

BIOGRAPHY FROM  
**ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS**  
LEGENDS, FOLKLORE, AND STORIES OF ANCIENT WORLDS

*The Life and Times of*

**PLATO**



*Jim Whiting*



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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Jim Whiting has been a remarkably versatile and accomplished journalist, writer, editor, and photographer for more than 30 years. A voracious reader since early childhood, Mr. Whiting has written and edited about 200 nonfiction children’s books. His subjects range from authors to zoologists and include contemporary pop icons and classical musicians, saints and scientists, emperors and explorers. Representative titles include *The Life and Times of Franz Liszt*, *The Life and Times of Julius Caesar*, *Charles Schulz*, *Charles Darwin and the Origin of the Species*, and *Juan Ponce de Leon*.

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**PUBLISHER’S NOTE:** This story is based on the author’s extensive research, which he believes to be accurate. Documentation of such research is contained on page 47.

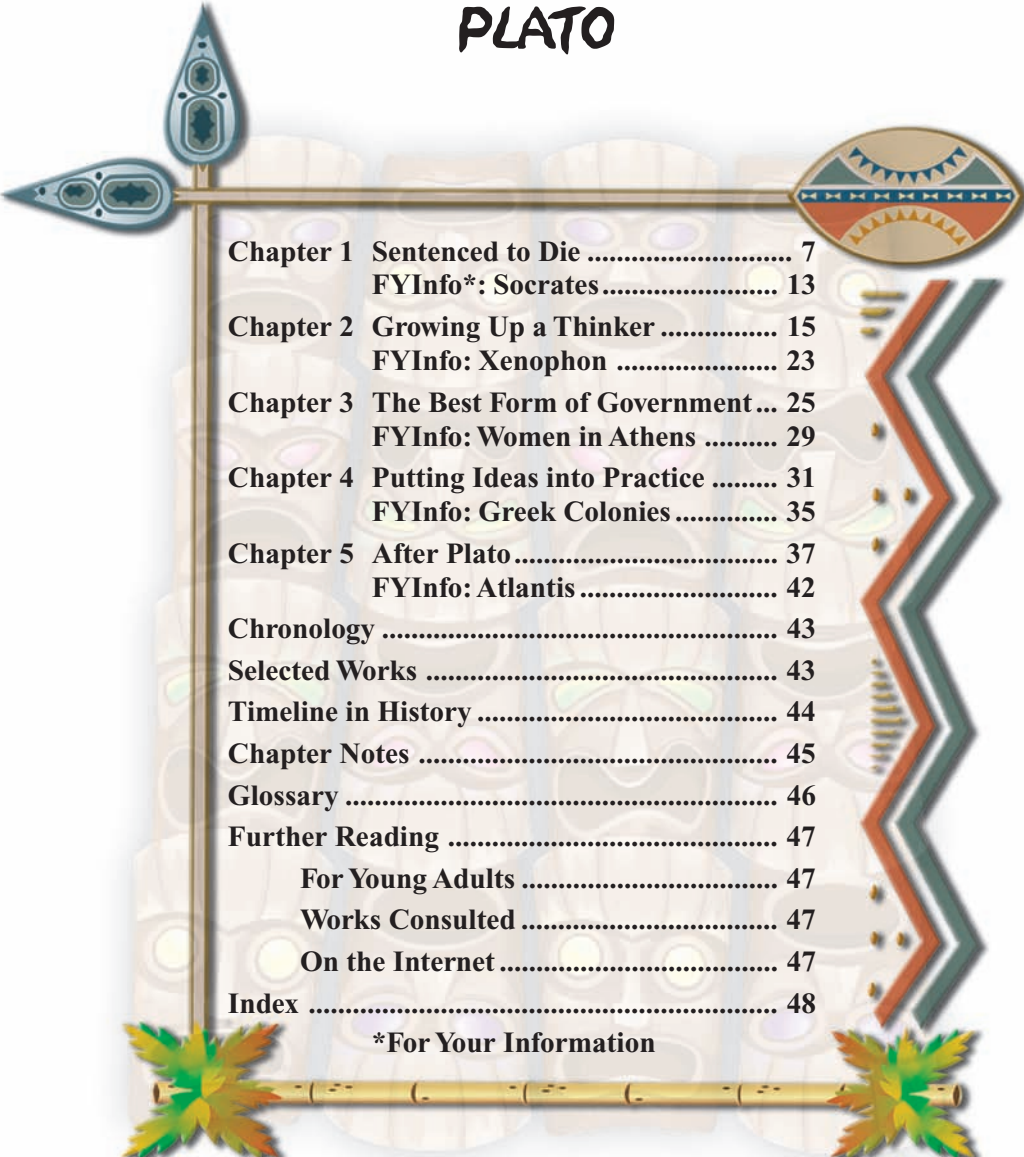
The internet sites referenced herein were active as of the publication date. Due to the fleeting nature of some web sites, we cannot guarantee they will all be active when you are reading this book.

To reflect current usage, we have chosen to use the secular era designations BCE (“before the common era”) and CE (“of the common era”) instead of the traditional designations BC (“before Christ”) and AD (*anno Domini*, “in the year of the Lord”).

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**\*For Your Information**

CHAPTER  
**ONE**

**SENTENCED TO DIE**

There's nothing like a juicy celebrity trial to get people talking. In recent years, nearly everyone had an opinion about the guilt or innocence of high-profile defendants such as Michael Jackson, Martha Stewart, and Congressman Tom DeLay. Two thousand years ago, Jesus of Nazareth went on trial before Roman governor Pontius Pilate. His is probably the most famous trial in world history.

About four hundred years before Jesus was sentenced to die on the cross, a notorious legal case rocked the city of Athens, Greece.

The trial centered on one of its most famous citizens, the philosopher Socrates. He had been a popular teacher for decades. Many people who witnessed the proceedings, including Plato, had studied with him. He was a recognized war hero. Then, at the age of seventy, he was hauled into court.

He was facing two very serious charges. One was impiety. His accusers said that Socrates didn't believe in the gods that were sacred to Athens. The other charge was that he corrupted the city's youth.

The ancient Greeks believed in gods who were quick to administer punishment at the slightest offense. These gods were well known for their jealousy. Everyone believed that the gods didn't just

## Chapter ONE

retaliate against the individual who offended them. They took out their anger on the entire population. If Socrates offended the gods, all of Athens would be in danger.

Corrupting the youth was also serious. Allegedly, Socrates was filling the heads of young people with bad ideas. The Athenians didn't have to look very far for "evidence." Several of Socrates' former students had done things that threatened the city's democratic ideals. There was no proof that Socrates had done anything to encourage them in their treasonous deeds. It didn't matter. It was a case of guilt by association.

Many of the trial procedures of ancient Greece were similar to those of today. Socrates' trial began when a citizen named Meletus made an accusation against Socrates. Any citizen of Athens had that right. Both Socrates and Meletus appeared a few days later before the city's chief magistrate, a man similar to a judge. The magistrate listened as both men presented their sides. He decided that the lawsuit Meletus brought was acceptable under Athenian law.

The next step was a preliminary hearing. Meletus presented a written summary of his charges. Socrates responded. The magistrate questioned each man. Socrates and Meletus also questioned each other. The magistrate considered both sides. He determined that the case should go to trial.

The trial took place in the Agora, the public marketplace of Athens. A jury of 500 men listened to the case. The large size was intentional. Small juries were subject to bribery. It would be impossible to buy off such a large group. In addition to the huge jury, it is likely that hundreds of citizens packed the Agora.

Unlike modern-day trials, in ancient Athens there were no attorneys. The trial lasted one day. The sentence was carried out right away. And there were no appeals.

But there was one very strong similarity with modern-day court cases. Many people had already made up their minds about Socrates'

guilt or innocence before the trial began. Many if not most of Socrates' students liked and respected him, but he was not universally popular in the city. That's not unusual. Even today, there are very few public figures who don't have their share of enemies. That was certainly the case with Socrates.

Athens in his day was very prosperous. Many of its inhabitants were trying to "get ahead in life." Socrates wasn't. His only concern was the life of the mind. He lived at a near-poverty level. Many of his fellow citizens didn't understand him. People often fear people they don't understand. Others thought he was just being lazy.

The playwright Aristophanes was one of the city's most famous comedy writers. He didn't like Socrates. He wrote a play called *The Clouds* that focuses on Socrates. According to Aristophanes, Socrates runs a "school" called The Thinkery. He teaches anything that people will pay him to teach. He is especially successful at making a bad argument sound good. That Socrates was an especially ugly man gave Aristophanes another avenue for his comedy. The mask that the character playing Socrates wore exaggerated the philosopher's looks. People laughed when they saw it.

Some of the additional laughs came from Aristophanes' use of bathroom humor. One character tells another that Socrates wanted to know if a fly makes noise through its mouth or its anus. According to the first character, Socrates has discovered "the gastric gas of the gnat is forced under pressure down to the rump. At that point the compressed gases, as through a narrow valve, escape with a whoosh, thereby causing the characteristic tootle or cry of the flatulent gnat."

"So the gnat has a bugle up its [butt]!" the other character replies. "Why, the man who has mastered the [butt] of the gnat could win an acquittal from any court."<sup>1</sup>

The first character adds that Socrates was cheated out of making an important scientific discovery about the orbit of the moon. "There he stood, gaping open-mouthed at the sky, when a lizard on the roof

let loose on him.” The second character replies, “Ha! A lizard crapping on Socrates! That’s rich.”<sup>2</sup>

A third exchange ridicules Socrates’ teaching methods. A group of students who have been with him for a long time are on their hands and knees. Their foreheads are pressed against the ground. They are doing “research” on what the earth is made of.

The first character asks, “Why are their [butts] scanning the skies?”

The other responds, “Taking a minor in astronomy.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, they are “studying” the stars with their rears.

Aristophanes’ meaning is clear. Socrates is the kind of man who will do anything to turn a fast buck.

According to some historians, Socrates attended a performance of *The Clouds*. When his character first appeared on stage, Socrates good-naturedly stood up. That way the audience could compare his actual face with the mask the character portraying him was wearing.

Aside from the obvious humor, there was a dark side to the comedy. It wasn’t all in fun. It demonstrated that not everyone in Athens approved of Socrates’ methods. Many of his supporters believed the play helped to create a climate of opinion against Socrates. More than twenty years after Aristophanes presented his play, this negative opinion allowed Meletus and two other men, Anytus and Lycon, to bring serious charges against him.

As the trial opened, the three accusers had a total of three hours to speak. One at a time, they mounted an elevated stage. A water clock kept track of the time as they provided “evidence” in support of their charges.

Socrates had equal time—three hours—to answer the charges. He began by branding his accusers as liars. He pointed out that he was a first-time offender. He firmly denied the charges, especially that of

impiety. He said that the charges cut to the heart of his sense of personal worth.

“Men of Athens, I care for and love you, but I shall obey the god rather than you, and while I have life and strength I shall never cease from the practice and teaching of philosophy . . . [I will always greet anyone] in my usual manner: ‘You, my friend—a citizen of the great city of Athens, famous for its culture and power—are you not ashamed of heaping up the largest amount of money and status and reputation, and caring so little about wisdom and truth and improving your soul, which you never regard or heed at all?’ ”<sup>4</sup>

He concluded, “I do believe that there are gods, and in a sense higher than that in which any of my accusers believe in them.”<sup>5</sup>

The case went to the jury. The members didn’t spend any time talking among themselves. They began voting immediately. The vote was 280 in favor of conviction, 220 in favor of acquittal.

Then came what is known today as the penalty phase. Socrates’ accusers asked for the death penalty. Many scholars consider it likely that the jury didn’t want to administer the death penalty. It had lesser options. It could fine Socrates. It could exile him, especially because the margin of conviction was relatively narrow. Exile would serve the primary purpose of the proceedings. Athens would be rid of Socrates.

Socrates had several minutes to persuade the jury to allow him to live. Many people in his position would have pleaded for forgiveness. Not Socrates. First he said that he was one of the most valuable citizens of Athens because he was trying to bring out the good in everyone to whom he spoke. He said that he fully intended to go on doing the same thing.

“What would be a reward suitable to a poor man who is your benefactor, and who needs leisure to devote to instructing you?” he asked.

He answered his own question. “There could be no reward more fitting for such a man than to be given free meals . . . for life.”<sup>6</sup>

He concluded on what seems like a more serious note. He suggested a fine. He didn’t have any money himself. He guaranteed that his friends and supporters would pay the fine for him.

The jury voted for the death penalty. Reportedly the margin was considerably higher than the vote to convict. Even then, Socrates was defiant. First he chided them for hastening his death. Old age would have solved their “problem” within a few years. Then he said, “[I do not] repent of the style of my defense; I would rather die having spoken in my manner than live in the manner you like.”<sup>7</sup>

His friends tried to save him from his fate. He could have escaped from Athens relatively easily. He chose not to. He said that the jury had made a mistake in convicting him. On the other hand, he believed that the jury system was a recognized part of the government of Athens. Socrates had always supported the government, and he felt it was his obligation to respect its decision. To escape would have been dishonorable.

Typically, Socrates spent his final hours on earth in a philosophical discussion with his friends. “Seeing all these things, what ought not we to do in order to obtain virtue and wisdom in this life? Fair is the prize, and the hope great!”<sup>8</sup> he concluded.

The time had come. Socrates took a bath, said good-bye to his wife and children, then drank a cup of hemlock, a poison. His friends began crying. Socrates scolded them.

“What is this strange outcry?” he said. “I sent away the women mainly in order that they might not offend in this way, for I have heard that a man should die in peace. Be quiet, then, and have patience.”<sup>9</sup>

Soon the poison began its deadly work. First his feet, then his legs, then his stomach became numb. Socrates pulled a blanket over his face. A few more minutes passed. Someone picked up the blanket. Socrates was dead.

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