WHAT DID PLATO READ?

Plato was a prose writer. He employed a full palette of artistic colors. In order to craft a language suitable for philosophy he stretched preexistent literary usage to its limits. In his work one can find very specific tropes and linguistic formulations that can only be suited for prose and are typical of former prose compositions. The premise that Plato read and read widely, then, merits examination. Despite the reservations about writing that Plato has Socrates express in *Phaedrus* 274b-277a, Plato himself was likely a “reader” with a range of literature available to him. While the philosophical implications of writing may have seemed questionable to him, both the written ideas of his predecessors and the *formal* elements of writing influenced him. In fact, some of his perceptions of the inadequacy of writing probably came from his own struggle to perform a transforming alchemy on a language that heretofore had a limited philosophical conceptual lexicon. Intent upon philosophical priorities, he worked hard to force the extant coinage to fit his restless inquiries. Whether Plato’s dialogues are discussed as dramas or as doctrine (esoteric or exoteric) they embody a compendium of the prose legacy of the preceding two centuries. (1)

The influence of poetry on Plato is a subject in and of itself. Here I will examine the premise that technical, scientific and historical prose writing was an important determinate of Plato’s written efforts. The international language-literary Ionian—was used about 425, the time of Plato’s birth, by learned men of diverse origins: Sicily, Asia Minor, the Aegean islands, northern Greece, both Ionians and Dorians. Thomas Cole points out that there might have been little need for written texts in the metropolitan atmosphere of the agora where the latest scientific theories and discoveries, historical and *Sophistic* epideixis, were read to all. “Ionian intellectuals”, Cole explains, “were widely scattered throughout the islands and coasts of the Aegean and had limited opportunities for coming together for the exchange of ideas”. If the research or speculation conducted in Miletus or Ephesus were to be made available to other areas there would have to be texts for consultation and eventually reading. (2) This type of text existed from the sixth century. Cole argues that these writings abandoned poetic meter and diction and became more obviously a written prose, composed to be studied and deciphered “by the eye as well as heard by the ear.” He bases this observation on the compactness, precision, regularity and complexity that he finds in late fifth century texts. These are works composed for perusal at leisure rather than heard in performance. Plato who was in communication with traveling scholars had access to a wide selection of prose writing extant during his time and formulated new figures of speech and terminology based on them.

**Plato as Reader**

There is documentation from a number of sources that Greece was a literate society well before Plato’s time. Alfred Burns and Debra Nails both challenge the idea that literacy was a newfound phenomenon of the fifth and fourth centuries. The majority of Athenian citizens were literate by then and there was a prose literature from the end of the sixth