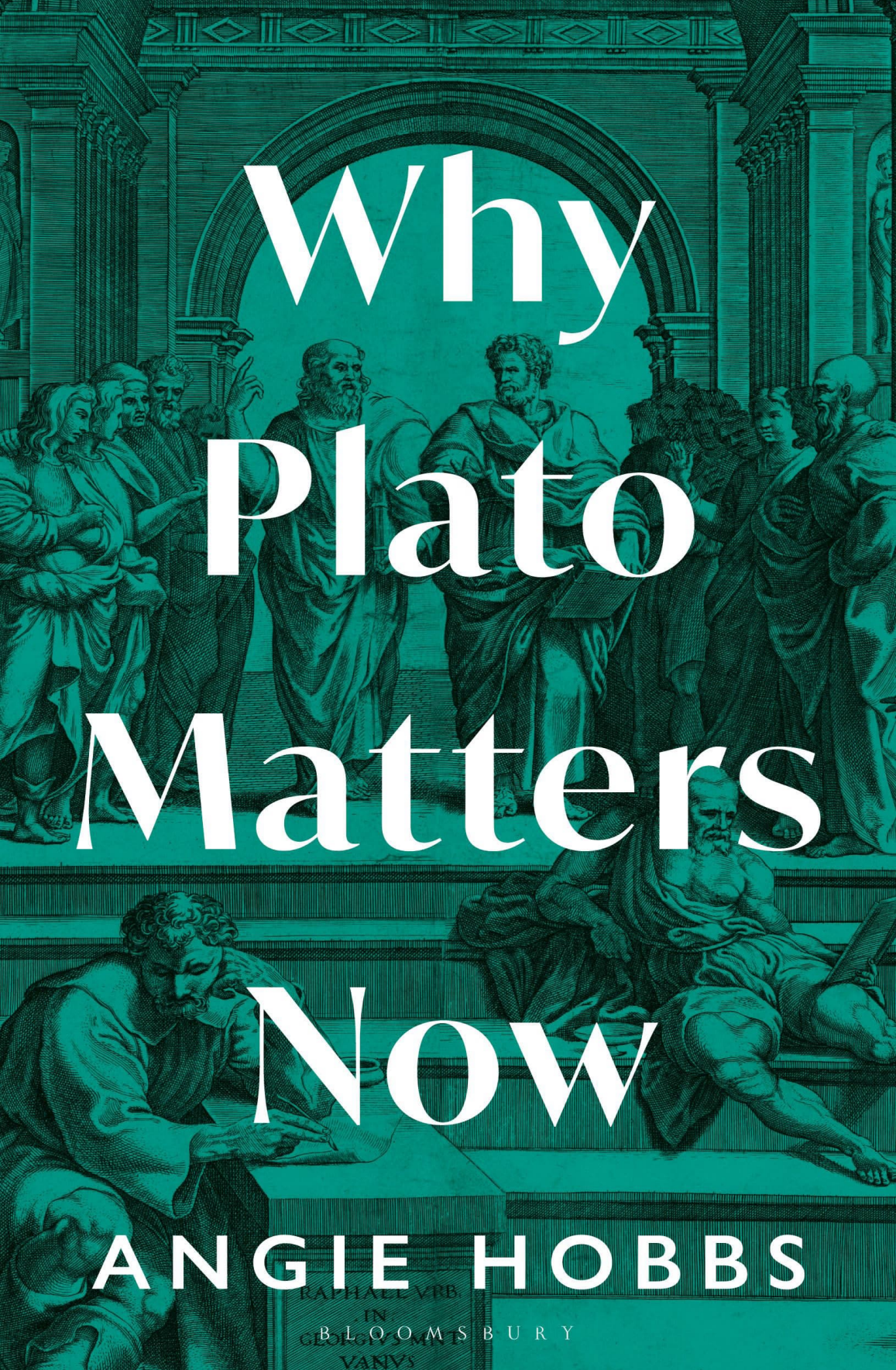
Why
Plato
Matters
Now
ANGIE HOBBS
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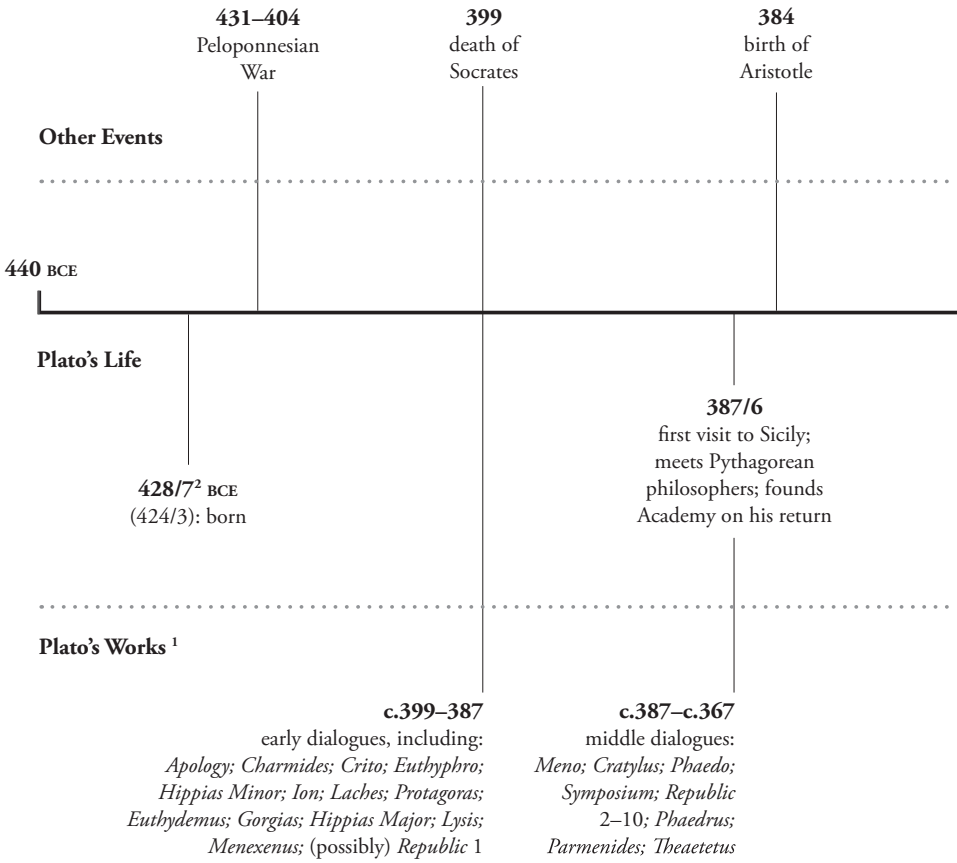
For Mike, the best brother anyone could have

Philosophy begins in wondering
Plato, *Theaetetus* 155d

Contents

CHRONOLOGY

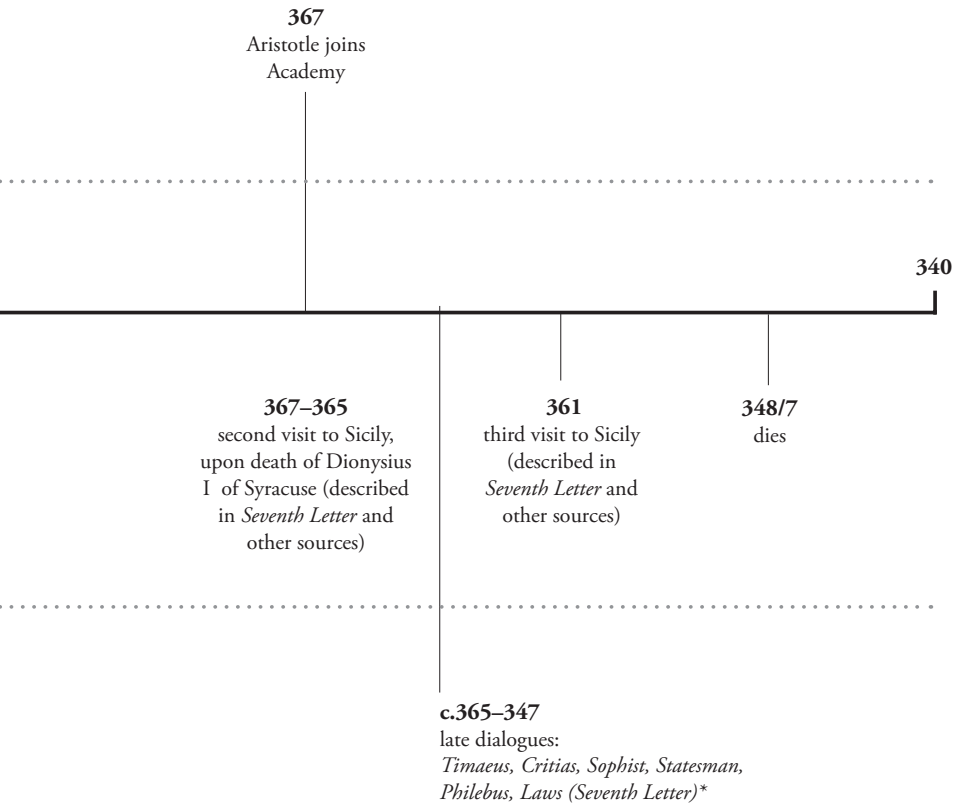


Referencing System

The referencing system in universal use to particular passages in Plato's works (e.g. *Republic* 473c) is that derived from the 1578 edition of the complete works of Plato compiled by a French printer and scholar, Henri Estienne, commonly known by his Latin name of Stephanus. *Republic* 473c, for example, refers to the third column of p. 473 of the Stephanus edition. However, when referring to passages in the *Republic* and *Laws*, I also reference the widely used Book numbers for those lengthy works, e.g. *Republic* 5.473c.

[1] We do not know for sure exactly when Plato wrote any dialogue, although in some cases a reference to a historical event indicates the earliest possible date of composition. I have followed the traditional (though not universally accepted) groupings into early, middle and late, both because I find them persuasive and for ease of navigation.

[2] Athenians did not number their years, but named them after one of the annual archons who administered the city. Archons were in place from (roughly) April to April, so we cannot always tell in precisely which numbered year an event took place. Some scholars argue for a later date of birth, around 424 BCE. For our purposes, nothing of substance hinges on this.



*The thirteen letters ascribed to Plato are not thought to be authentic, but the Seventh Letter in my view (though not all scholars agree) does appear to have been written by someone well-acquainted with Plato, and with good knowledge of the events described (although the summary of Plato's views is very odd). A possible author is his nephew Speusippus, writing shortly before or after Plato's death.


Adriatic Sea
ITALY
Tarentum
Elea
Tyrrhenian Sea
Thurioi
Ionian Sea
Croton
Locri
SICILY
Leontini
Syracuse
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
N


Lesbos
Arginusae
Aegean Sea
Delphi
Delium
Megara
Athens
Corinth
PELOPONNESE
Ionian
Sea
Sparta
Aegina
Delos
Miletus
CRETE
N
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
Cyrene
Inset: The Nile Delta
River Nile

Preface

Plato has always mattered. The plethora of legends that quickly grew up around him is testimony to the fact that people immediately recognized the importance of his questions and ideas, and that their imaginations were captivated by the beauty, vitality and power of much of his writing. According to one tale, Socrates dreamed that a cygnet was sitting in his lap, and that it suddenly sprouted feathers and flew away, singing a sweet song; the very next day the young Plato was introduced to him and Socrates claimed that this youth was the cygnet of his dream.[1] Plato's eloquence clearly greatly impressed the ancients: Cicero also tells us of a story that when the infant Plato was sleeping in his cradle, bees settled on his lips, presaging his 'unique sweetness of speech'.[2]

Plato's ability to engage, delight and, at times, provoke and infuriate continued through the centuries: the Neoplatonists, St Augustine, Marsilio Ficino, St Thomas More, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Popper, Isaiah Berlin, Iris Murdoch – all these and very many more enter into explicit or implicit dialogue with Plato, whether with approval or the reverse. As I try to show in this introduction to some – very far from all – of his key arguments, ideas, methods and images, the questions that Plato raises are with us still, and addressing both them and Plato's responses with seriousness (but not deference) can do much to clarify and enrich our own thinking, and help us work towards possible solutions to the issues of today. The aim of this book is to examine certain key ideas, arguments, and passages throughout Plato's works, together with the dialogue form and other literary devices in which and

with which they are expressed, and to explore why someone in the twenty-first century should care about them. Why, precisely, does Plato still matter? How does he speak to our times?

The material selected comes from a variety of dialogues, written at different stages of Plato's career. I do not set out to argue for a particular chronology (although I will in fact be working with a fairly traditional rough grouping into early, middle and late, outlined in the (possible) Chronology on pp. VIII and IX). Plato's thought evolves over time, and certain key ideas of his middle dialogues, such as the Forms and the tripartite psychology of the *Republic*, *Timaeus* and *Phaedrus*, are reworked very considerably (or even abandoned) in later dialogues: Plato is always asking questions of himself. I do not, however, specifically address unitarian, developmentalist or revisionist views of his corpus; I am simply saying: these works are important and here are some of the reasons why. The emphasis is therefore on Plato now, but the history of how some of his works and ideas have been received will not be ignored, as some of the reasons he matters now depend on those receptions and interpretations, both accurate and inaccurate.

As we shall see, one of the reasons Plato matters is because of the challenges his works can present to those of us who try to defend (sometimes with difficulty) liberal democracy. The ideally just city that the character of Socrates proposes in the *Republic* is unquestionably run on authoritarian – indeed totalitarian – lines, and much the same can be said of the semi-ideal city described in detail by the main protagonist of Plato's last work, the *Laws*. I make no attempt to gloss over the fact that some of the views expressed by the character of Socrates (and the Athenian Stranger[3] in the *Laws*) may make many of us decidedly uncomfortable, and at times repel us; however, I do argue that even when the 'solutions' offered seem too extreme, again and again we find Plato the off-stage author asking the right questions. In the twenty-first century, many of the issues that he raises are vital still: demagoguery and tyranny; sophistry and fake news; censorship of the arts and the potential value and danger of myth-making; heroism and fame; love and friendship; what it might mean for an individual or a community to flourish.

We also need to be careful. As we shall be exploring in more detail, Plato should not be confused with any of the characters he creates in the dialogues, including Socrates and the Athenian Stranger: he cannot be assumed uncritically to endorse any of the opinions they express. The work that we know as the *Republic* (its Latin title, *res publica*, was given to it by Cicero; in Greek it was known as *Politeia*) would be *banned* in the ideally just city it outlines: it does not meet the censorship criteria of that city. Plato, the consummate artist and ironist, cannot have been unaware of this ultimate irony.

These vital nuances have often been missed by Plato's interpreters, and as a consequence accusations have been directed at him which he does not always deserve. Even more disturbingly, throughout the centuries there have been dangerous distortions of the views expressed in the dialogues – either through deliberate and cynical manipulation or through lazy, partial and selective reading, usually driven by the desire to make Plato fit a particular agenda. (Although I have of course inevitably had to select from Plato's extensive body of work, I have tried very hard not to project my own views onto him, although I accept that there is no view from nowhere, and that my selections reflect my particular interests.) For this reason too, Plato matters, and it is essential to go back to the texts and find out what he really said. When we do, we shall find not only that the right questions are usually being asked, but that in some cases the solutions themselves are genuinely helpful, even if we do not want to endorse them in their entirety. We shall find that Plato's tripartite psychology, for instance, or his view of *erōs* as a stream of desire, suggest useful ways of approaching contemporary problems.

Fortunately, many more of the influences of Plato's work have been positive, or at least neutral, and this evidence for why he matters – in theology, psychology and the arts as well as in almost every branch of philosophy and political thought – will also be touched on. In *Process and Reality* (1978: 39), A. N. Whitehead claims that the European philosophical tradition can best be characterized as a 'series of footnotes to Plato'. This is not true, but it is true that after Plato no philosopher in the West can fail to have

been influenced by him, for better or worse, whether they are aware of it or not.

I fell in love with Plato when I was a student of 19, and have been reading his works, writing and broadcasting about them, and discussing them with undergraduates and graduates throughout the decades since. 'Philosophy begins in wondering, and nowhere else,' says Socrates in the *Theaetetus*;[4] Plato helped harness and nurture that sense of wonder in me, and I shall always be grateful to him. I still find his dialogues inexhaustibly rich, beautiful and thought-provoking. At times I find them disturbing, but they always provoke me into exploring why I am disturbed, and thus coming to a more precise and lucid understanding of the questions at stake. In what follows I concentrate on some of the characters, concepts, arguments, methodologies, images and myths which continue to fascinate me the most, and which I have found to be of the most fascination to generations of students. It is unashamedly a personal work. Being compelled by reasons of space to select from such a vast body of writings has at times been very difficult, and I have chosen to focus mainly (but by no means exclusively) on the less technical dialogues from Plato's early and middle periods; my hope is that the reader will be stimulated to explore some of the superb later dialogues for themselves and discover more of Plato's important and rewarding contributions to epistemology, logic and metaphysics. To this end I have included some editions and discussions of the later works in the Further Reading section. The chapters are designed to be read in order, each building on what has gone before; however, if a reader wishes to dip into a particular chapter, there are sufficient cross-references to enable it to make sense. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own (in some cases adapted from the translations cited in the Primary Sources).

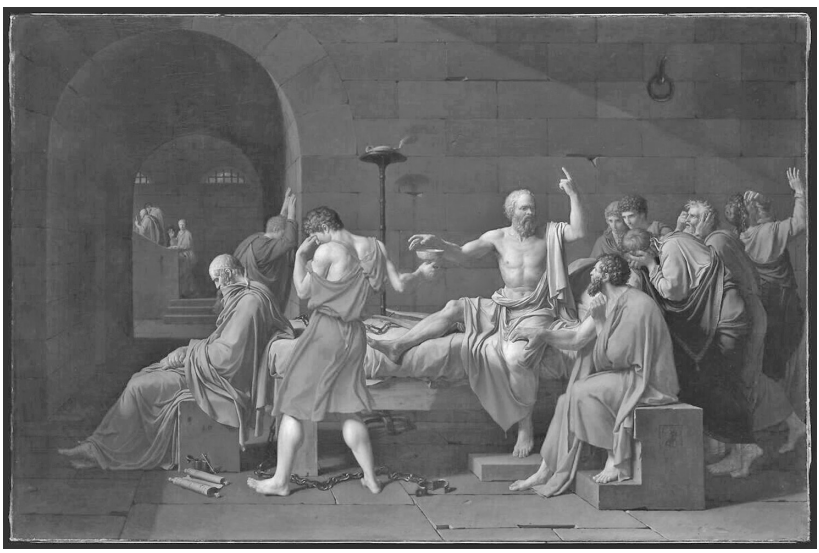
In short, if we take the trouble to approach Plato with open eyes and minds, we will I believe find that many widely held prejudices and assumptions about him do not stand up to scrutiny. For all the undeniable challenges and justified concerns, he nevertheless has a very great deal to offer us now. We have perhaps never needed him more; it is time to look at his dialogues afresh.

Introduction: Plato's Life and the Socratic Inheritance

Plato was born c.428/427 BCE (possibly 424/423) into an aristocratic Athenian family in a period of profound political turbulence, and despite his own preference for a quiet and scholarly existence, his own life was also turbulent at times. In 431 a bitter civil war had broken out between the cities (sing. *polis*)[1] of Athens and Sparta, the Peloponnesian War, a vicious conflict that dragged on until Athens was comprehensively crushed in 404. At the beginning of the fifth century, Athens and Sparta had joined forces to ward off two invasion attempts by the mighty Persian Empire – a successful joint effort, the Persian armies being defeated at Marathon in 490, and then again at Salamis in 480 and Plataea and Mycale in 479. Once the Persians were overcome, however, the two great Greek powers vied for supremacy, and Sparta grew increasingly – and quite correctly – suspicious of Athenian empire-building, carried out under the guise of their heading a supposedly protective league, the Delian League, against future Persian threats.

Nor was civil war the only problem that Athens faced in the final third of the century. Cramped siege conditions fostered the outbreak of a devastating plague in 430 which killed, amongst many others, the democratic leader Pericles; and on top of all this there were simmering hostilities in Athens between supporters of a democratic system of government in which all adult male citizens – no females – participated directly, and those who wanted an

oligarchic regime in which power resided with a wealthy few. Plato's own family was linked to both factions. His mother, Perictione, was related to two of the so-called Thirty Tyrants, a pro-Spartan oligarchy installed in Athens in 404 after Sparta's victory; however, her second husband, Plato's stepfather Pyrilampes, was a democrat and had been a friend of Pericles (Plato's father, Ariston, had died when Plato was young, and Pyrilampes too died when Plato was a teenager). Her family was also descended from Solon, who had laid the foundations for Athenian democracy in the early sixth century. It is hardly surprising that in his political philosophy Plato was to aim above all for civic harmony and the avoidance of internal strife.



Given his elite background, he was expected to have a career in politics, but as a young man he developed an interest in philosophy and, after initially learning about the philosophy of Heraclitus from Heraclitus' follower Cratylus (of which more anon), Plato became an associate of Socrates; during his twenties, he would also almost certainly have undertaken periods of active military

service, as an aristocrat very possibly in the cavalry, though he may also have served as a hoplite. At some point during this period he – again almost certainly – underwent initiation into the sacred mysteries of the cult of the fertility goddess Demeter at Eleusis; he retained a keen interest in mystery religions all his life. In 404 the pro-Spartan oligarchy invited him to join them (not surprisingly in view of the family connections), but he decided to wait and see how they behaved. Their brutal excesses revolted him, and despite the family ties he refused to endorse them. When democracy was restored in Athens in 403, Plato was initially cautiously optimistic and felt that, on the whole, the democratic leaders behaved with moderation. However, in 399 came the accusations against Socrates, his friend and mentor, for 'corrupting the young, refusing to believe in the city's gods and introducing new divine beings'. The real reasons behind the accusations were a mixture of the political (some of the Thirty had associated with Socrates) and the personal (Socrates had annoyed many in authority by revealing through his questioning that they did not have the expertise they claimed). Plato attended the trial of Socrates and was amongst those who offered money to pay a fine for him. (This detail at *Apology* 38b is the second of only three occasions in the dialogues where Plato mentions himself by name, the first being *Apology* 34a, where Socrates simply states that Plato is present.) However, Socrates was condemned to death, and the third occasion where Plato names himself is in his account of Socrates' final hours in the *Phaedo*, where it is stated (59b) that Plato was not present in the prison that day. The narrator simply says: 'Plato, I think, was ill.' The 'I think' is telling: it suggests that illness was not the real reason for the traumatized Plato's absence. Shortly afterwards he left Athens in grief and disgust (and considerations of physical safety may also have been an issue), initially taking refuge with the philosopher Euclides and his circle at Megara. For the next 12 years Plato travelled extensively around the Greek world, and probably further afield as well to Egypt and Cyrene (in modern Libya), travels very probably still interspersed with periods of military service.[2] One of the most

significant of these journeys was around 387,[3] when he visited the Greek colonies in southern Italy (Magna Graecia) to study mathematics and harmonics with the Pythagorean communities there. They were followers of the charismatic sixth-century sage Pythagoras, who combined serious scholarship with an ascetic and disciplined communal way of life and adherence to a set of religious beliefs, particularly concerning the immortality of the soul and its capacity to transmigrate, including into non-human animals (which his followers said was one of the chief reasons for their vegetarianism and refusal to practise animal sacrifice); their religious beliefs intertwined closely with the mystery Orphic cults of Greek culture in the West, and were of profound appeal to Plato, who was already, as noted, an Eleusinian initiate.[4] We will be returning to the Pythagoreans (and indeed Orphism) in later chapters; the crucial point for now is that in addition to their mystical side, Plato was also profoundly impressed by their scholarly work, particularly on geometric proportion – a concept that we will find figuring prominently in the *Gorgias* and elsewhere – and their belief that the cosmos is an ordered whole bound together by mathematical laws.

On this same trip circa 387, Plato also visited Sicily and had increasingly fractious dealings with the tyrant of Syracuse, Dionysius I – according to the admittedly unreliable third-century CE biographer Diogenes Laertius (3.18), he forcefully criticized tyranny to Dionysius' face. In any event his experiences at the court of Dionysius were later to inform his vivid portrayal of the evils of tyranny in the *Gorgias* and *Republic*. In chapters 3 and 4 we will see how Plato, while no fan of direct democracy (the only kind he knew), nevertheless thought tyranny a great deal worse, and issued a stark warning on how it can emerge, even (and perhaps especially) from democracies.

This first visit to Sicily was also of the utmost significance to Plato personally in that he appears to have fallen deeply in love with Dionysius I's brother-in-law, Dion, an attachment that was to last until Dion's assassination in 354, and to embroil Plato in considerable trouble on two subsequent trips to Sicily. In the