

The Mythological & Ritualistic Background of Plato's Timaeus

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In the traditional canon of the West Plato's *magnus opus* on cosmology, *Timaeus*, stands in a pre-eminent place. The fact that modern scholars attribute to this work "more intellectual evil than any text except the Revelation of John" is an indication of its significance to traditional ideas in Western civilization; it was pivotal to the premodern world-view. In medieval Christendom it was received as an inspired commentary on the Book of Genesis and regarded as all but scripture. In profane terms, it has the distinction of having been in continuous publication for nearly 2400 years and the wealth of its ideas still manages to excite some scientific minds beyond merely historical interest. By reputation it is a deeply esoteric text, placed by the Neoplatonists at the centre of the Platonic corpus and regarded by them as the key to the divine Plato. The whole Platonic tradition has been nurtured on its teachings. The purpose of this present exposition is to introduce readers to aspects of this seminal text that usually escape attention and yet are vital for appreciating the depth of the wellsprings from which Plato has drawn his doctrines. Modern commentaries are little use in this regard. Typically, they situate the Platonic cosmology as a "reaction" to the trend-setting Ionian physiologists who are routinely championed as ancient forerunners to modern science. What readers who seek the traditional Plato require, on the other hand, is an understanding based on the traditional spiritual background of his times. It is a singular mistake to import a secular sensibility into Plato and to divorce him from the spiritual atmosphere of his day. Rather Plato's writings - in which, according to the famous Seventh Letter, he never revealed his full doctrine, it should always be remembered - need to be considered in the context of the living Greek spiritual tradition in which Plato was born and in which he participated throughout his life. This is nowhere more evident than in the *Timaeus* which otherwise remains opaque and mysterious in many parts.

The central agent of the Platonic cosmology is the craftsman creator god, the Demiurge. Of this character the modern commentators have little that is penetrating to say. A type of orthodoxy was established by Solmsen who argued that the Demiurge is a conception unique to Plato and, in the final analysis, one of Plato's most stunningly original contributions to the history of ideas. But when we remember that Plato was not, as a lot of twentieth century scholarship seemed to think, an Oxford don, or a "speculative philosopher" in the modern mold, but a pious Athenian pagan of noble birth, the source of his conception of the Demiurge becomes obvious: it has been modelled on the mythological figure of Hephaestus, the blacksmith/craftsman god of the Athenian religion whose cultus was celebrated on the Acropolis. The identification is most evident in passages where the Platonic craftsman god "forges" aspects of the cosmos in his "workshop" and where Plato resorts to the language of metallurgy to describe his Demiurge's activities. The long monologue on creation by *Timaeus* of Locri is replete with the language of crafts, but above all of those of the crafts of fire, Hephaestus being

the fire god among Olympians. The religious and mythological background to the *Timaeus* is signalled in the early sections of the dialogue and in its companion dialogue, the *Critias*. Hephaistus is mentioned by name, along with Athene and Gaia. These are the tutelary deities of Athens whose rites and mysteries were celebrated on the Acropolis and in the broader cult of the Attic region. As an Athenian, a son of the Attic soil, they are Plato's own gods. Solmsen and others only ever consider Plato among philosophers, and among philosophers they can find no forerunner to Plato's Demiurge. It is only when we appreciate Plato in his full native context that the model becomes obvious. This in turn illuminates the mythology of Hephaistus. The Platonic Demiurge recasts the Olympian fire god so that we must understand his mythology in cosmogonic and cosmological terms. Thus his crafting of the extraordinary Shield of Achilles in Homer's *Iliad* must be understood as an act of cosmogony, and his binding together of Aphrodite and Ares, Love and Strife, in the *Odyssey*, must similarly be seen as a cosmological symbolism. In over 2000 years of voluminous commentary on the *Timaeus* only the Neoplatonists seem to have appreciated this.

But the specific aspect of Hephaestian mythology upon which Plato draws in the *Timaeus* is the Athenian/Attic cultus which the god shares with Athene and Gaia. The setting of the work is a visitation to Athens by an illustrious Pythagorean from Southern Italy on the Panathenaea, the great festival of Athene, the most sacred festival in the Athenian calendar and, consequently, the occasion of the most hallowed rites in the temples of the Acropolis. This is the real key to understanding the *Timaeus*: its full context is that, as the Pythagorean speaks, giving his account of creation, the Panatheanea, great New Year and birth festival of the Athenians, along with its mysterious rituals, is being celebrated throughout the city and in particular in the Temples of the Acropolis. The intent of the work then becomes clear. It is a philosophical - or more explicitly, Pythagorean - exposition of the inner dimensions of the Attic religion, its secrets and mysteries. It becomes plain that Plato has brought his Pythagorean speaker to Athens to reveal certain inner aspects of the festival on which he discourses to Socrates and others. From what else we know of Plato's life - he was the greatest mind of a disgruntled generation of aristocrats who went into self-exile after the execution of Socrates - it is fair to assume that he was unhappy about the spiritual and civil decline of his times and so imports a Pythagorean to newly inform the Athenians of the deeper meanings of their own feasts and rites. But it would be wrong to regard Plato as in any way a radical reformer. His purpose is to rectify. According to traditional accounts, during his self-exile he visited Egypt, Southern Italy and other strongholds of traditional wisdom. In the *Timaeus* he brings these old contacts to Athens on the occasion of the cities' most sacred rites. The portrait of the Demiurge is not in any way a bold new innovation in the history of ideas: it is a development - in the mode of the philosopher-poets - of the Hephaestian mythologem in its fullness - a drawing out, not a new departure. Plato proposes returning to the roots of the Athenian religion in order to revivify it in the intellectual idiom of his day. It is important to recall that, despite the drama of the trial and death of Socrates, all the evidence tells us that Plato remained a patriotic, pious Athenian to the end of his life, and it is well to remember that his Academy had no resemblance to a modern, secular university, but was a registered thiasos, officially integrated into the state religion of the city, was situated in an olive grove sacred to Athene herself and conducted rites and

sacrifices according to tradition and law. The Platonic enterprise was to articulate the Greek tradition in and to the times, a deeply traditional and conservative endeavour, not to subvert or overthrow it with innovations.

The particular mythology and religious cult that Plato wants his visiting Pythagorean to illuminate with a renewed profundity is the autochthony cult to which the Athenians and the people of Attica laid claim. The Athenian boast was that they, of all Greeks, were children of the Attic soil, natives, aboriginal in the fullest sense, born from the soil of the land just like the plants and the trees. In Plato's time, in the context of Athenian merchantile colonialism, this boast carried the extra implication that other Greeks should submit to Athenian authority and power. That Plato has a Magna Grecian from "well-governed Locri" in Athens to discourse on the true or inner meanings of the Athenian's own festival is, then, counter-colonial. Plato is concerned to refill the forms of the Athenian religion with understandings from the periphery of the Greek world, in contrast to the exploitation and subsequent emptying of those forms into a purely exoteric, imperialist ideology. Athene and Poseidon (the other deity whose rites were celebrated on the Acropolis) were Air and Water deities respectively, and had become emblematic of Athenian naval might, the wind and waves that carry Athenian merchandise afar. During the procession that accompanied the Panatheneia the citizens of Athens hauled a ship draped in a woven peplos as a sail around the streets of the city and up the steep slopes of the Acropolis to the Temples of the cities' gods. In Plato's Athens, this represented the twin powers of Athene and Poseidon, the cloth of the weaving goddess, the ship of the sea god, who championed the cities' empire through unmatched naval strength. Timaeus of Western Locri, a small Greek outpost on the foot of the Italian peninsula, is in Athens on the Panatheneia to tell his hosts that the rites and symbols of the festival are about something far more profound. In particular, the boast of autochthony has a deeper, spiritual and cosmological dimension beyond being merely a device of ethnic chauvanism. Autochthony is the subject of the most sacrosanct secrets of the Acropolis cult and it is Plato's purpose to restore understandings of its deepest and therefore most universal significance.

The great secret of the Acropolis cult has been preserved by the Church Fathers in their assault on pagan religion. Despite every claim to her virginity, they tell us, the goddess Athene had in fact secretly been the bride of Hephaistus, and she had had a son by the fire god, the solar serpent-child Erechtheus, ancestor of the Athenians, in whose honour Athenian children were given a golden, serpentine necklace at birth. The fact of Athene's motherhood, however, was only known to the priests and priestesses of the cultus and was otherwise covered over by a story that made Athene not the mother but the foster-mother of the solar child. In this story, the amorous fire god accosts the virgin goddess who successfully repels him but not before the god ejaculates his fiery seed upon her leg. Athene then wipes the semen with a tuft of wool and, throwing it to the earth, impregnates the earth-goddess Gaia. It is then Gaia who gives birth to the solar child - who therefore is autochthonous, born from the soil - and Athene, victorious in her virginity, adopts and nurtures the son as his foster-mother. It is a myth of surrogate motherhood. The Athenians habitually regarded themselves as earthborn and Athene as their foster-mother and patroness, but this Athenian patriotic mythology was centred on

the ambivalence of surrogacy and on hiding the "secret motherhood" of supposedly virgin Athene. The Roman Vesta cult was a duplication of the Acropolis fire cult but while in the Roman derivative we find a virgin priesthood, in Athens the virgin goddess Athene was attended by married priestesses, guardians of the virgin's "secret". Various aspects of the rituals of the Acropolis enacted or symbolically alluded to this "secret". In essence, all of this is a variation on the primeval Sky-fire-god's nuptial with the Earth mother, with Athene as an air and cloud goddess - thus the tufts of wool - distributing the Sky-god's seed. We see here the most primitive motifs of Attic agricultural mythology. A yet more basic configuration is simply Sun-Moon-Earth, with the Sun as the fire god, Gaia the Earth goddess and Athene the dual-natured moon goddess who rules over the winds and rains.

This mythology is transposed into a philosophical elemental cosmology in Timaeus of Locri's exposition on the Panatheneia. The mode of transposition is plain. The citizens of Athens, we are told, are the children of Hephaistus and Gaia. In Timaeus' contribution to the "feast of discourse" - it is actually his purpose to bring the first human beings into creation as part of an ensemble of speeches with epic scope - this becomes the doctrine that Fire and Earth are the primeval elements.

Now that which is created is of necessity corporeal, and also visible and tangible. And nothing is visible where there is no fire, or tangible which has no solidity, and nothing is solid without earth. Wherefore also the God in the beginning of creation made the body of the universe to consist of fire and earth.

In the Athenian mythology Hephaestus and Gaia are the primeval parents. Timaeus then informs his Athenian listeners that Fire and Earth are the primeval constituents of creation in a direct parallel. But he then explains that there must be a middle term between these two poles, and for structural, mathematical reasons, this third term must itself be dual in nature:

But two things cannot be rightly put together without a third; there must be some bond of union between them. And the fairest bond is that which makes the most complete fusion of itself and the things which it combines; and proportion is best adapted to effect such a union. For whenever in any three numbers, whether cube or square, there is a mean, which is to the last term what the first term is to it; and again, when the mean is to the first term as the last term is to the mean--then the mean becoming first and last, and the first and last both becoming means, they will all of them of necessity come to be the same, and having become the same with one another will be all one. If the universal frame had been created a surface only and having no depth, a single mean would have sufficed to bind together itself and the other terms; but now, as the world must be solid, and solid bodies are always compacted not by one mean but by two, God placed water and air in the mean between fire and earth, and made them to have the same proportion so far as was possible (as fire is to air so is air to water, and as air is to water so is water to earth); and thus he bound and put together a visible and tangible heaven.

Thus Timaeus gives us the classical and ancient arrangement of the four elements, arranged in order of rarity to density: fire, air, water, earth. To Athenian ears, already alert to the Hephaestus/Gaia = Fire/Earth equation, the further identification of Air and Water as Athene and Poseidon is obvious, if not explicit, and just as obvious that the remarkably masculine character of their goddess, like the dark and light of the moon, is a manifestation of the same duality of the middle term. Timaeus' exposition of the elements then becomes an illumination of the inner dimensions of what this pious, Athenian mythology is actually about; its true content is a sacred understanding of the origins and nature of the cosmos, from its metaphysical roots to its most basic physical components. Moreover, the four element theory characteristic of the Sicilian and Southern Italian philosophers and the doctrines of proportions enunciated by the Pythagorean sages of those regions is revealed as only another way of describing those things which the rites of the Acropolis enact in ritual and myth. In the "feast of discourse" the Athenians contribute myth and legend and pious gestures: the Locrian brings philosophical illumination to this. This is how the teachings of the Timaeus should be understood, namely against a mythological and ritualistic background much of which is only alluded to in the text. But the more we understand of this mythological and ritualistic background the more the cosmology of Timaeus is itself illuminated to modern readers.

An example of this is Timaeus' description of the mysterious "Receptacle of Becoming" which the speaker himself admits is difficult to describe and which readers invariably find opaque and confounding. Timaeus has several attempts at defining this "Receptacle", employing numerous analogies, none of which seem particularly illuminating. The Receptacle is compared to a mother, firstly, but then to a nurse, and then, on a completely different tack, to the metal gold. Modern commentators will explain that Plato was himself confused about this, since these analogies seem arbitrary and contradictory, as if the author is struggling with an idea that is only half formed. But the source and also the coherence of this conception becomes evident when the text is considered in its Athenian, mythological context. While the Demiurge is modelled on Hephaestus, the perfectly passive Receptacle is analogous to Gea, and we suddenly recognize in Timaeus' descriptions of the Receptacle allusions to her cult and mythos. She is the passive, maternal womb that receives the divine seed, who gives birth to the children of the soil and thereafter nurtures them on her bounty. The interplay of mother-nurse is the cultic ambiguity of Gea-Athene in surrogate motherhood. In a parallel use of symbols, Timaeus at one point describes the human brain as ploughland surrounded by a stone fence (the skull) in which the Demiurge sows divine, celestial seeds. The source of the gold analogy applied to the Receptacle also becomes clear: it is to be understood as an emblem of autochthony, for the autochthons are Hesiod's Golden Race, as Plato tells us in the Republic, and metallic gold is the solar seeds of the Golden Race slowly incubating in the womb of the Earth. The background to these otherwise odd aspects of Timaeus' exposition is again the Athenian autochthony cult. This is also the key to understanding Timaeus' descriptions of human anatomy and physiology that, in fact, occupy the larger part of the text. One must remember that it is the primordial autochthon that he is describing, the original plant-man and solar child, Erectheus. This is why, for instance, Timaeus gives no account of the reproductive system until the very end, at which point the genitals are added to the primal man as a type of afterthought and as a consequence of

generational decay. The original man was not yet touched by animal reproduction but was autochthonous, born directly from the soil (the Receptable) from golden seeds in the manner of vegetation. In this respect it must be understood that Timaeus is not describing an actual but an archetypal anatomy and, in this, anatomical analogies with such things as a "winnowing basket" - a cult object in the Attic Mysteries - provide the relevant clues. It is in these sections of the text that we find Timaeus comparing the human form to an upside down tree. Such an analogy only makes sense in the context of the cult of the primal plant-man. Timaeus draws out, in a philosophical mode, a body of cosmological science that describes the inner dimensions of the Athenian/Attic manifestation of Greek religion.

Finally, a further and still more crucial thing to realise about this aspect of the Timaeus monologue - which in literary terms is deeply sonorous and incantatory in places - is that it is being recited on the Athenian New Year and is itself a ritual invocation of a new cosmic order. In traditional reckonings, where the year is a symbol of the All, the New Year is the day of creation, and thus it is the appropriate occasion for a dissertation such as the Locrian's. But in the plan of speeches set forward for us, it is his task to speak first and to bring the cosmos into creation "by his words, so to speak" and from the cosmos bring forth the primeval citizens of Socrates' ideal state, namely an idealized, antedeluvian Athens, which citizens will populate the speeches later in the programme. Timaeus is not just to describe the creation, his words are to bring the creation into being. This is an age-old, shamanic pattern; in the rites of the New Year the speaker calls or sings the cosmos into creation, being Demiurge to his own tale. The New Year is to the solar cycle what the Day of Creation is to the cosmic cycle. Speaking on the New Year, Timaeus is to call the primordial humans into being just as the Demiurge had done on the day of Creation. This, of course, introduces resonant parallelisms that remove the Timaeus from the status of just an ordinary text as author and god are assimilated into the same function and creation and text become parallel, as Timaeus himself hints when he describes the atomic level of his cosmos by analogy with letters and syllables. It will be found, in fact, that the text itself is isomorphic to the proportions of the human form, as the French scholar Reme Braque discovered, and so is, literally, an embodiment of the very things it describes. In these ways the Timaeus behaves very much as a sacred text in the fullest sense - having a microcosmic completeness and adequacy - which indeed it is, but to a religion that is now defunct. The Locrian's purpose was nevertheless to revivify universal meanings beyond the particulars of the Athenian predicament and consequently the text's array of symbols is so primordial and fundamental that it has remained an unsurpassed account of traditional cosmological doctrines. To understand those doctrines we merely need to appreciate its proper mythological and ritualistic background.