

Plato's Myths of Autochthony and the Debate over Citizenship and Political Participation in Fourth-Century Athens

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ABSTRACT:

This chapter examines the role of autochthony in the debate over citizenship in fourth-century Athens and argues that this myth was deployed within a heated ideological struggle which revolved primarily around political participation rather than access to cult. First, it shows how democratic discourse in the *epitaphios logos* conceptualised autochthony through a set of motifs (omission of the earthborn kings of Attica; collectivisation of *eugeneia*; metaphor of the community as a family) which legitimised political equality. It then analyses Plato's engagement with autochthony in the *Republic*, *Timaeus*, and *Critias*. It argues that Plato reshaped the same motifs to articulate an elite counter-discourse of political exclusion grounded in the principle of specialisation based on *physis*.

KEYWORDS: autochthony; citizenship; political participation; Plato; Atlantis.

Autochthony provided the Athenians with a charter myth for their democratic community. In the classical age, the Athenians took pride in their indigenous origins: they had never migrated and had been born from Attica's very soil. As Vincent Rosivach showed in an influential article, this belief emerged around the middle of the fifth century from the combination of two earlier traditions: the myth of the earthborn origins of the Athenian king Erechtheus, already attested in the Homeric epics (*Il.* 2.546-551; *Od.* 7.77-81), and a later tradition, first recorded by Herodotus (1.56.2; 7.161.3; cf. Thuc. 1.2.5-6; 2.36.1), which held that the Athenians had always inhabited Attica.¹ The conflation of these

1 Rosivach 1987. This view has been taken up by most scholars: see e.g. Bearzot 2007b; Blok 2009a; Morgan 2015a; Barbato 2020, 82-88. *Contra* Loraux 1979; Parker 1987, 194-195. Shapiro 1998 accepts most of Rosivach's argument but dates the introduction of the full notion of autochthony to the period of the Persian Wars.

narratives allowed the Athenians to construct a powerful myth which, at least in some institutional settings of the democracy, served to legitimise their political equality and promote civic cohesion.²

Despite its central role in Athenian collective identity, the myth of autochthony has received virtually no attention in recent scholarship on the nature of citizenship in classical Athens. This is especially striking given the pivotal role of autochthony in Josine Blok's influential (and hotly debated) reconceptualization of Athenian citizenship. While a longstanding tradition of studies stemming from Aristotle's definition of the *politēs* as "one who has the right to participate in deliberative or judicial office" (ὁ γὰρ ἐξουσία κοινωνεῖν ἀρχῆς βουλευτικῆς ἢ κριτικῆς) (Arist. *Pol.* 3.1275b 18-20; tr. Rackham) emphasises political participation as the defining feature of Greek citizenship,³ Blok has argued that the primary *locus* of citizenship lay in the right to share in the city's *ἱερὰ καὶ ὄσια*, that is, respectively, the cult of the gods and the observation of appropriate religious norms in one's dealings with both humans and gods. This status was grounded in legitimate descent from citizen parents and extended to women as well as men.⁴

Within this framework, a key development is represented by the enactment of Pericles' Citizenship Law in 451/0 BCE. By requiring two Athenian parents for citizen status, the reform extended to all Athenians a criterion previously restricted to the *gene*. This shift resulted in the democratisation of *polis* priest-hoods. Prior to the reform, these were filled exclusively by members of the *gene* by virtue of their descent from a mythical *archēgetēs* through a purely Athenian line.⁵ According to Blok, the full articulation of the myth of autochthony emerged as the ideological corollary of Pericles' Citizenship Law—it served to legitimise the extension to the entire *dēmos* of the claim to pure Athenian descent and the right to perform *τα ἱερά* which had previously been the prerogative of the *gennētai*.⁶

By emphasising the religious dimension, Blok has helped redirect scholarly attention to a wider array of characteristics that defined ancient Greek citizenship beyond political participation and has opened important research pathways into female citizenship.⁷ Her interpretation of autochthony, moreover, is appealing on several respects. As already suggested by Rosivach, the

2 On the different uses of the myth of autochthony in different institutional settings of the democracy, see Barbato 2020, 96-114.

3 See e.g. Meier 1988; Manville 1990; Ruzé 1997; Hansen, Nielsen 2004.

4 Blok 2009a; 2009b; 2017. Against the interpretation of expressions such *μετέχειν/μετεῖναι τῶν ἱερῶν καὶ τῶν ὀσίων* as typical of the technical language of citizenship, see now Faraguna 2025b. On the conceptualisation of citizenship through the metaphor of "having a share (*μετέχειν/μετεῖναι*) in the *polis*", see Filonik 2023.

5 Blok 2009b.

6 Blok 2009a and 2009b.

7 See e.g. Duploux 2011 and 2018b; Giangulio 2017; Sebillotte Cuchet 2017.

enactment of Pericles' Citizenship Law is a very likely historical background for the emergence of the full notion of autochthony.⁸ Nor can it be denied that autochthony could be framed in terms of access to the city's *hiera*, at least in cases involving women, where political participation was obviously not a relevant theme. For example, when prosecuting the foreign prostitute Neaera for illegally living with Stephanus, an Athenian, as his wife, Apollodorus claims that the couple had enrolled Neaera's daughter, Phano, as an Athenian citizen upon the false claim that she was Stephanus' daughter from a previous marriage. To strengthen his case, Apollodorus alleges that Phano had served as *basilinna* despite this priesthood being reserved for virgins of Athenian birth and once being the prerogative of the wives of the autochthonous kings of Attica ([Dem.] 59.74-76).⁹

Yet, Blok may go too far in downplaying the role of political participation in Athenian conceptions of citizenship. This is especially evident in her claim that Aristotle, in identifying access to political *archai* as the defining criterion of citizenship, was departing from traditional Greek practice.¹⁰ As recently argued by Michele Faraguna, Aristotle's definition, while admittedly narrow and less attentive to important dimensions of Greek citizenship such as religious participation and land ownership, was by no means exceptional. On the contrary, it reflected a broader and longstanding emphasis on the political dimension of citizenship which emerged already during the Archaic period and is well attested in both literary and epigraphical sources.¹¹

Autochthony provides an excellent test case for assessing the centrality of political participation in the cultural debates over citizenship in fourth-century Athens. As Mirko Canevaro shows in a forthcoming contribution, autochthony served as a powerful weapon in an ideological battle around the participation and hegemony of the lower classes in the political institutions of the city. The ideology of autochthony, while expressing the racial superiority of the Athenians over other nations, was mobilized by the *demos* to assert the *eugeneia* and equality of all male citizens, countering elite narratives that sought to limit political authority to those of noble birth. Such a democratisation of *eugeneia* prompted the elite to find other criteria for legitimising their claims for the exclusion of the lower classes from political activity, namely virtue, education and *scholē*.¹²

Building on Canevaro's insights, I aim to investigate Plato's mythmaking as a precious, yet relatively underexplored source for understanding elite responses

8 Rosivach 1987, 303 n. 34; also Bearzot 2007b, 12-13.

9 Barbato 2020, 109-113.

10 Blok 2009b, 169; 2017, 15-18.

11 Faraguna 2025a and 2025b.

12 Canevaro forthcoming (b).

to the democratic discourse on autochthony and citizenship.¹³ I begin by outlining the conceptualisation of autochthony in Athenian democratic discourse, focusing on its articulation in the *epitaphios logos*. I show that the surviving funeral speeches conceptualise Athenian autochthony through a relatively fixed set of motifs (the omission of the earthborn kings; the Athenians' collective *eugeneia*; the metaphor of the family) to legitimise the political equality of all citizens under the democracy. I then turn to Plato's own myths of autochthony in the *Republic*, *Timaeus* and *Critias* to examine how those very motifs could be appropriated or subverted in elite counter-discourse to challenge the democratic conception of political equality. As I result, I demonstrate that the myth of autochthony and its discursive components were deployed within a heated debate on citizenship which revolved primarily around political participation and where access to cult only played an ancillary role.

1. Autochthony and political participation in democratic discourse

At the state funeral for the war dead, orators regularly deployed the myth of autochthony to foster civic cohesion among the Athenians.¹⁴ Their standard rhetorical strategy is best exemplified by Demosthenes' *Funeral Speech* for the dead of Chaeronea. Demosthenes (60.3-4) envisages autochthony as a collective quality that grants *eugeneia* to all Athenians (γεγενῆσθαι καλῶς ... ἡ γὰρ εὐγένεια τῶνδε τῶν ἀνδρῶν). He makes no mention of the earthborn kings and claims that each citizen's ancestry can be traced back not only individually to a father (οὐ γὰρ μόνον εἰς πατέρα ... κατ' ἄνδρα) but also collectively to their fatherland (ἀλλ' εἰς ὅλην κοινῇ τὴν ὑπάρχουσαν πατρίδα), "which they all share in common and in which they are recognized as autochthonous" (ἧς αὐτόχθονες ὁμολογοῦνται εἶναι; tr. Worthington).¹⁵ Autochthony is constructed through the metaphor of the family. The Athenians are described as legitimate children and therefore legitimate citizens (γνησίους... πολίτας) of their fatherland, whereas the other nations are made up of immigrants (ἐπήλυδας) and are similar to adopted children (τοῖς εἰσποιητοῖς τῶν παίδων). Autochthony, therefore, levels social differences and fosters cohesion within the Athenian citizen body, while providing a prestigious claim of superiority over the other nations.

13 On the influence of the *epitaphios logos* on Critias' speeches in Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias*, see Loraux 1981, 307-314.

14 Barbato 2020, 96-103.

15 Demosthenes does mention Erechtheus and Cecrops in his digression on Athenian tribal heroes but never stresses their earthborn nature; instead, he highlights Erechtheus' divine origins (ἀπ' ἀθανάτων πεφυκός; Dem. 60.27) and Cecrops' part-serpent form (τὰ μὲν ὡς ἔστιν δράκων, τὰ δ' ὡς ἔστιν ἄνθρωπος λεγόμενον; 60.30).

Demosthenes' *Funeral Speech* effectively illustrates the standard form of the myth of autochthony in democratic discourse but does not provide clear indications on whether this myth framed citizenship primarily in political or religious terms.¹⁶ For an answer to this question, we need to turn to Lysias' *Funeral Oration*. In addressing the theme of autochthony, the speech employs many of the motifs found in Demosthenes, albeit with some variations. Like Demosthenes, Lysias (2.17) omits reference to the earthborn kings so as to emphasise the Athenians' collective autochthony. He contrasts the Athenians with the other nations. These are depicted as ethnically diverse and as usurpers of the lands of others, whereas the Athenians are inherently just (ἡ τε γὰρ ἀρχὴ τοῦ βίου δικαία) because, by virtue of their autochthony (αὐτόχθονες ὄντες), they never displaced other peoples but possess the same land as mother and as fatherland (τὴν αὐτὴν ἐκέκτηντο μητέρα καὶ πατρίδα). Lysias, therefore, does not stress the Athenians' *eugeneia* or their legitimacy of birth;¹⁷ yet, by equating the Athenians' fatherland with their mother, he metaphorically portrays their community as a family.

Most importantly, Lysias gives autochthony clear political connotations,¹⁸ as he links it with the ancestors' propensity to act with one mind (μῆ ᾧ γνώμη χρωμένοις; Lys. 2.17). Given the historical context of the speech, which is set about ten years after the democratic restoration,¹⁹ this reference to *homonoia* is politically charged, as it reflects the climate of the amnesty between democrats and oligarchs.²⁰ The theme is immediately reinforced when Lysias (2.18) recounts how those autochthonous ancestors overthrew *δυναστείας* and established democracy, because they believed that freedom for all was the greatest form of concord (ὁμόνοιαν).²¹ This is usually taken as a reference to the suppression of local potentates during the synoecism, but the wording may also establish a parallel with contemporary political developments.²² As noted by Cinzia Bearzot,

16 Cf. also Hyper. 6.7.

17 The themes of *eugeneia* and legitimacy of birth are raised only later in the speech, during the narrative of the Persian Wars (Lys. 2.20, 43).

18 Autochthony is introduced after the catalogue of mythical exploits to explain the Athenians' eagerness to fight in the name of justice. Since some of these exploits, such as their intervention to secure the burial of the Seven (Lys. 2.7-10) and their defence of the suppliant children of Heracles (11-16), relate to what Blok classifies as *τα ὄσια*, one may argue that religion played a role in Lysias' development of the theme. Other exploits, however, carry no such religious connotation—the repulsion of the Amazons, for example, is presented purely as a defence of Greek freedom against eastern imperialistic *hybris* (4-6): see Barbato 2020, 152-161. Overall, therefore, religion does not appear as the main factor in Lysias' conceptualisation of autochthony.

19 On the dating of the speech to the 390s, see Todd 2007, 163-164.

20 Todd 2007, 227-229. On the notion of *homonoia*, see de Romilly 1972; Thériault 1996, 6-13; Cuniberti 2007; Bearzot 2015.

21 Todd 2007, 229; Barbato 2020, 99-103.

22 Todd 2007, 159 and 228

the term *δυναστεία* can denote particularly narrow oligarchic regimes (Arist. *Pol.* 1292b 4-10; 1293a 30-34), and it is no coincidence that the same term is used in the Aristotelian *Constitution of the Athenians* to describe the Thirty Tyrants ([Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 36.1).²³ By connecting autochthony with *homonoia* and the overthrow of *δυναστείας*, therefore, Lysias presents autochthony as the foundation of a community which had recently reestablished the principle of the participation of all citizens in the political institutions under equal rights.

The political relevance of autochthony is even more explicit in the parodic *epitaphios logos* delivered by Socrates in Plato's *Menexenus*.²⁴ Socrates recalls the non-immigrant origin of the ancestors (ἡ τῶν προγόνων γένεσις οὐκ ἔπηλος οὐσα) as the cause of the nobility of birth (εὐγενείας) of the war dead. These are described as autochthonous people who inhabit and live in their true fatherland (αὐτόχθονας καὶ τῷ ὄντι ἐν πατρίδι οἰκοῦντας καὶ ζῶντας) as opposed to foreign residents (μετοικοῦντας). The Athenian ancestors, moreover, have not been raised by a stepmother like the other nations (τρεφομένους οὐχ ὑπὸ μητρειᾶς ὡς οἱ ἄλλοι) but by the motherland in which they lived (ὑπὸ μητρὸς τῆς χώρας ἐν ᾗ ὄκουν), who gave birth to them (τεκούσης), reared them (θρεψάσης), and received them again upon their death (Pl. *Menex.* 237b-c). Plato, therefore, uses the same motifs as Demosthenes but provides a very literal interpretation of the metaphor of the family. In doing so, he also uses autochthony as an aetiology of the Athenian political system, in which no citizen dominates on the others. For Socrates argues that the mixed origins of the other nations result in tyrannical and oligarchic regimes (τυραννίδες τε καὶ ὀλιγαρχίαι), whose citizens regard one another as slaves or masters (οὐδ' ἔνιοι μὲν δούλους, οἱ δὲ δεσπότας ἀλλήλους νομίζοντες). The Athenians, on the other hand, are all brothers born of the same mother (μῆας μητρὸς πάντες ἀδελφοὶ φύντες), and their equality of birth (ἡ ἰσογονία) according to nature results in their equality of rights (ἰσονομίαν) according to law (238e-239a).

The surviving funeral speeches, therefore, conceptualise Athenian autochthony through a standard set of motifs which strip the myth of its potential hierarchical implications: the earthborn kings are omitted, *eugeneia* is collectivised, and the Athenian community is cast as a family of legitimate sons of the same land. This allowed the orators to highlight the Athenians' superiority compared to other nations, but also to legitimise the political order established by the democracy. In democratic discourse, in other words, autochthony asserts a view

23 Bearzot 2003, 22-23.

24 On the parodic nature of Plato's *Menexenus*, see Loraux 1981, 321-337; Coventry 1989; Trivigno 2009. *Contra* Pappas, Zelcer 2015, who interpret the dialogue as a genuine attempt at improving the genre of the *epitaphios logos*, and Wienand 2023, 224-238, who takes it as an "Epitaphien-Patchwork" which assembles fragments of epitaphic narratives to emphasise contradictions in the ideology of the *epitaphios logos* and criticise fifth-century Athenian militarism. For an intermediate position, see Tsitsiridis 1998, 63-92.

of Athenian citizenship which undercuts elite privilege and stresses the equal participation of all adult males of legitimate birth in the political institutions of the *polis*.

2. Autochthony and elite counter-discourse in Plato's mythmaking

As a parody of the *epitaphios logos*, Plato's *Menexenus* deploys the core features of democratic discourse on autochthony and exaggerates them to paradoxical effects—by virtue of their autochthony, the Athenians are all nobly born and live with equal rights under a democracy which is in fact an aristocracy (Pl. *Menex.* 238d: καλεῖ δὲ ὁ μὲν αὐτὴν δημοκρατίαν, ὁ δὲ ἄλλο, ὃ ἂν χαίρη, ἔστι δὲ τῇ ἀληθείᾳ μετ' εὐδοξίας πλήθους ἀριστοκρατία). But the dialogue also provides early evidence of Plato's life-long fascination with the theme of autochthony, which he pursued with increasing creativity and philosophical density in later phases of his production. For the *Republic*, *Timaeus* and *Critias* feature myths of autochthony designed by Plato to reflect and justify imaginary constitutional arrangements which are far from democratic.²⁵ These works illustrate how elite-counter discourse could appropriate the ideology of autochthony to reconceptualize citizenship so as to exclude large sections of the population from political participation.

Plato's *Republic* is the first of his works to repurpose autochthony to these ends. The dialogue starts off as a discussion on justice. In response to Thrasymachus' argument that injustice is more advantageous and conducive of happiness than justice, Socrates shows that the just man is wise and good, while the unjust man is his opposite; that injustice causes internal turmoil and makes one incapable to act; and that the just man, unlike the unjust man, lives a good life (Pl. *Resp.* 1.343c-354a). Thrasymachus' thesis, however, is taken up by Glaucon and Adeimantus, who bring new arguments to its support, and Socrates is called on to defend justice again. To do so, he elects to analyse justice in the city, as this allows him to understand individual justice on a larger scale (2.357a-365b).²⁶

Most of the dialogue is thus devoted to designing the ideal state. This shall be structured around a tripartite division of its population: on the one hand, the guardians, who are further split into rulers and auxiliaries; on the other, the producers (Pl. *Resp.* 3.412b-417b). Socrates provides several details about the life of the guardians—they shall not be allowed to hold private property (3.417b);

25 While *Menexenus* is counted among Plato's early dialogues, the *Republic* belongs to the middle phase of his production, and *Timaeus* and *Critias* to the final phase. On the phases of Plato's production, see Kraut 1992a.

26 On Plato's defence of justice in the *Republic*, see Kraut 1992b; Scott 2019, 211-216.

women shall be included among their ranks and have the same tasks as men (5.451c-456c); they shall not have families but will share women and children in common, and reproduction will be regulated by the state (5.457d-462a)—and argues that the rulers shall be philosopher-kings (5.473c). Socrates argues that justice coincides with the principle of specialisation, whereby every class performs the tasks it is meant to perform and none tries to encroach on the prerogatives of the classes to which one does not belong: the rulers shall rule, the auxiliaries shall defend the city, and the producers shall practise their crafts (4.432d-434c).²⁷

Autochthony comes into play when Socrates introduces the Noble Lie, which provides the charter myth of the ideal state.²⁸ Socrates has just discussed the education of the guardians and divided their class between rulers and ruled (οἵτινες ἄρξουσὶ τε καὶ ἄρξονται; Pl. *Resp.* 3.386a-412c). After establishing that the rulers shall be the best among the guardians (φυλάκων... ἀρίστους), he clarifies that only those who have qualified as such after a series of tests and challenges shall be called guardians in the full sense (φύλακας παντελείς), whereas the others shall be called helpers and aids for the decrees of the rulers (ἐπικούρους τε καὶ βοηθοὺς τοῖς τῶν ἀρχόντων δόγμασιν). Among other qualities, the rulers will need to prove that they care for the interests of the state. Socrates argues that one is likelier to care for what one loves, and that one is likelier to love something if one perceives that its interests coincide with one's own (412c-414b).

To make sure that the rulers care for the interests of the city, Socrates devises the Noble Lie (γενναῖόν τι ἐν ψευδομένους): a useful falsehood (τῶν ψευδῶν τῶν ἐν δέοντι γιγνομένων) that will instil in the guardians love for the state,²⁹ or at least will be believed by the rest of the community. The guardians will need to be persuaded that the education they received was just a dream and that in truth they have been moulded and reared within the earth (ὑπὸ

27 The tripartite structure of the ideal state is mirrored by that of the soul, which is composed of a rational, an appetitive and a spirited part, and the just man is the one whose parts of the soul each perform their proper tasks under the rule of the rational part (Pl. *Resp.* 4, 4.434d-444c).

28 Scholars since antiquity (cf. Procl. *In R.* 7.9-11.4) have debated whether the primary purpose of Plato's *Republic* was moral or political: see Ferrari, Griffith 2000, xxii-xxix; Schofield 2006, 30-35. Even if one does not regard the *Republic* mainly as a work of political philosophy, Plato's use of autochthony is suggestive of how his elite readership would have understood the political implication of the myth. In other words, for the analogy between justice in the *polis* and justice in the individual to be effective, it must rely on contemporary political debates with which Plato's readers were familiar.

29 Cf. Pl. *Resp.* 3.415d. See Schofield 2007, 150-53. That the guardians believe the Noble Lie appears all the more crucial in light of the myth of the cave in Book 7. After being exposed to the Ideas, the guardians will have to re-enter the cave to perform their role as rulers, which they will only be willing to do if they have been conditioned to love the state and reciprocate what the city has done for them: see Schofield 2007, 156-57.

γῆς ἐντὸς πλαττόμενοι καὶ τρεφόμενοι). Socrates here draws inspiration from the Theban myth of autochthony. He labels the tale “something Phoenician” (Φοινικικόν τι), which is allusion to Cadmus, and describes the guardians as being born within the earth already equipped with their weapons, which parallels the birth of the Theban *spartoi*.³⁰ Yet, by describing the earth as mother and nurse (ἡ γῆ αὐτοὺς μήτηρ οὔσα... ὥς περὶ μητρὸς καὶ τροφοῦ τῆς χώρας) and by portraying the citizens as brothers and as children of the earth (ἀδελφῶν ὄντων καὶ γηγενῶν), Plato echoes the metaphor of the family observed in the funeral speeches, which suggests that he is engaging with Athenian democratic discourse on autochthony (Pl. *Resp.* 3.414b-e).

Not unlike the epitaphic versions, Socrates' myth of autochthony is meant to foster civic cohesion and devotion to the city, and like those versions it is mainly declined in political terms. As we have seen, the Noble Lie is introduced in the context of the education of the guardians and their distinction into rulers and ruled. Moreover, while the guardians and the auxiliaries will be later said to set up camp and perform sacrifices (Pl. *Resp.* 3.415e),³¹ the primary task they are expected to perform as a result of their autochthonous origins is that of deliberating about and defending (βουλευέσθαι τε καὶ ἀμύνειν) the land which is their mother and nurse.³²

This political emphasis is even more pronounced in the second part of the Noble Lie, which reveals the extent of Plato's departure from the democratic understanding of autochthony. Socrates merges autochthony with the Hesiodic myth of the metals to justify the subdivision of society into three classes.³³ The citizens will have to be persuaded that, even though they are brothers, the god has mixed different metals into their souls. Those fit to rule (ὅσοι μὲν ὑμῶν ἱκανοὶ ἄρχειν) have been infused with gold, the auxiliaries with silver, and the producers with iron and bronze. Socrates allows for the possibility of class mobility should a child be born whose soul is infused with a different metal than his parents. Yet, his main concern is to prevent those of inferior metals from becoming guardians, so much so that he devises an oracle which foretells that the state will be ruined if iron or bronze ever come to rule (Pl. *Resp.* 3.415a-c).

30 Loraux 1996, 176-178; Vegetti 1998, 449-450; Morgan 2015a, 76.

31 On religious rites in the ideal state of the *Republic*, see McPherran 2006.

32 That Socrates is mainly interested in the political rather than cultic aspect of citizenship is also indicated by his audience's startled reaction at his suggestion that women should be included among the guardians and should perform the same tasks as men (Pl. *Resp.* 5, 451c-456c). Since Athenian women were already actively involved in cults and festivals, their role in performing sacrifices would not have been surprising—the whole point is that the guardians, including the women among them, have political authority.

33 On Plato's derivation of the myth of metals from Hes. *Op.* 106-201 and the differences between the two versions, see Vegetti 1998, 451-452.

The Noble Lie subverts the democratic ideals conveyed by the myth of autochthony.³⁴ While it encourages all citizens, regardless of class, to view one another as brothers, it also conditions them to accept their inherent inequality and predetermined roles in society as well as the power of the rulers over the ruled.³⁵ As noted by Peter Rose, Plato defends and repurposes elite claims to inherited superiority. Since his guardians are not allowed private property, Socrates detaches excellence from wealth (Pl. *Resp.* 5.458d). This apparent move towards equality is compensated by the elevation of *physis*, understood as innate character, as the determinant of one's place in society (2.370a-b). Socrates' ideal city will even implement a eugenic programme to ensure that the best men are paired with the best women to produce the best offspring (5.458d-460b), virtually restricting the practical possibility of the class mobility he had theoretically allowed. Finally, when Socrates later proposes that rulers should be philosophers (5.473c), he highlights the aristocratic credentials of the philosophical nature, which is characterised by an innate capacity to strive toward what is real (6.489e-490a), and stresses the rarity of individuals being born with these qualities (6.491a-b)—nothing further away from democratic discourse on autochthony as the foundation of the Athenians' collective *eugeneia* and political equality.³⁶

The political implications of the Noble Lie are expounded further in Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias*, where autochthonous origins are claimed for both primeval Athens and its negative foil, Atlantis.³⁷ *Timaeus* starts with Socrates summarising a conversation from the previous day on the topic of the ideal state. This largely corresponds to the city described in the *Republic*: it is divided into a class of guardians and one of producers, though the latter is not further split into rulers and auxiliaries; the occupations of each class are set according to the rule of specialisation; the guardians do not possess private property and share women and children; women share the same tasks as men. Socrates then expresses the wish to hear a tale portraying this state in action, such as fighting a great war (Pl. *Ti.* 17c-20c).³⁸

Socrates' desire is met by Critias,³⁹ who claims that such a story, originally told to Solon by an Egyptian priest, had been handed down within his family

34 Cf. Pl. *Prtg.* 322d-323c, where Protagoras expresses the democratic ideal according to which political virtue is shared almost by everyone alike; see Scott 2019, 219-20.

35 Williams 2013, 373-75.

36 Rose 1992, 351-69.

37 See Morgan 1998.

38 The main difference with the ideal state of the *Republic* is that, in *Timaeus*, Socrates does not state (at least explicitly) that the rulers shall be philosophers: see Gill 2017, 9-13. On whether the conversation alluded to in *Timaeus* is the one reported in the *Republic*, see Annas 2010, 52; Gill 2017, 89.

39 On the problems regarding Critias' identification, who may be either the leader of the Thirty or his homonymous grandfather, see Gill 2017, 7-8, 18-20.

and relates how Athens defeated the invading maritime empire of Atlantis some 9,000 years earlier (Pl. *Ti.* 20c-26e). Critias only provides a summary of the conflict and does not discuss the political structure of the belligerent states in detail. He merely remarks that primeval Athens was “most well-ordered in all respects” (κατὰ πάντα εὐνομοτάτη; 23c) and briefly illustrates its class division through the parallel of Egyptian society (24a-b).⁴⁰ Yet, Critias does connect Athens’ ancient constitution to autochthony. He claims that Athena was allotted the Athenians’ land and reared and educated them (ἔλαχεν καὶ ἔθρεψεν καὶ ἐπαίδευσεν) when she received their seed from Earth and Hephaestus (ἐκ Γῆς τε καὶ Ἡφαίστου τὸ σπέρμα παραλαβοῦσα ὑμῶν; 23d-e), and credits the goddess with arranging their constitutional order at the time of the foundation of their state (ταύτην οὖν δὴ τότε σύμπασαν τὴν διακόσμησιν καὶ σύνταξιν ἡ θεὸς προτέρους ὑμᾶς διακοσμήσασα κατέκτισεν; 24c).

Critias’ characterisation of Athena as a nurturing figure for the Athenians reprises the family metaphor used in the *epitaphios logos* to underscore the civic community’s shared descent and maternal bond with the land. At the same time, Socrates subverts the epitaphic paradigm by alluding to the earthborn Erichthonius, and in doing so rehashes an ancient tradition, already attested in Homer, which stressed the goddess’ special relationship with the earthborn kings of Attica.⁴¹ But, most crucially, primeval Athens is labelled εὐνομοτάτη. By the late fifth century, *eunomia* had become a key term in oligarchic critiques of democracy, most notably in the so-called Old Oligarch ([Xen.] *Ath. Pol.* 1.5-9), where it designated the orderly governance allegedly undermined by the lawless and arbitrary nature of popular rule.⁴² In attaching this notion to the earthborn community established by Athena, therefore, Critias repurposes democratic discourse on autochthony so as to provide legitimisation to a state founded upon the rule of the best and the exclusion of the producers from political activity.

These political implications are explored further in Plato’s unfinished *Critias*, where the namesake character offers the detailed account of the Atlantis story he had promised in *Timaieus*. Critias describes the institutions and physical environment of primeval Athens as well as Atlantis, which appear as opposites.

40 Cf. Isoc. 11.15-17, who illustrates Egypt’s class division and claims that this system, based on the principle of specialisation according to which the same individuals should always have the same occupation, even influenced philosophers—plausibly an allusion to Plato’s *Republic*: see Morgan 1998, 110; Gill 2017, 114-115.

41 Cf. Hom. *Il.* 2.546-551; *Od.* 7.77-81.

42 Faraguna 2011, 88-90; Canevaro 2017b, 225-227. Cf. Hdt. 1.65-66; Thuc. 1.18.1, where *eunomia* is associated with Sparta. Given Solon’s role in transmitting the Atlantis story, Critias may also be alluding to Solonian *eunomia*, understood as the characteristic of a stable community where everyone is respectful of one’s own and other people’s rights and place in society (Solon fr. 3.31-32 G-P), on which see now Canevaro 2022, esp. 386-389. Such a preoccupation with social mobility resonates well with the principle of specialisation upon which Plato builds his ideal state and conception of justice.

Primeval Athens is portrayed as a land power, with the city structured around an enlarged Acropolis surrounded by a fertile countryside. Its social structure largely (though not completely) mirrors the ideal state of the *Republic*. Citizens are divided into a producing and a guardian class, and the former provides the latter with its basic necessities. By contrast, Atlantis is portrayed as a sea power. Poseidon arranged its landscape into a series of concentric circles of land and sea and provided the Atlanteans with everything they needed. The kings of Atlantis, however, kept improving the city with complex works and lavish temples and extended their rule over other islands and territories even within the Pillars of Heracles.⁴³

In *Critias*, the political significance of autochthony is immediately spelt out. Critias states that, when the earth was distributed among the gods, Attica was allotted to Athena and Hephaestus. These produced good autochthonous men (ἄνδρας δὲ ἀγαθοὺς ἐμποιήσαντες αὐτόχθονας) and placed the organization of their constitution (τὴν τῆς πολιτείας τάξιν) in their minds (Pl. *Criti.* 109c-d), so that their population was divided into producers and guardians by godlike men (ὕπ' ἀνδρῶν θείων; 110c).⁴⁴ Like in *Timaeus*, therefore, autochthony is used for claiming primeval Athens' special relationship with its tutelary deities and legitimising its constitution and class system. The latter is predicated upon the principle of specialisation spelt out in the *Republic*, which requires that one's nature determines one's only occupation. This is most evident when Critias states that the land was cultivated by true farmers who did only that one thing (ὕπὸ γεωργῶν μὲν ἀληθινῶν καὶ πραττόντων αὐτὸ τοῦτο) and were naturally suited (εὐφυῶν) for this purpose (111e).⁴⁵

Critias' version of Athenian autochthony implicitly reprises the family imagery of the funeral speeches. By stressing Athena and Hephaestus' fraternal relation and omitting Hephaestus' attempted rape of Athena, Critias may be hinting at the brotherly nature of the ancient Athenian community. This in turn may reflect the cohesion between guardians and producers, which mirrors the brotherly relationship between their respective patron deities, Athena and Hephaestus.⁴⁶ Moreover, as argued by Kathryn Morgan, Plato evokes autochthony so as to combine the principle of specialisation with a sort of agrarian ideal—evident in the physical structure of primeval Athens—whereby the city is merged with the countryside.⁴⁷ While the principle of specialisation counters democratic egalitarianism, the agrarian ideal advocates an alternative, non-naval

43 Vidal-Naquet 1964; Morgan 1998 and 2015a.

44 Harvey 2023, 562-63.

45 Gill 2017, 147.

46 Vidal-Naquet 1964, 431; Gill 2017, 139-40.

47 Morgan 2015a, 78-79.

Athens with no place for the imperial attitudes of the fifth century and the thetic class traditionally employed in the fleet.⁴⁸

The maritime character of classical Athens, as we have seen, is attributed to Atlantis,⁴⁹ which also gets its own version of autochthony. According to Critias, in the centre of the island lived one of the original earthborn men (τῶν ἐκεῖ κατὰ ἀρχὰς ἐκ γῆς ἀνδρῶν γεγονότων), named Euenor,⁵⁰ together with his wife, Leucippe, and their daughter, Cleito. Poseidon, to whom Atlantis had been allotted, became attracted to Cleito and fathered five pairs of twin sons with her. To their firstborn, Poseidon gave Cleito's home and the surrounding area, which was the most fertile, and made him king over his brothers, who each received a portion of land for them to rule as kings (Pl. *Criti.* 113c-114a). Each king had supreme authority over his region and its inhabitants, but the relations between the kings had been regulated by Poseidon himself and inscribed on a stele of orichalch (119c-d).⁵¹

Together with divine descent and Poseidon's direct intervention, therefore, autochthony provides the foundation for Atlantis' political organization. Critias does delve into the religious role of the ten kings, particularly the sacrifices they performed during their gatherings at the temple of Poseidon (Pl. *Criti.* 119d-120d). However, the contrast between Atlantis and primeval Athens highlights two significant political implications of autochthony in relation to contemporary Athens. First, whereas democratic discourse on autochthony emphasises political equality, Critias' two versions of autochthony stress the importance of *physis* for the preservation of the state. The ancient Athenians, since their autochthonous birth, were instilled with the belief that one's place in society is determined by one's nature. This principle of specialisation ensured their political stability and enabled them to maintain a guardian class consistently numbering around 20,000 members (112d). Atlantis, by contrast, owed its well-being to the divine nature of its earthborn kings. For a time, these were able to conquer many territories and amass great riches without succumbing to corruption. Over several generations, however, the divine element in their nature became diluted, and they lost the capacity to handle their wealth and power without experiencing moral decay (120e-121a).⁵²

Second, just like primeval Athens—with its agrarian nature and certain military traits reminiscent of Sparta⁵³—acts as a positive foil to contemporary Athens, the naval empire of Atlantis reflects the flaws of the Athenian Empire and has sometimes been read as a warning against the renewed imperial

48 Vidal-Naquet 1964, 432.

49 Morgan 2015a, 79.

50 Lambert 2008.

51 Vidal-Naquet 1964, 439-40.

52 Harvey 2023, 567-70.

53 On primeval Athens' similarity with Sparta, see Annas 2010, 54; Gill 2017, 27-28.

ambitions of fourth-century Athens.⁵⁴ While primeval Athens is characterised by an agricultural economy and simple lifestyle, Atlantis thrives thanks to its three harbours, visited by ships and merchants from all over the world (Pl. *Criti.* 117d-e). As noted by Christopher Gill, this picture of a bustling commercial port evocative of the Piraeus would have carried negative connotations for the Athenian elite and would have plausibly been interpreted as a source of moral corruption.⁵⁵ Moreover, whereas the Athenians of old were “leaders of the other Greeks with their consent” (τῶν δὲ ἄλλων Ἑλλήνων ἡγεμόνες ἐκόντων; 112d), Critias’ narrative implies that the Atlanteans had acquired their empire through military conquest (114c; cf. Pl. *Ti.* 24e-25b). The first picture is reminiscent of the chauvinistic narratives of the funeral speeches, which similarly depicted the Athenian Empire as a benign hegemony (cf. e.g. Lys. 2.47, 55-56); the second merges features reminiscent of the Persian Empire with elite criticisms of the Athenian Empire familiar, for example, from Isocrates (Isoc. 8.36-37).⁵⁶

3. Conclusions

Athenian democracy, especially in the context of the state funeral for the war dead, elaborated a discourse on autochthony centred around a series of key motifs—the omission of the earthborn kings, the collectivisation of *eugeneia*, and the metaphor of the Athenian community as a family. By picturing themselves as sharing a collective nobility of birth by virtue of their descent from the Attic soil, the Athenians promoted civic cohesion and their superiority to other nations, while at the same time legitimising the equal rights of all citizens to access political institutions. At the same time, autochthony was a deeply contested mythical resource in cultural debates over citizenship in classical Athens. Possibly due to its origins in the conflation of two separate traditions—the myth of the earthborn kings of Attica and the belief in the Athenians’ indigenous nature—autochthony proved to be a remarkably flexible notion. Its adaptability allowed it to be redeployed by the elite to counter democratic claims of political equality.

This anti-democratic repurposing of democratic motifs has been exemplified in Plato’s mythmaking in the *Republic*, *Timaeus*, and *Critias*. In the *Republic*, while adopting the family metaphor to foster civic cohesion within his ideal state, Socrates transforms the myth of autochthony to support a class system rooted in the principle of specialisation based on one’s *physis*, so as to restrict political agency to a subgroup of best citizens within the guardian class. The

54 Morgan 1998 and 2015a.

55 See Gill 2017, 167, who quotes Pl. *Gorg.* 518e-19a for Socrates’ negative depiction of the Piraeus as fostering greed and moral corruption. See also Vidal-Naquet 1964, 441.

56 Vidal-Naquet 1964; Morgan 1998, 114-18.

myth of autochthony is further developed in *Timaeus* and *Critias*, where both primeval Athens and its negative foil, Atlantis, are given autochthonous origins to reflect on the problems of contemporary democracy. Primeval Athens derived from autochthony a stable, agrarian constitution with a class system based on *physis*, whereas Atlantis built a naval and commercial empire, but its rulers, despite their earthborn origins, ended up corrupted by luxury and power once their divine nature was diluted.

Despite the importance of religion and cult in Greek conceptions of citizenship, the ideological struggle over autochthony was ultimately centred on the question of who was entitled to and deemed worthy of participating in political life. Whatever the original motivations behind the articulation of the full notion of autochthony in the fifth century, the way the myth of autochthony was articulated in both democratic and anti-democratic discourse suggests that fourth-century Athenians largely shared Aristotle's understanding of citizenship as grounded primarily in political participation.