

The Representation of Athena and the Autochthony Myth in Plato's *Timaeus*

Before articulating its complex theories on the birth of the universe and the genesis of mankind, Plato's *Timaeus* has Critias report a time-honored story according to which an Egyptian priest describes Athena as settling Athens in Greece and Sais in Egypt. A cursory reference is made there to the Athenian autochthony myth wherein Athena brushed off Ephaestus' *sperma* onto the earth/Ge, thus generating the land's first inhabitant, whose rearing Athena supervised. (23e)

To my knowledge, scholars have not drawn any connections between the representation of Athena in the *Timaeus* and the autochthony myth, on the one hand, and Timaeus' later cosmogonic treatments, on the other. No correlation has in fact been established with the εἰκὼς μῦθος (the likely *muthos*) of the demiurge, the divine architect of the *kosmos*, or the cosmological processes regulated by the interactions of the triad intellect/Being, necessity/Becoming, and space/χώρα. These newer formulations as found in Timaeus' discourse have been thought of as incompatible with and superseding any previous articulations.

This paper attempts to correct this view by positing that the portrayal of Athena and the Athenian autochthony myth in Critias' story are carefully designed to be compared to Timaeus' subsequent developments. While Plato may well be calling for a radical revision of traditional conceptions in order to elevate Timaeus' new cosmology, he needs to deploy approximate concepts in order to ease his audience's process of redefinition. None of these notions, though imperfect, are to be completely dismissed but help to move forward the philosophical discussion. Such position has the advantage of vindicating the *Timaeus* as an organic continuum and a well-conceived whole.

The representation of Athena is a case in point. Her figure is made to approximate and prepare for that of the demiurge even though she is only responsible for a localized anthropogony, not a cosmogony. First, the goddess selects a site for Athens apt to bear men most closely resembling her (24d), which matches the demiurge's desire to produce a creation that is as close to him as possible (29e). Second, the lexical insistence on Athenas's engagement in an operation of *diakosmesis* when founding Athens and Sais (23e2, 24c4, 24c5) prefigures the order (*diakosmeo*) the demiurge is said to bring about to the All (69c-d) and the heaven (37d5). Third, Athena inherits the *sperma* from Ge and Hephaestus; similarly, the demiurge has to work with *spermata*, the elements fire, air and water (56b), whereas the lesser gods created by him and tasked to fashion mankind are handed the divine *sperma* to embody in men's head (73c-d).

As far as the full autochthony myth is concerned, the Athena-Hephaestus-Ge trinity works well as a provisional yet recognizable canvas for Athenians to reflect on the new tripecta intellect-necessity-chora. Impenetrable expressions that have long vexed scholars, such as the rule of intellect over necessity by means of persuasion in the formation of the universe (48a), make sense from an Athenian perspective if one associates intellect with Athena, the champion of democratic persuasion in Athens (*Eum.* 970-2).

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