indeed, it is quite remarkable that, as already noted, the very notion of a set of doctrines representing what should be regarded as a distinctive Platonic heritage, as well as the term 'Platonism' itself, only emerged after the discontinuation of the school's activity near the grove of Academus. Nonetheless, certain intellectual traits are peculiar to the school throughout its history and obviously reflect aspects of Plato's original teaching, at least as this is mirrored in his dialogues; these possibly also echo views upheld by him in the course of his oral lectures. Two of the most important such traits that, though not unconnected between them, acquired different degrees of pre-eminence in various historical circumstances, and can be regarded as of paramount importance throughout its history are: a) a pronounced emphasis on the dialectic method as a means of arguing for or against any philosophical position by debating on both sides of any

putative or actually held alternative; and b) the fundamental downgrading of, if not complete distrust for, perceptual cognition.

The first of these traits can easily be traced back to Socratic practice, as well as to the method advocated by Parmenides in Plato's eponymous dialogue, and presumably bore some relation to the manner in which Plato himself performed his educational duties in the school. However, it obviously evolved greatly from the formal debating technique analysed by Aristotle in his *Topics*, reaching the level of the spectacular artistry displayed by Carneades in his famous set of lectures delivered in Rome during his visit in 155 BC. There can be no doubt that this practice encouraged an understanding of philosophy as a communal enterprise, one involving a continuous exchange of views and arguments in a spirit of open and unprejudiced, albeit occasionally fierce, debate.

The second trait also took various forms, from Plato's own occasionally drastic repudiation of the senses, for instance in the *Phaedo* and the *Theaetetus*, to the systematic criticism levelled against all kinds of empiricist epistemology by the Sceptical Academy. This was a topic that caused a major disruption among the members of the school during the last years of its formal existence, and eventually led to important new developments in the way Platonism was conceived.

Nonetheless, the variety of approaches that have been proposed within this framework is truly astounding, and led to serious disagreement even within the school itself. It thus comes as no surprise that already in antiquity the continuity and the uniqueness of Academic teaching was sometimes called into question and caused considerable disagreement. One issue that should, therefore, be addressed in any modern attempt seeking to arrive at an overall assessment of the position of the Academy in the ancient philosophical tradition is to clarify whether it consistently adhered to certain distinctive theoretical trends such as the ones mentioned above. A second area of research pertains to the importance of scientific research as an integral part of the school's theoretical endeavour. Mathematics, for example, was always thought to constitute one of its primary areas of interest, but it is still unclear to what extent the engagement with and the methodology of mathematical sciences had any impact on the way in which philosophy was conducted, or whether a reverse causality held true.

Such an assessment of its achievements may appear anticlimactic to those expecting more tangible results from an examination of an institution as prestigious as the Academy. Nonetheless, there is perhaps a salutary – one might even venture to say almost Socratic – conclusion that

follows from the realization of how little we actually know about what went on inside Plato's school. For, in this way, we may come to better appreciate how indeed precious the little we know about it is. We could grasp that this reflects the openness that characterized it throughout its long history, the fact that it remained primarily a forum of discussion and debate rather than a bastion of unassailable doctrinal orthodoxy. In this perspective, even its ultimate extinction might no longer appear as a mere historical accident, but as a development congruent with its eventual morphing into a propagator of Platonic doctrine.

Now, although there is a considerable amount of contemporary literature on various aspects of the Academy's activities, it seems that we still lack a comprehensive treatment of its overall contribution to the intellectual and social life of the Hellenistic period. The importance of examining the Academy within its broader intellectual and social context becomes even more pressing in view of the fact that, in antiquity, philosophy was far more than a speculative engagement with purely theoretical issues. It involved the practical application of the results reached by means of theoretical argument, and such application was commonly regarded as an integral part of what philosophy is about. This realization entails that, in order to properly appreciate the contribution of the great thinkers of antiquity and of institutions such as the Academy, we need to take into account the ways in which they tried to implement their theoretical pursuits within their historical environment. This is, of course, a vast, extremely complex and variegated undertaking that cannot be adequately pursued in a single volume such as the present one. But the aim of this publication – as of the conference out of which it has evolved – is to lay out a preliminary outline of some of the main directions along which the study of the Academy should proceed and, furthermore, to highlight the ways in which these diverse approaches may elucidate one another, thus contributing towards a more comprehensive understanding of such a complex phenomenon, its ramifications and implications for the history of thought.

In trying to arrive at a comprehensive view concerning the Academy's operation, one has further to closely examine its place within contemporary Athenian society, as well as the social and political implications of the activity of some of its most prominent members, known to have assumed public duties and even to have represented the city on various occasions, e.g. as envoys and ambassadors. One should also note in this connection Plutarch's testimony (*Adv. Col.* 32.1126c), according to which Plato's teaching was instrumental in bringing about significant political



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changes in various areas of the Greek-speaking world, no less by assigning several members of the Academy (including Eudoxus and Aristotle) to reform the constitutions of their home cities. The school's political aspirations can be further gauged by examining the corpus of letters attributed to Plato and his successors; these underline its status as a sort of political 'think tank' whose influence extended all over the Greek world.

It seems quite obvious that such an understanding of the historic significance of the Academy cannot be attained without further taking into account the archaeological evidence from the area where it was founded. Although the results of excavations in the site have so far been mostly tentative and rather inconclusive, they can still offer valuable insights into the cultural background against which Plato's school operated; furthermore, there are some intriguing, if controversial, suggestions about its exact location, the buildings existing in the area, and the organization and arrangement of the teaching activities taking place therein.

Another important testimony on the history and activity of the Academy can be found in Philodemus' *Syntaxis of the Philosophers*, whose text has been preserved in two somewhat divergent versions in two mutilated papyri from the library of Herculaneum. This is antiquity's sole extant text that contains a complete account of Plato's school from its foundation until the time of Philo of Larissa and Antiochus of Ascalon. Although known for about one and a half centuries, the *Syntaxis* has not yet been fully translated into English, and has so far been accessible only to specialists capable of negotiating its considerable textual and other pitfalls resulting from its very poor state of preservation. It was thus considered expedient to include a translation of it here, taking advantage of the important advances in the restitution of the text achieved by recent research.

To be sure, debating was a staple activity for the members of the Academy during most of their time there; all these debates led to the emergence of some of the most refined, complex, subtle, and sometimes abstruse philosophical ideas and arguments to be found in the history of thought. The ambivalent connotations the term 'academic' sometimes carries up to our own time can undoubtedly be attributed, at least in part, to this fact. Indeed, although during the Hellenistic period the term was habitually employed in reference to the members of the school or the various philosophical positions held by its members, in later times it was principally used to designate a particular type of allegiance to Platonism, one that was also informed by a strong vein of Scepticism (see, e.g., Anon. *in Thet.* 54.39–43 Bastianini-Sedley, in contrast with 2.11–12 and fr.

D). This certainly reflects the unfolding of intellectual developments within the school itself, but it has also significantly influenced the way in which its achievements were received by later thinkers and up to more recent times.

In general, one might reasonably contend that the Academy's history is a typically Greek phenomenon. Such a bizarre coalescence of high intellectual aspirations and attainment, brilliant thinking, indefatigable arguing and assiduous reasoning, radically novel ideas, subtlety of expression, lofty political ideals and ambitions, and avid scientific curiosity with much idle talk, bitter polemic, pedantic scholasticism, occasional verbal trickery, devious political machinations and petty academic intrigue, coupled with a disregard, if not unqualified disdain for commonly observable facts, is one that can hardly be imagined to emerge with all its glaring contradictions in any other part of the world. Even so, the intellectual momentum that all these tensions produced has rendered the school of Plato an enduring source of both fascination and inspiration.