PLATO’S 
Republics

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Abstract: Various ancient sources refer to the Platonic work that we know as Republic in the plural. Aristotle seems to have made it possible to refer to politeiai as 'constitutions', actual or written, and therefore some of our texts are best explained as references to Plato’s two written constitutions, Republic and Laws. One neglected reference that may perhaps be explained in this way occurs in the anonymous Antiatticista. A large number of references from the Alexandrian school of Platonism in late antiquity cannot be explained in that way, and should be understood with reference to the prevalent interpretation of the Republic, which gives equal weight to the internal (psychic) and external (civic) constitutions. The trickiest question is what it means in the titles of three commentaries dating from the early imperial era.

Introduction

The way that Plato’s Republic was cited in antiquity has important consequences for our understanding of the history of its reception. In particular it has a bearing on the history of commentary on the work, on the interrelation between title and exegesis in late antiquity, and possibly even on the manuscript tradition since the important Parisinus Graecus 1807 (A) and dependent manuscripts placed ‘Republics or On Justice’ at its commencement.¹ As we shall see, ancient titles were often not so much the definitive product of authorial intention as a convenient description for others referring to the work. The early absence of anything equivalent to the capital letter made it natural to think of many titles as being flexible, and it is well known that works like the Phaedo (On Soul) and Critias (Atlantikos) were regularly known by alternative titles in antiquity. There is a special problem that it was impossible to distinguish between Plato’s Republic and his ‘constitution’, usually the constitution outlined within the Republic.

Various ancient sources refer to the Platonic work that we know as Republic in the plural: not Politeia but Politeiai. There has been a certain amount of discussion as to why this should be so.² The tradition of a plural title involves both philosophers and grammarians, two groups who ought to have interacted in

¹ Details in Slings (2003); note that Slings misleadingly reports the Antiatticist as preserving the plural title, without indicating that this was written only in one of a great many citations in the work.