

Doxa and Dokimasia: The Persuasiveness of Civic Myth in Plato's Timaeus and Critias

This paper argues that, in a manner consistent with epistemological categories as established in the *Republic*, Plato employs the Atlantis myth in the *Timaeus* and *Critias* to persuade his audience to believe his philosophically-informed civic tales in order that they may then progress to the instruction of philosophy as presented in by Timaeus' cosmogony and, finally, to reason.

Studies of Plato's myths concerning Athens and Atlantis in the *Timaeus* and *Critias* often are constrained by the idea that of all the myths in the Platonic corpus, these were constructed around some kernel of historical 'truth'. Accordingly, the details of the ancient Athenian and Atlantean cities often are not treated as philosophically informed and the cities' deeds are considered as parodic, ironic and even ambiguous pastiches of the *topoi* regularly found in the funeral orations and histories of 5th or 4th century Athens. When ideological readings of the myths are offered, the interpretations regularly juxtapose the civilizations of ancient Athens and Atlantis and measure them against representations of Athens, Persia and Sparta in the historical and rhetorical genres, as well as the ideal societies Plato constructs in the *Republic*, *Statesman* and *Laws*. But such interpretations rarely consider the connections the Athens/Atlantis myths may have to the comprehensive cosmogonic account in the *Timaeus* itself; hence the critical desideratum the present study seeks to fill.

In the *Republic* Plato's Socrates maintains the epistemological primacy of reason over belief or opinion, *doxa*, since reason arises from the perception of truth and being while observation of the physical world produces only shifting beliefs (508d4-9), but reason cannot be reached without passing first through the stages of belief and understanding (511e). The same sentiments are echoed in the *Timaeus*, in which the eponymous character explains that true being

can be contemplated by reason alone, while the physical world which becomes and passes away again is grasped by belief together with sense perception (52a1-7). Additionally, reason is obtained by instruction whereas belief derives from persuasion (51d3-e4), yet persuasion is key to the audience's ability eventually to reach reason: Plato must persuade the audience to believe not only his novel myths of an ancient Athens quite alien to any representation of that polis known to them, but also of an enemy neither Persian nor Spartan but of an as yet unknown race, the Atlanteans. Only when the audience accepts these myths and the philosophical concepts implicit within them will they be prepared to recognize the same concepts in Timaeus' cosmogony and therefore to accept the proper instruction of not myth but philosophy.

In order to accomplish this feat, Plato employs a device customary in Athenian legal procedure: the *dokimasia*. In Athens, both ephebes and prospective magistrates submitted themselves to this procedure of examination before the courts and Council of 500 in order that proof of their citizenship, age, rank, military service and lack of *atimia* could be established firmly both officially and in the opinion of the citizen body; the term *dokimasia* indeed is etymologically related to *doxa*. Plato secures the belief of the audience by weaving the language of *doxa* throughout the mythic summary as well as by subjecting the narrators of the Athens/Atlantis myths—whether Critias, Solon, or the Egyptian priest—to the strict civic and religious criteria required by the legal procedure. Each narrator of the account and thus the account itself is represented as credible and therefore superior to the poetic tradition, which already has been denigrated by Socrates as too inadequate to supply civic myths (*Tim.*19c8-e2); hence the need for these previously unknown ones. Whereas *doxa* as belief or opinion can change—for example, when a person is persuaded to reject one kind of myth and believe another—reason cannot be overcome by persuasion (*Tim.*51e4). In this epistemological system,

doxa becomes the only medium by which the philosophically uninitiated may be transformed into philosophers, for unlike eternal reason, *doxa* allows for change. This quality explains Plato's concern to establish a pattern of belief connecting the myths to the discourse (or *logos*) of Timaeus: the cues to interpret the myths in conjunction with the *logos* suggest that the myths are truly credible only with reference to the ontology of the philosopher's discourse, while at the same time the myth persuades the audience to sample the instruction of philosophy. From this *logos* they will learn to abandon myth altogether in favor of reason. Finally, Critias' proclamation that both myths and ontology will be subjected to examination is situated at the text's structural transition between his mythic summary and Timaeus' cosmogony, affirming the myths' crucial persuasive position on the path to reason.