ΜΕΣΟΤΗΣ IN PLATO'S *LAWS* 746A6–7

In the fifth book of Plato's *Laws* (745e7–746a8), the Athenian stranger concedes that some requirements posed in the description of the ideal city might be unrealistically demanding. The passage quotes the due limits fixed with regard to wealth and the regulations about the number of children and the size of the family, as well as the rules to be observed in the allocation of houses in the city and in the countryside. The latter requirement is recalled at 746a6–7 (ἔτι δὲ χώρας τε καὶ ἄστεος, ὡς εἴρηκεν, μεσότητάς τε καὶ ἐν κύκλῳ οἰκήσεις πάντῃ), where the word μεσότης is unanimously understood as indicating a geographic notion of 'middle', with regard to either the position of the houses in the ideal city, or that of the city in the territory.[1]

No explicit justification of the geographic rendering of μεσότης in 746a6–7 is normally offered by commentators, but the use of μέσον in the description of the ideal city plan supplies an obvious explanation of its widespread adoption. The words ὡς εἴρηκεν in 746a6 clearly refer to the plan the lawgiver has just described in 745b3–e6, and while the reference cannot be taken to literally indicate the exact sentences that have been uttered—μεσότης does not occur anywhere else in the work—the previous account does in fact employ the word μέσον in the geographical sense of 'middle'. As I shall argue, however, the attribution of the same geographic meaning to μεσότης in 746a6 is problematic and far from convincing.

The city plan does certainly demand that the city be founded as close as possible to the middle of the land (ὅτι μάλιστα ἐν μέσῳ, cf. 745b3–4), but the idea that 746a6 is rehearsing the same point is at odds with the phrasing of the sentence, which in one of its possible constructions would instead suggest that the *countries* (χώρας) are μεσότητας (supposedly, 'centrally located'). Noting the tension with the formulation of the original plan, in which 'it is the city which is to be in the *middle*', England (1921), 538 claims that the sentence can be paraphrased as 'central positions for all states which have a city'. He further remarks that the 'strange' plural μεσότητας 'is chosen perhaps to balance the plural οἰκήσεις, and to avoid the two short syllables at the end of μεσότητά τε'. The loose rendering necessary to support this reading, coupled with a merely stylistic justification of the plural, does not make the proposal particularly compelling. Along these lines, it is significant that England himself immediately adds

[1] Translators suggesting a reference to the central position of the city include B. Jowett, *Dialogues of Plato: Translated into English, with Analyses and Introduction*, vol. 5 (Oxford, 1892[3]); F. Adorno, *Platone, Dialoghi Politici, Lettere*, vol. 2 (Torino, 1953); and K. Schöpsdau, *Platon Werke: Platon, Bd.9/2: Nomoi* (Göttingen, 2003[1]). The word μεσότης does instead indicate the central position of the houses, according to B. Jowett, *Dialogues of Plato: Translated into English, with Analyses and Introduction*, vol. 5 (Oxford, 1875[2]); L. Robin, *Platon: Œuvres complètes*, tome 2 (Paris, 1943); E. Des Places, *Platon*, tome 11, 2e partie*: Les Lois—Livres III–VI* (Paris, 1951); T.J. Saunders, *Plato. The Laws* (Harmondsworth, 1970); T.L. Pangle, *Plato. The Laws* (New York, 1980); R. Radice in G. Reale, *Platone. Tutti gli scritti* (Milano, 2000); F. Ferrari, *Platone. Le leggi* (Milano, 2005); T. Griffith in M. Schofield and T. Griffith, *Plato: Laws* (Cambridge and New York, 2016).

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that 'it is possible though that we ought to read μεσότητά τε'.[2] In fact, it seems clear that the plural μεσότητας is not just 'balancing' the plural οἰκήσεις, but, rather, indicating that the requirement being recalled *concerns* those houses, and not some countries and their supposed 'central positions'.

The association, however, between μεσότητας and οἰκήσεις *cannot* be taken to imply that the houses are in the middle of the city, either: such a claim would be at odds with the distribution specified in the ideal city plan. Having founded the city in the centre of the territory, the lawgiver should divide the land into twelve slices whose size is determined by a principle of equivalent productivity (745b6–c3). The slices must then be divided to accommodate a total of 'five thousand and forty' holdings, which must then be split into two parts and recombined in balanced pairs of opposites: the half holding closest to the border is joined to the one closest to the centre, the second closest to the second closest, and so on (745c3–d2). In the end, such subdivision and distribution are meant to assign to each citizen two houses, one near the boundary and one near the 'middle' (745e4–5: δύο νέμεσθαι ἕκαστον οἰκήσεις, τήν τε ἐγγὺς τοῦ μέσου καὶ τὴν τῶν ἐσχάτων). It is of course undeniable that the city plan makes a further hint at the geographic 'centre' in relation to the allocation of houses, then; however, this further mention of the centre has the sole purpose of denoting one of the oppositely located 'extremes' in opposition to the other. The same plan according to which those two opposites have to be appropriately paired entails, in fact, that no house is located at the centre.[3]

The necessity to provide a just balance between extreme opposites, which constitutes the rationale behind the allocation of houses in the ideal city plan, suggests a different (non-geographical) understanding of μεσότης in 746a6. The reason why the ideal city is constituted by pairs of houses placed at opposite locations is that everyone should have a fair share of both the advantages and the disadvantages of living at different distances from the city centre (745c4–d4). On this account, the exact position of each house 'near' (*not* 'at') the centre cannot be determined independently from the exact position of its counterpart 'near' the border, according to calculations that resemble those performed in mathematical proportions.[4]

It is apparent, then, that the unrealistically demanding requirement at issue in 746a6–7 is not the 'central location' of the houses in the ideal city but, rather, the necessity for them to be 'golden means' between 'central' and 'peripheral' locations, both in the city and in the countryside: one house is related to the centre in the same way as the other house is related to the periphery.

The appeal to the quasi-mathematical notion of 'golden means' is not surprising in the context in which the passage occurs. The immediately preceding lines already hinted

[2] Other unsupported emendations include μεσαιτάτας and ἐν μέσῳ τινάς, respectively proposed by F.W. Wagner, *Platons Werke. Griechisch und Deutsch. 17. und 18. Theil: Platon Gesetze I* (Leipzig, 1854) (in the apparatus criticus) and (in the text) by R.G. Bury, *Plato in Twelve Volumes: Laws* (London, 1926).

[3] While endorsing the geographical rendering of μεσότης, F. Susemihl, *Platon's Werke. Gruppe 4. Bändchen 9–15: Die Gesetze* (Stuttgart, 1862) clearly has in mind this requirement in his translation of 746a6–7: 'ferner den Besitz eines Grundstücks in der Mitte und eines andern im Umkreise des Landes und einer Wohnung in der Mitte und einer im Umkreise der Stadt'.

[4] As an exception to the standard practice, A. Zadro, *Platone, Dialoghi.* Vol. 7*: Le Leggi,* vol. 7 (Bari, 1952) translates μεσότητας as 'proporzioni'. Along the same lines, U. Fantasia, 'Platone e Aristotele sull'organizzazione della χώρα', *ASNP* 5 (1975), 1255–74 (at 1258) remarks that 'è indubbio che Platone si riferisca in qualche modo alle proporzioni geometriche secondo le quali è ordinata la sua città', but none the less translates the passage according to the standard 'geographical' reading.

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at proportions and calculations: the discussion concerns the unlikelihood of satisfying the discussed requirements κατὰ λόγον (745e9), and it has already been recalled that citizens' possessions must be within measure (μέτρια, 746a3). The notion of a 'golden mean' also fits with the following emphasis on mathematical aspects and the importance of coupling their study with the removal of ungenerosity and greed (746e6–747b6).

A translation of 746a6–7 congenial to the proposed interpretation would therefore be: 'furthermore, houses both all around in a circle and, as he said, golden means (μεσότητας) of both the countryside and the city'. The determination of the 'golden means' might be one of two requirements being recalled here, or, more interestingly, an attributive apposition of οἰκήσεις in the expression of one complex requirement, that is, the need for houses distributed all around in a circle to be calculated by way of the intermediation of extreme terms, and according to a principle of justice.

If the proposed interpretation of 746a6–7 is right, the decision about the placement of houses can hardly be deprived of qualitative considerations and, as a consequence, the notion of the 'golden mean' at play in the *Laws* is different from the purely quantitative and mathematical use of μεσότης observable in the *Timaeus*. The latter work contains the only other four occurrences of the word in Plato (32a8, 32b3, 36a3, 43d6), which refer to mathematical means of different kinds (the arithmetic, geometric and harmonic).[5] In the first passage, μεσότης may be indicating either the operation of finding a geometric mean, or the middle term of such a mean (31c1–32b7). In 35c2–36a5, the word refers unambiguously to the middle terms of the harmonic and arithmetic progressions, and the same use can be observed in the last occurrence of the word in 43d3–7.[6] Arguably, the 'qualitative-cum-quantitative' use of μεσότης in the *Laws* may be an extension of the strictly mathematical μεσότης of the *Timaeus*, made possible by their common aspect of arriving at a mean by way of the intermediation of extreme terms.

The occurrence of μεσότης in the *Laws* is the only (supposed) evidence in Plato's works for the meaning of 'central position' quoted by modern dictionaries.[7] The alternative reading of the passage that has been offered, then, entails that Plato never used μεσότης to indicate something that is 'central' or merely 'lying in the middle'.

[5] It is tempting to conjecture that the word μεσότης was coined as a technical term in the Academy, possibly under the influence of Eudoxus' investigations on the subject of mathematical means mentioned by Iamblichus' *Commentary on Nicomachus' Introduction to Arithmetic* (cf. 100.19–101.11 [= Text A in C.A. Huffman, *Archytas of Tarentum: Pythagorean, Philosopher, and Mathematician King* (Cambridge, 2005), 164], a passage probably based on the lost history of geometry by Aristotle's pupil Eudemus; cf. Huffman [this note], 170). At any rate, while the utterance of the word by a 'Pythagorean' character in the *Timaeus* is possibly paying homage to earlier discussions of the same subject by thinkers like Hippasus, Philolaus and Archytas, there is no textual evidence that any of those thinkers did use the actual term μεσότης (cf. the useful information about Pythagorean systematizations contained in Huffman [this note], 70–7).

[6] A. Bailly, *Dictionnaire Grec-Français* (Paris, 1963) refers to the occurrences in 43d and 36a as evidence for the definition of μεσότης as 'position médiale, intermédiaire', while F. Montanari, *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek* (Leiden, 2015) proposes the sense of 'space between' for 36a. The mathematical meaning of 'mean' is rightly recognized by C. Mugler, *Dictionnaire Historique de la Terminologie Géométrique des Grecs* (Paris, 1958); D.J. Zeyl, *Plato.* Timaeus (Indianapolis/Cambridge, 2000) and F.M. Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology: The* Timaeus *of Plato* (Indianapolis, 1937).

[7] Both LSJ and Montanari (n. 6) quote Plato's passage as a source for the first sense of 'central position' (Montanari [n. 6] has 'centre, central position' and the slightly different, but still geographical, 'l'essere al centro' in the original 2004 Italian version). Bailly (n. 6) similarly offers 'position médiale, intermédiaire' as the first meaning, but the reference he offers points to Plato's *Ti.* 43d and 36a.

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Interestingly enough, no further textual basis seems available for such a geographical sense in Aristotle, either.[8] Thus, the claim that μεσότης originally had this positional meaning seems hardly justified, as is the attempt, made by LSJ, to extend such meaning to time.[9] No correction of the 'geographic' understanding of μεσότης as 'central position' has been proposed, though, even with regard to the often-criticized LSJ.[10] The word is absent from classic studies by Renehan (1975, 1982, 2001), Chadwick (1996) and Bain (1999), and the entry for μεσότης in the bibliographical repertoire by Colera and Somolinos (1998) only lists a few studies and specialized dictionaries that do not add anything relevant to the received lexicography.[11] The proposed interpretation of Plato's use of μεσότης in the *Laws*, then, might be of some lexicographical significance.

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[8] LSJ only adds two passages from *Mirabilium auscultationes* (846a18) and *De Mundo* (399b34), in which the reading μεσότης is dubious (ἐν μεσότητι in 846a18 is at odds with ἐν μέσῃ τῇ at 399b34).

[9] LSJ suggests a temporal extension of the meaning of 'central position' in Aristotle's *Physics* 251b20, while Montanari (n. 6) has 'middle point *or* period' for the same occurrence. In fact, the argument for the eternity of time contained in the passage relies on the idea that present instants necessarily entail the existence of past and future ones. Thus, the word is better understood as indicating some 'mean' determined by way of the intermediation of extreme terms (cf. D.W. Graham, *Aristotle. Physics, Book VIII* [Oxford, 1999], 47–8, who recognizes that μεσότης is used here 'not merely in the sense of being a mid-point, but in the sense of being like a geometric mean'). Other supposed sources for the temporal extension of 'central position' appear to be echoing a Pythagorean dictum firstly attested by Aristotle, whose formulation features μέσον instead of μεσότης (*Cael*. 268a10–13; cf. also Pl. *Leg.* 4.715e7–716). The version of the dictum using μεσότης is attributed to 'Ocellus' in a 'Pythagorean' fragment preserved by John the Lydian (sixth century C.E.) in his *De Mensibus* (2.8, p. 27 lines 8–9 [Wuensch]: ἡ τριὰς πρώτη συνέστησεν ἀρχήν, μεσότητα καὶ τελευτήν; collected as fr. 8 in DK [1951], 440–1). The name Ocellus, however, is mainly known as the supposed author of the *De uniuersi natura*, which is in fact a late Hellenistic pseudo-Pythagorean forgery (cf. B. Centrone, 'The pseudo-Pythagorean writings', in C.A. Huffman (ed.), *A History of Pythagoreanism* [Cambridge, 2014], 328). A wording very similar to the 'Ocellian' version of the dictum appears in the sources quoted for the 'temporal' meaning by LSJ and Montanari (n. 6): LSJ refers to an inscription in Eleusis about the eternity of the Universe (ἀρχὴν μεσότητα τέλος οὐκ ἔχων, Dittenberger [1883: 3.1125.9–11]), which is thought to be Augustan; on the other hand, Montanari (n. 6) quotes similar phrases in Philo of Alexandria (*Quis rerum diuinarum heres sit* 126) and the Old Testament (*Wisdom* 7.18).

[10] Cf. J. Chadwick, 'The case for replacing Liddell and Scott', *BICS* 39 (1994), 1–11 and P.G.W. Glare, 'Liddell–Scott–Jones: then and now', *Hyperboreus* 3 (1997), 205–17.

[11] Some of the studies deal with Aristotle's ethics with no critical remark on the meaning and the use of μεσότης in particular (H. Kalchreuter, *Die Mesotēs bei und vor Aristoteles* [Tübingen, 1911]; R. Stark, *Aristotelesstudien: philologische Untersuchungen zur Entwicklung der aristotelischen Ethik* [Munich, 1972]); others are thematic dictionaries on specific meanings of μεσότης with regard to philosophy (F.E. Peters, *Greek Philosophical Terms: A Historical Lexicon* [New York, 1967]; J.O. Urmson, *The Greek Philosophical Vocabulary* [London, 1990]), mathematics (C. Mugler, *Dictionnaire Historique de la Terminologie Géométrique des Grecs* [Paris, 1958–9]) and grammar (V.B. Botas, *Diccionario de terminología gramatical griega* [Salamanca, 1985]), which contain no objections to the received lexicography. H.J. Sieben, *Voces: eine Bibliographie zu Wörtern und Begriffen aus der Patristik (1918–1978)* (Berlin, 1980) is itself a bibliographical repertoire, which in turn quotes H. Schilling, *Das Ethos der Mesotes: eine Studie zur* Nikomachischen Ethik *des Aristoteles* (Tübingen, 1930)—a philosophical study on Aristotle's doctrine of the mean; and G.P. Kousoulakos, 'Μεσότης and μέτρον in Greek thought', in H.J. Wolff et al. (edd.), *Ξένιον. Festschrift für P.J. Zepos* (Athen, Freiburg, 1973), 203–65—regrettably impossible for me to obtain and check.

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