

SOCRATES

Soldier Before Philosopher?

COMPANION STUDY | LIFE - SAYINGS - TRIAL - SOURCES



Who was Socrates?

Socrates (c. 470-399 BCE) was an Athenian citizen who wrote nothing, took no fees and left no school text behind. Almost everything we know comes through other voices, especially Plato and Xenophon, with Aristophanes providing a hostile comic portrait.

Before the philosopher

Ancient sources present Socrates as a veteran hoplite who served at Potidaea, Delium and Amphipolis. Plato's dialogues remember his endurance in cold, hunger and danger. The military background matters because Socrates later described his philosophical mission as another post that he must not abandon simply because death threatened him.

The sayings audit

SUBSTANTIALLY AUTHENTICATED: "The unexamined life is not worth living." The thought appears in Plato's *Apology*, in the context of Socrates refusing to stop examining himself and others even under threat of death.

FAMOUS PARAPHRASE: "I know that I know nothing." Plato gives a subtler version: Socrates recognises that he does not know what he does not know, unlike those who mistake confidence for knowledge.

AUTHENTICATED IN TRANSLATION: "Not life, but a good life, is to be chiefly valued." In *Crito*, survival is not the highest test; the question is whether an action is just.

Questions from the Hall

- What changes when we remember Socrates as a soldier as well as a philosopher?
- Why did he question people instead of giving them lectures?
- Is admitting uncertainty a weakness, or the beginning of wisdom?
- Why did Socrates refuse escape after his conviction?
- Which sayings belong to ancient sources, and which merely sound Socratic?

The final post



By the end, the soldier analogy returns. Socrates had already faced physical danger and political pressure. In prison, he refused to save himself by abandoning the principles he had spent a lifetime defending.

Principal research anchors

Plato, *Apology* - trial speech, examined life, military-post analogy and final reflections.

Plato, *Crito* - the prison dialogue on escape, law and the good life.

Plato, *Symposium* - Alcibiades' portrait of Socrates' appearance, endurance and military conduct.

Xenophon - additional near-contemporary recollections of Socrates.

Aristophanes, *Clouds* - hostile comic evidence for Socrates' public reputation.

Vicarii principle: the closer a saying comes to a famous name, the more carefully the source should be tested.