

“Still noon” in Plato’s *Phaedrus* (and in Heraclides of Pontus)

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THE CONVERSATION reported in Plato’s *Phaedrus* takes place around noon. This detail, mentioned three times in the dialogue (242A4, 259A2, 259D8), is significant. Midday was the time for divine epiphany and inspiration. In Homer, Menelaus’ encounter with Proteus happens at midday (*Od.* 4.400 ἦμος δ’ ἥλιος μέσον οὐρανὸν ἀμφιβεβήκη, 450 ἔνδιος). In Callimachus’ *Bath of Pallas*, Teiresias sees the bathing Athena at noon (73–74 μεσαμβρινὰ ... ἀσυχία, μεσαμβρινὰ ... ὄραι).¹ In Apollonius’ *Argonautica*, the epiphany of the heroines of Libya takes place at noon (4.1312 ἔνδιον ἡμᾶρ). And in Theocritus’ *Idyll* 7, Simichidas meets the enigmatic Lycidas—interpreted as an epiphany of Apollo or an Apollo-like figure—at midday (7.21, μεσαμέριον).² According to Diogenes Laertius (1.109), young Epimenides, when sent by his father into the fields, went off the road at midday (κατὰ μεσημβρίαν) and fell asleep in a cave; he slept for many years, and after waking up, found himself endowed with supernatural powers by the gods. Another midday story appears in Plutarch, who reports that the Mother of Gods appeared at noon (μεσημβρίας) to Themistocles in a dream and advised him to take a different route than he had planned, and in this way rescued him from death (*Them.* 30.1).

Reading noon in the *Phaedrus* as “the divine hour” fits the context of the passage, which is filled with hints at the presence

¹ J. N. Bremmer, *Greek Religion and Culture, the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Leiden/Boston 2008) 226–227; G. Petridou, *Divine Epiphany in Greek Literature and Culture* (Oxford 2016) 210–214.

² I thank Jan Kwapisz for bringing this passage to my attention.

of the divine.³ Phaedrus’ words in which the phrase occurs come just after Socrates refuses to finish his first speech and expresses fear that he will be “possessed by the Nymphs” (241E3–4 ὑπὸ τῶν Νυμφῶν ... σαφῶς ἐνθουσιάσω). Shortly afterwards, he experiences a divine sign that stops him from crossing the river until he purifies himself from his offence against the gods (242B8–9 τὸ δαιμόνιον τε καὶ τὸ εἰωθὸς σημεῖόν μοι γίνεσθαι ἐγένετο). The second speech of Socrates, which praises Eros and illuminates the nature of the soul, is marked as divinely inspired.⁴

While there is no ambiguity about the timing of the conversation, the phrase used by Phaedrus has caused scholarly controversy since the eighteenth century. At 242A4 Phaedrus says:⁵

ἢ οὐχ ὀρᾶς ὡς σχεδὸν ἤδη μεσημβρία ἴσταται ἢ δὴ καλουμένη σταθερά;

Don’t you see that it is almost exactly noon, “straight-up” as they say?

The adjective σταθερά, which derives from ἴστημι, has been considered problematic. It is an unusual word in the Classical period, and Plato’s *Phaedrus* is the earliest text extant in its entirety in which it appears. The passage, therefore, not only includes a rare word, not attested elsewhere in the Platonic corpus, but also one that has appeared to editors superfluous and redundant as doubling the meaning of ἴσταται. Ruhnken in his edition of Timaeus’ *Lexicon Platonicum* proposed that ἢ δὴ καλουμένη σταθερά was added by a grammarian to explain μεσημβρία ἴσταται.⁶ He was followed by several editors of the *Phaedrus*:

³ Cf. 238C6 θεῖον πάθος, 238C9–D1 θεῖος ἔοικεν ὁ τόπος εἶναι.

⁴ Cf. D. Clay, *Platonic Questions. Dialogues with the Silent Philosopher* (University Park 2000) 11: “If the reader asks why Plato has Phaedrus notice the time of day, the significance of this dramatic detail becomes clear: it is precisely at this demonic hour when gods appear to men and Pan makes his sudden epiphany, that Socrates decides to remain on the banks of the Ilissos and begin his inspired speech in praise of love as a kind of divine madness.”

⁵ Ed. J. Burnet, transl. A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff.

⁶ D. Ruhnken, *Timaei Sophistae lexicon vocum Platonicarum* (Leiden 1789) 235–236: “verba ἢ δὴ καλουμένη σταθερά, quae a Grammatico, locutionem

Heindorf (1802)⁷ and Fowler in the Loeb (1914) re-moved the words, Hermann (1855) and Schanz (1882) bracketed them. Ast, while agreeing that the text is problematic, excised merely ἡ δὴ καλουμένη and printed μεσημβρία ἴσταται σταθερά, considering it “luce clarius” that ἡ δὴ καλουμένη had been added by a grammarian.⁸ Schneider defended the *lectio* of the manuscripts and proposed that Plato added ἡ δὴ καλουμένη σταθερά in order to correct his contemporaries, who incorrectly derived the adjective σταθερός from σταθεύειν, “to scorch/ roast,” rather than from ἴστημι;⁹ however, this somewhat fanciful hypothesis, in which Plato becomes a language purist annoyed at his contemporaries’ linguistic incompetence, did not find followers. Other editors retained the version of the manuscript, though some hesitated.¹⁰

The phrase remains suspect for recent editors and translators. Yunis deletes ἡ δὴ καλουμένη σταθερά and notes that it “adds nothing and in its didactic tone would distract from Ph[aedrus]’s complaint. It looks like a marginal gloss on μεσημβρία that was later interpolated into the text.”¹¹ Ryan follows Burnet and keeps the phrase, but finds it awkward and notes that σταθερά is “a quasiscientific term, not part of the urbane vocabulary of Socrates and Phaedrus,” and that Plato precedes it with ἡ δὴ καλουμένη, apologizing “for its redundancy in the wake of the

μεσημβρία ἴσταται explicante, proficisci potuerunt, a Platone non potuerunt.”

⁷ L. F. Heindorf, *Platonis dialogi quatuor: Lysis, Charmides, Hippias Minor, Phaedrus* (Berlin 1802) 235: “post ἴσταται in edd. leguntur haec addita ἡ δὴ καλουμένη σταθερά, quo Grammatici additamento, locutionem μεσημβρία ἴσταται explicantis, Platonis orationem foedatam non sustinui.”

⁸ F. Astius, *Platonis Phaedrus* (Leipzig 1810) 268, 270.

⁹ C. Schneider, *De locis nonnullis Phaedri Platonis* (Wrocław 1819) 14.

¹⁰ The phrase is retained by Bekker (1826), Stallbaum (1857), and Burnet (1901). Thompson (1868) keeps it, but adds: “The adj[ective] σταθερός being derived from ἴστασθαι, Heind[orf] is offended by tautology and rejects the words ἡ δὴ καλουμένη σταθερά as a ‘Grammatici additamentum’ ... I confess that Heind[orf]’s suspicion appears to me but too probable.”

¹¹ H. Yunis, *Plato. Phaedrus* (Cambridge 2011) 122.

ordinary, nontechnical ἴσταται.”¹²

I believe that these suspicions are mistaken. First, although σταθερά derives from ἴστημι, Phaedrus’ sentence is not tautological on the semantic level. The phrase μεσημβρία ἴσταται means “the midday begins,” as ἴσταμαι, used in reference to time, has the meaning “to begin”;¹³ σταθερά, on the other hand, means “still.” From Photius and the *Suda* (s.v. σταθερόν) we know that the term was used by fifth-century poets in lost works: by Aeschylus (fr.276 σταθεροῦ χεύματος, presumably “of standing water”), Aristophanes (fr.483 σταθερά δὲ κάλυξ νεαρᾶς ἥβης, “a steady bud of early youth”), Antimachus (fr.30 W. θέρεος σταθεροῖο, “of still summer”), and Cratinus (fr.220 οὔτω σταθερὸς τοῖς λωποδύταις ὁ πόρος πεινώσι παφλάζει, “the still strait boils with hungry thieves”). The cases of Aeschylus and Antimachus suggest that the term was appropriate for a lofty poetic register, while the passages of Aristophanes and Cratinus might have been comic imitations of the tragic style.¹⁴ The poetic connotations of the adjective are confirmed by Apollonius’ *Argonautica* 1.450 where one reads: ἦμος δ’ ἠέλιος σταθερὸν παραμείβεται ἦμαρ (“when the sun passes the still day,” i.e. noon, the still time of the day). The contexts in Antimachus and Apollonius with their notion of summer and sun are reminiscent of the Platonic passage.¹⁵ Phaedrus’ use of a poetic phrase does not strike one as odd in a dialogue known for its poetic character.

What about ἡ δὴ καλουμένη? Phaedrus says: “the midday begins—which, in fact, is called ‘still’.” This suggests that he evokes

¹² P. Ryan, *Plato’s Phaedrus: A Commentary for Greek Readers* (Norman 2012) 161.

¹³ Cf. e.g. Hom. *Od.* 19.519 and Hes. *Op.* 569 ἔαρος νέον ἴσταμένοιο; *Od.* 14.162 τοῦ μὲν φθίνοντος μηνός, τοῦ δ’ ἴσταμένοιο; Thuc. 4.52.1 μηνὸς ἴσταμένου; Theophr. *Hist.pl.* 3.5.1 εὐθὺς ἴσταμένου τοῦ Θαργηλιώνος.

¹⁴ Cratinus’ *Seriphioi*, from which the fragment comes, apparently was a “myth-burlesque” with “a paratragic dimension”: E. Bakola, *Cratinus and the Art of Comedy* (Oxford 2010) 158–168.

¹⁵ Proclus reports that Plato liked the poetry of Antimachus and asked Heraclides of Pontus to go to Colophon to collect his poems: *In Ti.* 28C = fr.8 Schütrumpf.

a certain linguistic *usus*; it is not impossible that he is extrapolating here from a lost poetic passage. He emphasizes that noon “is, in fact, called still” because he desires to dissuade Socrates from getting up and going back to the city; he draws attention to the fact that noon is recognized as a time of stillness, and therefore is not proper for walking and moving about.¹⁶

Plato’s “still noon” as a divine hour appears to have inspired his student Heraclides of Pontus. In a commentary on Plato’s *Republic*, Proclus reports that in one of his works Heraclides narrated a vision of Empedotimus:¹⁷

οὔτε τὸ θείας ἀλ<ηθεία>ς τυχεῖν ἀδύνατον ψυχὴν ἀνθρωπίνην τῶν ἐν Ἄιδου πραγμάτων καὶ ἀγγεῖλαι τοῖς ἀνθρώποις. δηλοῖ δὲ καὶ ὁ κατὰ τὸν Ἐμπεδότιμον λόγος, ὃν Ἡρακλείδης ἱστόρησεν ὁ Ποντικός, θηρῶντα μετ’ ἄλλων ἐν μεσημβρία σταθερῶ κατὰ τινα χώρον αὐτὸν ἔρημον ἀπολειφθέντα λέγων τῆς τε τοῦ Πλούτωνος ἐπιφανείας τυχόντα καὶ τῆς Περσεφόνης καταλαμφθῆναι μὲν ὑπὸ τοῦ φωτὸς τοῦ περιθέοντος κύκλω τοὺς θεοὺς, ἰδεῖν δὲ δι’ αὐτοῦ πᾶσαν τὴν περὶ ψυχῶν ἀλήθειαν ἐν αὐτόπτοις θεάμασιν.

Nor is it impossible that a human soul gained the divine truth of the situation in the Underworld and reported it to humans. This is also shown by the account according to Empedotimus, which Heraclides Ponticus narrated. Heraclides says that while Empedotimus was hunting in some place with other people at high noon, he himself was left alone, and after encountering the epiphany of Pluto and Persephone the light that runs in a circle around

¹⁶ For a similar use of δῆ see Pl. *Phd.* 80C3–4 τὸ σῶμα ... ὃ δὲ νεκρὸν καλοῦμεν; *Soph.* 219A11–B1 περὶ τὸ σύνθετον καὶ πλαστόν, ὃ δὲ σκευὸς ὠνομάκαμεν; *Cra.* 405C9–D1 περὶ τὴν ... ἁρμονίαν, ἣ δὲ συμφωνία καλεῖται; *Leg.* 628B1–2 πρὸς πόλεμον ... ἣ δὲ καλεῖται στάσις; *Arist. Pol.* 1278b37–38 ἣ δὲ τέκνων ἀρχὴ καὶ γυναικὸς καὶ τῆς οἰκίας πάσης, ἣν δὲ καλοῦμεν οἰκονομικήν.

¹⁷ Proclus *In R.* II 119.18 = fr.54a Schütrumpf; transl. P. Stork, J. van Ophuijsen, and S. Prince. For an attempt to reconstruct the contents of Heraclides’ work on Empedotimus see H. B. Gottschalk, *Heraclides of Pontus* (Oxford 1980) 98–105, and I. Kupreeva, “Heraclides’ On Soul (?) and its Ancient Readers,” in W. W. Fortenbaugh et al. (eds.), *Heraclides of Pontus: A Discussion* (New Brunswick 2009) 93–138. We do not know the title of Heraclides’ work; it might have been *On Soul*, listed by Diogenes Laertius (5.87).

the gods shone down upon him, and through it he saw in visions that he personally experienced the whole truth about souls.

Discussing this passage, Reiche asked: “Why ... is Empedotimus’ vision expressly timed to ‘high noon’ (by contrast to, say, the expressly nocturnal dream-vision of Cicero’s Scipio [*Rep.* 6.10])?” He proposed that Heraclides alludes here to Plato’s discussion of the sense of sight in the *Timaeus*: “the timing of Empedotimus’ vision to ‘high noon’ ... evokes the crucial enabling role which Plato in his analysis of vision assigns to ‘midday light’ (μεθήμερινὸν ... φῶς, *Tim.* 45C).”¹⁸ This explanation has an essential flaw: it relies on an erroneous understanding of Plato’s μεθήμερινὸν φῶς as “noonday sunlight” rather than “daylight,” from μεθ’ ἡμέραν, “by day.”¹⁹ There are only a few occurrences of μεθήμερινός from the Classical period; in all of them the adjective means “happening during the daylight hours,” in juxtaposition to what takes place at night.²⁰ The terms μεσημβρία and μεσημβρινός, “midday” and “occurring at midday,” on the other hand, refer to the time around noon, and are typically associated with the midday heat (as in the expression μεσημβρινὰ θάλαττα).²¹

¹⁸ H. A. T. Reiche, “Heraclides’ Three Soul-Gates: Plato Revised,” *TAPA* 123 (1993) 161–162, 166–168.

¹⁹ The mistake might be due to the misleading translation of μεθήμερινός as “midday” in the Loeb *Ti.* 45C, “surrounded by mid-day light” (transl. R. G. Bury). This is not an isolated case; cf. e.g. the Loeb *Plut. Mor.* 626D τοῦ μεθήμερινοῦ φωτός, “the mid-day light” (twice; transl. P.A. Clement).

²⁰ Cf. *Pl. Soph.* 220D5–10, where μεθήμερινός is contrasted with νυκτερινός. Xenophon in *Lac.* 12.2 speaks of φυλακὰς μεθήμερινάς, “day-guards,” in contrast to those who keep watch at night (νύκτωρ). Demosthenes 18.129 refers to μεθήμερινοὶ γάμοι, “daylight matrimonies,” meaning sexual intercourse taking place during the day rather than at night.

²¹ For the association of noon and heat see e.g. Aesch. *Sept.* 431, 446, *Ag.* 565; *Ar. Av.* 1096; *Xen. Hell.* 5.2. In the *Ps.-Platonic Definitions* (411B), μεσημβρία is defined as χρόνος ἐν ᾧ τῶν σωμάτων αἱ σκιαὶ ἐλαχίστου μήκους κοινωνοῦσιν. While the noon is also the brightest part of the day, its relation to the light is ambiguous: in the *Laws* Plato observes that the midday sun is blinding and looking at it yields darkness (897D8–9); cf. Ch. L. Griswold, *Self-Knowledge in Plato’s Phaedrus* (New Haven 1986) 34.

Rather than being an allusion to the *Timaeus*, Heraclides' timing of the vision of Empedotimus to μεσημβρία σταθερά appears to interact with the passage from the *Phaedrus*.²² As in the *Phaedrus*, the midday in Heraclides also bears the significance of a divine time. Empedotimus experiences the epiphany of Pluto and Persephone²³ and acquires “the whole truth about souls”; from other fragments we learn that Empedotimus was granted by a *daimon* a “rise” (μετεωρισμός) and was initiated into the immortality of the souls (δι’ οὐ τὴν τῶν ψυχῶν μνεῖται ἀθανασίαν). He learned that souls going through Hades traveled on the Milky Way, and saw three gates and three paths (one at the sign of Scorpio, the other between Leo and Cancer, the third between Aquarius and Pisces); and learnt about the division of the heavens into the realms of Zeus, Poseidon, and Pluto (fr. 54c, 52, 57, 58). Heraclides' work contained, therefore, apart from the divine epiphany, instructions about the nature and immortality of the soul, a discussion of the afterlife, and an account of the structure of the universe. This constitutes a clear thematic link with the *Phaedrus* and its celebrated discussion of the soul. Heraclides is emulating Plato as he reports—in place of the divinely-inspired speech by Socrates—Empedotimus' “eyewitness” vision (note the emphasis in ἐν αὐτόπτοις θεάμασιν), granted him by the gods.²⁴

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²² Although it is not impossible that the adjective σταθερά was added by Proclus, it is more likely that he retains the phrase of Heraclides rather than embellishes his paraphrase by introducing the Platonic expression.

²³ The midday epiphany of the underworld divinities is remarkable: on the one hand, it is fitting that they provide Empedotimus with wisdom about the afterlife; on the other, Hades' midday appearance is paradoxical and at odds with his inherent *aphaneia* and the association of Hades/Pluto with invisibility, cf. Pl. *Cra.* 403A5–6, 404B8–9.

²⁴ The research for this article was financed by a grant from the Polish National Science Centre (NCN): 2015/17/D/HS2/01438.