"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 ἡμὸς δ’ ἡνέλιος μέσον οὐρανὸν ἀμφιβεβήκῃ, 450 ἐνδίος). In Callimachus’ *Bath of Pallas*, Teiresias sees the bathing Athena at noon (73–74 μεσσαμβριναὶ … ἄσυχία, μεσσαμβριναὶ … ὥραι).¹ In Apollonius’ *Argonautica*, the epiphany of the heroines of Libya takes place at noon (4.1312 ἐνδίον ἡμαρ). 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, μεσσαμέριον).² According to Diogenes Laertius (1.109), young Epimenides, when sent by his father into the fields, went off the road at midday (κατὰ μεσσημβρίων) 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 (μεσσημβρίας) 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


² I thank Jan Kwapisz for bringing this passage to my attention.
of the divine. 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 υπὸ 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 εἰσθής σημεῖον μοι γέγενθαι ἐγένετο). The second speech of Socrates, which praises Eros and illuminates the nature of the soul, is marked as divinely inspired.

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: ἡ οὐχ ὅρας ὡς σχεδὸν ἣδη μεσημβρία ἵσταται ἢ δὴ καλομέμνη σταθερά;

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

The adjective σταθερά, which derives from ἵστημι, 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 ἵσταται. Ruhnken in his edition of Timaeus’ Lexicon Platonicum proposed that ἡ δὴ καλομέμνη σταθερά was added by a grammarian to explain μεσημβρία ἵσταται. He was followed by several editors of the Phaedrus:

3 Cf. 238c6 θείον πάθος, 238c9–d1 θείος ἔοικεν ὁ τόπος ἐἶναι.
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.”
6 D. Ruhnken, Timaei Sophistae lexicon vocum Platonicarum (Leiden 1789) 235–236: “verba ἡ δὴ καλομέμνη 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 καλομένη and printed μεσιμβρία ἵσταται σταθερά, considering it “luce clarius” that ἡ δὴ καλομένη had been added by a grammarian.8 Schneider defended the lectio of the manuscripts and proposed that Plato added ἡ δὴ καλομένη σταθερά in order to correct his contemporaries, who incorrectly derived the adjective σταθερός from σταθεύει, “to scorch/ roast,” rather than from ἱστημι;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 καλομένη 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 μεσιμβρία 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 καλομένη, apologizing “for its redundancy in the wake of the

μεσιμβρία ἵσταται explicante, proficisci potuerunt, a Platone non potuerunt.”

7 L. F. Heindorf, Platonis dialogi quatuor: Lysis, Charmides, Hippias Minor, Phaedrus (Berlin 1802) 235: “post ἵσταται in edd. leguntur haec addita ἡ δὴ καλομένη σταθερά, quo Grammatici additamento, locutionem μεσιμβρία ἵσταται 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 adjective σταθερός being derived from ἱστημα, Heindorf is offended by tautology and rejects the words ἡ δὴ καλομένη σταθερά as a ‘Grammatici additamentum’ … I confess that Heindorf’s suspicion appears to me but too probable.”

ordinary, nontechnical ἵσταται.”

I believe that these suspicions are mistaken. First, although σταθερά derives from ἵστημι, Phaedrus’ sentence is not tautological on the semantic level. The phrase μεσημβρία ἵσταται means “the midday begins,” as ἵσταμαι, used in reference to time, has the meaning “to begin”; 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 ἡβής, “a steady bud of early youth”), Antimachus (fr.30 W. θέρεος σταθεροί, “of still summer”), and Cratinus (fr.220 οὕτω σταθερὸς τοῖς λυποδύταις ὁ πόρος πεινῶσι 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. The poetic connotations of the adjective are confirmed by Apollonius’ Argonautica 1.450 where one reads: ἦμος δ’ ἡλίος σταθερόν παρατάσσεται ἐνῷ (“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. Phaedrus’ use of a poetic phrase does not strike one as odd in a dialogue known for its poetic character.

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

13 Cf. e.g. Hom. Od. 19.519 and Hes. Op. 569 ἤαρος νέον ἴστεμένων; Od. 14.162 τοῦ μὲν φίλοντος μηνός, τοῦ δ’ ἴστεμένων; Thuc. 4.52.1 μηνός ἴστεμένων; Theophr. Hist.pl. 3.5.1 εὐθὺς ἴστεμένων τοῦ Θαρητήνων.
14 Cratinus’ Seriphiōi, 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:\(^{17}\)

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

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\(^{16}\) For a similar use of δὴ see Pl. *Phd.* 80c3–4 τὸ σῶμα ... δὴ νεκρὸν καλοῦμεν; *Soph.* 219A11–B1 περὶ τὸ σώματον καὶ πλαστόν, δὴ δὴ σκέπος ἀνομάκιμος; *Cra.* 405c9–D1 περὶ τὴν ... ἀρμονίαν, δὴ δὴ συμφωνία καλεῖται; *Leg.* 628b1–2 πρὸς πόλεμον ... δὴ δὴ καλεῖται στάσις; *Arist. Pol.* 1278b37–38 δὴ δὲ τέκνων ἄρχῃ καὶ γυναικὸς καὶ τῆς οἰκίας πάσης, δὴ δὴ καλοῦμεν ὀικονομικὴν.

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’ (μεθημερινὸν … φῶς, Tim. 45c).” This explanation has an essential flaw: it relies on an erroneous understanding of Plato’s μεθημερινὸν φῶς as “noonday sunlight” rather than “daylight,” from μεθ’ ἡμέραν, “by day.” There are only a few occurrences of μεθημερινός from the Classical period; in all of them the adjective means “happening during the daylight hours,” in juxtaposition to what takes place at night. 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 θάλπη).


19 The mistake might be due to the misleading translation of μεθημερινός 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 μεθημερινοῦ φωτός, “the mid-day light” (twice; transl. P.A. Clement).

20 Cf. Pl. Soph. 220D5–10, where μεθημερινός is contrasted with νυκτερινός. Xenophon in Lac. 12.2 speaks of φυλακᾶς μεθημερινος, “day-guards,” in contrast to those who keep watch at night (νύκτωρ). Demosthenes 18.129 refers to μεθημερινοὶ 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 ὧ τῶν σωμάτων αἱ σκιᾶ ἐλαχίστοι 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*. As in the *Phaedrus*, the midday in Heraclides also bears the significance of a divine time. Empedotimus experiences the epiphany of Pluto and Persephone and acquires “the whole truth about souls”; from other fragments we learn that Empedotimus was granted by a daimon a “rise” (μετεφθαρσός) and was initiated into the immortality of the souls (δι’ οὗ τὴν ψυχήν μνεύτα αἰθανάσιον). 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 (frr. 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’ “eye-witness” vision (note the emphasis in ἐν αὐτόπτοις θεώμασιν), granted him by the gods.

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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 ἀφανεία and the association of Hades/Pluto with invisibility, cf. Pl. *Cra.* 403A5–6, 404B8–9.

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