Translator’s Note: On August 5th 2007, while cleaning out his dry and mildew-free basement, Mr Christos Papadopoulos of Athens discovered what appeared to be a perfectly preserved Platonic dialogue, carefully tucked into a long-empty amphora. After turning down his MP3 sampler of traditional bouzouki music, he sat down on the futon to carefully scrutinize what appeared to be an ancient masterpiece. Experts at Athens University have since confirmed that, indeed, Mr Papadopoulos had found the lost Platonic dialogue concerning Thracymacus and his purchase of a house – a dialogue mentioned prominently throughout the Hellenistic period and well into the Middle Ages, especially during on-again/off-again times of hot residential hovel markets.

The scrolls are now safely housed in the Museum of Athens.

The Dialogue

Thracymacus: Greetings, Socrates. I have news!
Socrates: Greetings Thracymacus. The news from you is always good.
Thracymacus: I have recently purchased a house. A ‘fixer upper’.
Socrates: Congratulations, friend. It surely seems the news is good, but is such a purchase truly wise?
Thracymacus: I think you will agree, Socrates, that getting a house for a mere 400 drachma in an excellent neighborhood with superb Public Academies is quite the little deal.
Socrates: So it would seem. And yet, Thracymacus, we must always beware of ‘seeming’ and mere opinion – always striving for Knowledge of the True instead.
Thracymacus: Always.
Socrates: How much work will this house need?
Thracymacus: Well, once I fix the plastering it should be ready to paint.
Socrates: So the plaster is damaged. Walls or ceilings?
Thracymacus: Both.
Socrates: Ah. Am I to suppose it is water damage?
Thracymacus: Yes.
Socrates: Is there plumbing running near the damage?
Thracymacus: There is not. What’s plumbing?
Socrates: So the water source is not plumbing-related, and plumbing is therefore not our concern.
Thracymacus: No.
Socrates: Is there an attic directly above?
Thracymacus: Yes, if by ‘attic’ you mean a space above a ceiling, and not the dialect we are now speaking.

Socrates: Yes. Then it would appear that the source of the water is a leaky roof – for what is above the attic is by definition the roof, and if the water is coming from the roof then it must be leaking. Hence the appearance of a leaky roof.

Thracymacus: It surely follows.

Socrates: Yet mere appearance will clearly not do. You need to go up and take a look. We need certainty. Yet even looking will not provide that, for after all, the senses often deceive and are not to be trusted. For now, though, let’s assume the roof is leaking.

Thracymacus: A plausible assumption.

Socrates: So before you can paint, you must fix the plastering, and before you fix the plastering, you must locate and fix the source of the water.

Thracymacus: This I must do.

Socrates: And our assumption is that the roof is leaking and is the source of the water.

Thracymacus: Your reasoning is impeccable.

Socrates: Well then, it seems you must have the roof fixed. And if you are going to have the roof fixed, then it is best to have the gutters replaced and to install breathable soffits, a ridge vent, and a turbine vent so that the air flows through freely. In the end, it’s almost paradoxical, because on the one hand you want and need an absolutely leak-proof roof to keep the water out, yet on the other the life of the roof and the efficiency of your heating and air conditioning is wholly dependent on proper attic ventilation. After all, the Brotherhood of Athenian Roofing Fabricators (BARF) stipulates that ventilation in a low-rise residential building must be a minimum of 1 square cubit per 150 square cubit of attic space, attic space being measured at floor level. And always keep in mind that air intake must roughly equal, yet never exceed, air exhaust, if proper ventilation is to be achieved.

Thracymacus: I do not know what a ‘gutter’ or a ‘soffit’ is, yet I am able to follow your line of thought.

Socrates: You have not before done such skilled work yourself, Thracymacus – this ‘fixing the roof’?

Thracymacus: Indeed not.

Socrates: Nor should you: the just man keeps to his proper place – and in this case, lets the artisan perform his art. Therefore you must needs hire a Contractor. Glaucon once told me he had great success with Zeno and Brothers Roofing over on East Agora.

Thracymacus: As always I need your wisdom, Socrates!

Socrates: More, if you pry away and discard all the old quarter-rounds down by the baseboards, paint the baseboards, and then have the floors done, putting on new quarter-rounds will provide you with nice, crisp lines throughout the house.

Thracymacus: This I shall do.

Socrates: In all things, Thracymacus, there is a proper order. The just man is well ordered in his soul, and the successful home project must likewise follow its proper order. Hark, here comes Glaucon.

Glaucon: Greetings, Socrates and Thracymacus, how are things today?

Socrates: Greetings, Glaucon. Thracymacus here was just telling me about his recent house purchase – a fixer-upper. He apparently needs roofing work performed.

Glaucon: Did you tell him about Zeno and Brothers?

Thracymacus: Yes, Socrates has told me. I am pleased to learn of them.

Glaucon: If you need some flooring work you should call Father & Sons Flooring. Ask for Anthony.


Glaucon: Yeah, they’re Roman, but they do good work. Very reasonable rates. ‘Our Rates Will Floor You’ – that’s their motto.

Thracymacus: This is valuable knowledge indeed.

Glaucon: Tell ‘em Glaucon sent ya. Well, gotta get over to the festival before the wine runs out. See you guys later.

Socrates: Farewell, friend Glaucon.

Thracymacus: Farewell.

Socrates: So let us now ask, is there a basement in this house?

Thracymacus: Indeed, there is a basement.

Socrates: How would you describe this basement?

Thracymacus: Moist.

Socrates: Not ‘dark’? Do you have plans for this moist basement?

Thracymacus: Well, yes. I plan to deal with the moisture problem, then I’m putting in a bathroom and refinishing the whole thing. My Man Room will be down there.

Socrates: Truly, a man needs his place of solitude – it is hard to see how a man can contemplate the True and the Good without it. Still, it is an abomination and against nature that a man should keep entirely apart from the polis.

Thracymacus: I’ll keep some amphorae of wine down there, a futon, and my bouzoukis.

Socrates: I do not know this term ‘futon’. Bouzoukis are notoriously sensitive to moisture. How do you propose to handle the moisture situation?

Thracymacus: I’m not entirely sure. You see it appears to be coming through the walls in the one corner.
Socrates: Let us investigate this. Is there paint on these basement walls?
Thracymacus: Yes.
Socrates: And is this paint chipped or peeling?
Thracymacus: Surely.
Socrates: Is the chipping and peeling all over the walls, or only in certain areas?
Thracymacus: Only in certain areas.
Socrates: And are these areas limited to a close proximity to where the water appears to be entering the house?
Thracymacus: Yes.
Socrates: And does it appear to slope upwards toward ground level, such that the pattern of chipping and peeling appears like a triangle on the wall?
Thracymacus: Yes. You speak like the Oracle, Socrates.
Socrates: One final question. Where the paint is chipped and peeling the entire way up the wall, do you feel dampness if you place your hand there for a short time?
Thracymacus: That is what I feel.
Socrates: Your walls are filled with water. What you need is a cubit-long, half-inch solid iron masonry bit with a chisel and hammer. That ought to blow through both sides of the block. Hammer a hole in every other block, down nearest the floor. The water will drain from the block (you really should have a hammer. That ought to blow through both sides of the block. Like a triangle on the wall, it may seem, you are actually draining the water into the interior walls?
Thracymacus: You are now ready to start framing out the basement!
Socrates: The water will drain from the block (you really should have a hammer. That ought to blow through both sides of the block. Surely. Thales determined that the world will eventually drain too. As counterintuitive as it may seem, you are actually draining the water into the interior structure of the house. But then the internal Spartan drainage system will channel it directly to your sump pumps, and Lo! the water exits the house. It could take a few weeks or a few months, but I'll wager that the huge lake of water pushing against the exterior of the foundation will have drained away and your moisture problem will be solved. I'd coat all affected areas with a wattle and daub sealant or maybe even just mundane old basement waterproofing paint, and be done with it. You are now ready to start framing out the basement!
Thracymacus: Your words are sometimes strange to me, Socrates, yet I feel the pull of your arguments. And if they get me to a place where I can begin framing the basement out, I am a happy man.
Socrates: My friend, let not your happiness rest unduly on these external contingencies. Rather, order your soul well and become as divine.
Thracymacus: I shall try to follow your example.
Socrates: You realize that Thales determined that the world is ultimately composed of water after doing his own basement restoration [αἰτωκαταστάσιν]? Thracymacus: This I did not know.
Socrates: In the end, a properly waterproofed basement gives you; the new homeowner, the security and peace of mind you need to fully utilize the space of your home to its peak potential and efficiency. And done right, the waterproofing you perform now can last for decades, centuries, even millennia! It's truly a long-term investment — yet one with very real short term payoffs. Sort of like replacement windows.
Thracymacus: Er...
Socrates: You do have replacement windows, don't you?
Thracymacus: Not so much.
Socrates: Well you really need to get in touch with The Ship of Theseus Home Remodeling and Window Replacement Services by the Acropolis. Do this, and let us put the matter to rest.
Thracymacus: As you wish, wise Socrates.
Socrates: What other work will you perform on this house?
Thracymacus: I may do some finish work, putting up crown moldings. I'm not sure what to do with the tub. The marble is kind of chipped and scratched.
Socrates: With respect to the tub you basically have three options. First, you can replace the whole thing, knocking it out, knocking out all the tiles, et cetera. This is a very messy and expensive proposition. Second, you can hire someone to put one of these new 'glass' covers over it. It only takes a day and it fits right over the existing bath. This is second in expense to a total knockdown. Third, you can just get the whole thing re-marbled. This is the cheapest and easiest thing to do. And while the re-marbled job won't last forever, the tub will look like new for quite some time. Glaucon was telling me about Gyges Bathtub Marbling ('No More Ring') a while back.
Thracymacus: These options I shall carefully consider.
Socrates: As far as putting up crown moldings are concerned, you really need to read the scroll by Euclid about this. He has done a very careful analysis of the problems surrounding the installation of crown molding. At first you’d think you’d just set the mitre saw on 45 degrees and saw away, but Euclid has calculated the actual angles of the compound joint required and has graciously provided us with geometrical methods for calculating such angles — methods which work even if the walls and ceilings upon which the molding is to be installed are not at perfect 90 degrees to begin with.
Thracymacus: It’s so complicated.
Socrates: Of course, you could just put the molding upside down on the saw table, hold it firmly against the fence, and cut at a 45, essentially letting the angle of the molding itself take care of that compound angle. Euclid does not discuss this shortcut in his great work.
Thracymacus: Naturally. I’ve read some of Euclid’s stuff before, and he always seems to lead the argument, leaving things out, putting things in, as they suit his purposes.
Socrates: We must follow the path toward truth, wherever it takes us.
Thracymacus: Even if it takes us down strange and dangerous roads we would not wish to travel!
Socrates: Much like your project! I surely would rather drink the hemlock, so to speak, than walk through the fires of the process that lies before you. Good fortune with that. A wise man once said: “Our houses are such unwieldy property that we are often imprisoned rather than housed in them.”
Thracymacus: Socrates, sometimes your comments thoroughly throw me for a loop round the pillars of Hercules.
Socrates: I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.

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