

Strange, Ancient, Esoteric, and Indeterminate, but True:  
Plato and Egyptian Mythology

Plato is now universally acknowledged to have made significant use of myth in his philosophy, and he demonstrates the importance of Egyptian influence on Greek culture and his own philosophy in many instances. In particular, in the story of Theuth and Thamus in the *Phaedrus*, and in the account of Atlantis in *Timaeus* and *Critias*, Plato incorporates Egyptian myth and adapts it to serve his philosophical purposes. As with every other occurrence, he never simply integrates a myth in its traditional received form, but rather, embellishes, alters, or even fabricates them entirely. If, then, he was so willing to alter mythical accounts—even to the point of complete invention—why does he feel the need to include myths from Egypt? This essay investigates why Plato uses Egyptian myth in his writings, how this practice fits into his philosophical program, and whether this usage is consistent with his use of myth elsewhere. I argue that these questions are interrelated, and that their interrelatedness is itself revealing. The way Plato intervenes in the long-standing historical, cultural, and mythical connections between Greece and Egypt both exemplifies his use of myth throughout his philosophy and allows him to advance his philosophy in a way that relying on Greek and fabricated myth exclusively do not.

Egypt exerted a tremendous influence on every aspect of Greek culture, including myth, art, architecture, language, law, and politics, and especially in terms of its perception as a source of wisdom. It is into this flow of cultural transference that Plato's philosophy enters. Much has been written on the *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus-Critias*, but there has yet to be a study that looks at the myths of Theuth and Atlantis in conjunction with their Egypt-ness in mind, and which explores the significance of Plato of incorporating them into his writing. I discern four essential ways in which the Egypt-ness of these myths are significant, all of which either constitute a

difference in the way he uses myth, or exploit a more standard usage to a greater extent than would be otherwise available. First, the aura of Egypt conveys a sense of authority that surpasses Greek myths, especially in terms of its perceived superiority of wisdom. Secondly, he invokes the perceived antiquity and stability of Egyptian tradition. Thirdly, Egypt embodied a fascinating strangeness—an otherness—that Plato utilizes to achieve a detachment from the familiar. And fourthly, despite its perception of stability, Egyptian myth actually tended to be more amorphous and obscure, which allows Plato to exercise to a greater extent his tendency to manipulate traditional myths or to invent freely. Not only do these aspects of Egyptian myth inform our understanding of the *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus-Critias*, but they also work synergistically in a significant way when the myths of Theuth and Atlantis are juxtaposed.

Plato was an eminently successful mythographer, and myth plays a critical role throughout his philosophy. However, there is ultimately something lacking in the voluminous efforts in recent years to explicate why and how he uses myth in his writing. This critical deficiency reflects back on Plato's very foundational reasons and methods for merging, opposing, blending, and blurring the distinction between *μῦθος* and *λόγος* in the first place. The rational discourse of scholarship will never be able to completely pierce the veil of how myth functions because it encompasses inexpressible, ephemeral, and uncapturable nuances that nonetheless evoke visceral feelings and primal imagery. Plato essentially uses myths because they contain elements he ascribes to the divine realm of forms, and they keep us psychagogically pointed in that transcendent direction. All of these elements come to the forefront with Plato's Egyptian myths, and my emphasis on cultural authority, the perceived tendency toward stabilization, the strangeness and otherness, and their aspects of amorphousness and obscurity help to elucidate not only these particular myths, but also his use of myth in general.

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