

Plato *Meno*

dramatic-historical dating 401 BC

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Contents

Incorrect and correct dating	5
Introduction	7
Plato's <i>Meno</i> in the picture	11
<i>Meno</i> , fiction or reality	13
The misconception of 403/402 BC	16
On the way to 401 BC	21
The year 401	29
From Athens to Kolossai	32
Conclusion: fiction or reality	37
Brief bibliography	39
Notes	45

Plato's *Meno*, dramatic-historical dating 401 BC

Incorrect and correct dating

One day, somewhere in Athens, philosopher Sokrates talks about 'virtue' with the aristocratic rhetoric student Meno of Pharsalos who is accompanied by his servants and lodges with former democratic freedom fighter Anytos. For us to figure out when this dialogue plays.

The dramatic date of Plato's *Meno* can only be determined meaningfully, the moment character Meno is identified as one of the historical generals in Xenophon's *Anabasis*. This military expedition left in 401 BC under the leadership of Persian governor Kyros intending to overthrow his brother, Great King Artoxerxes II Mnemon. After Kyros got killed, Meno extradites the remaining army command to Artoxerxes' right-hand man Tissaphernes. At his command centre, under the watchful eye of Zeus, during 'hospitable' discussions about a benign continuation of their retreat to Greece, twenty captains and some two hundred soldiers are sabred down on the spot, four generals lead before the Monarch and the throat cut off, while Meno never returned either, because in the end this vice himself was ordered by Artoxerxes to be executed in the year 400.

Meno's identity gives us reason to get the dramatic date of the dialogue as close as possible to the year 401. One of the first, if not *the* first who attempted to set the date of action of *Meno* at 401 was John Sinclair Morrison in *Meno of Pharsalus, Polykrates, and Ismenias* (1942), *The Classical Quarterly* 36, pages 57-78. Yet he did not succeed. The bottleneck for Morrison appears to be his presumed duration of the journey from Athens to Asia Minor's Kolossai, where Meno joined Kyros' already collected troops. Unfortunately, Morrison didn't calculate his estimate for the required travel time and, based on guess, set the dramatic date a year back to be cautious, erroneously around the winter of 403/402.

Although people are not so sure, this date is simply accepted and, for the sake of convenience, duplicated esoterically. A well-known historian of philosophy, William Keith Chambers Guthrie in his *A history of Greek philosophy*, Vol. IV page 236 for instance,

states with integrity that the dramatic date of 403 or early 402 may be taken, and for details Guthrie refers to Richard Stanley Bluck, *Plato's Meno*, Cambridge, 1961, pages 120-123, who in turn relied on Morrison's research from 1942, just mentioned. One understands, this is just a selection of an endless row unchecked references to each other by renowned specialists. But fair is fair, they jointly make a genuine reservation in the dating of the *Meno*.

We will see that we get a better grip on Plato's *Meno* and that the appreciation of this jewel only increases when we sufficiently dig out the historicity on the one hand and the literary drama on the other. As soon as both elements are positioned in their specific balance amid the critical dynamic the year 401 constitutes, the narrative will get back its damned and at the same time so bright, comic shine it used to have. The frequently heard criticism, as if Plato didn't care much about an accurate time and date, can no longer be sustained for the *Meno*. If this were the case, any debate on dating would be nonsense and advocates for 403, 402 or 401 respectively had equal right to speak. But once coupled with *Anabasis*, it appears after careful consideration that Plato has not given in to anachronism. In fact, the historicity of 401 helps unlock Xenophon's *Hellenika* and biography, and gives further substance to both Plato's *Letter VII* and Aristotle's *Constitution of Athens*. Moreover, we will casually notice, mainly based on Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*, that we need to review prejudices about Hellas' seafaring during the winter season.

With the publication of *Meno* some fifteen years later, around 386, Plato brought back into memory of his contemporary readership the controversial Greek-Persian relations, the grim guarantee of Attika's democracy and the subsequent pandemonium oligarch Xenophon had to endure with general Meno in Mesopotamia.

When we have Plato's literary intention and the historically calculated pieces of the puzzle in the right place, then everyone will be convinced that the *Meno* plays in the year 401 BC.