‘It is mostly around the Timaeus that the issue of the value of Platonic myth is raised’. The claim, crude as it may appear, does at least highlight the importance of the dialogue’s cosmological questions: are we talking about myth in the sense of ‘fiction’? If so, an extreme interpretation, by and large denying the Platonic myth any truly philosophical value, would result in the bewildering conclusion that the explanation of the universe in the Timaeus is by no means Platonic per se, while more moderate and recent readings should eventually succeed in unravelling what is metaphoric and what is not, or even in ‘reading through the metaphor’. Are we dealing with a discourse that is chiefly narrative, albeit not fictional, and that should mostly be interpreted literally? In that case the divine craftsman’s fashioning of a world ‘born’ or ‘become’ would be part and parcel of Plato’s philosophy; but then one knotty task would still remain to be addressed: reducing those apparent inconsistencies in the text that are pointed out by the advocates of the opposite interpretation. Our purpose in this paper is not to re-open the whole thorny case, but to examine the Timaeus’ muthos from two different angles, both revealing its singularity: first, what makes it stand out among other Platonic myths, i.e. the well-known eikôs muthos qualification; next, because it relates to the world as mimêma, it is of all other Platonic myths the one most directly and overtly dedicated to an image, an ‘eikôn’...
promoted to ‘sensible God’ status (92c7); the cross-examination of both angles leading us to discuss the relationship of eikôs muthos to the issue of likeness and mimesis.

1. Eikôn, Eikos, Muthos

Admittedly, the dialogue gives the myth a ‘head’ (69b1–2), but it also veils it; indeed, the interpretation difficulties concerning the status of cosmology are to be analysed within a broader context where the logos-muthos boundaries are remarkably blurred. For the Timaeus, even as it provides hermeneutics with an enigmatic, savoury meta-discursive richness, embeds the myth—or rather a series of myths—in a mise en abyme and specular game.⁵ The former (partly presented as embedded true logoi, not muthoi) is quite obvious: Critias’ narrative to Socrates at the beginning of the dialogue is presented as an extended version of his earlier⁶ ‘narrative’ (logos, 20d1), in which he recounted Solon’s ‘logos’ (as told by Critias the Elder), which ‘though strange (atopos), is entirely true’. (20d7–8)⁷ However, over and above the mise en abyme expressing the myth’s irrational ingredient as well as its sacredness and immemorialness, there appears a specular game in which the embedded discourses endlessly reflect the mythhood itself.

Indeed, within Critias’ narrative, the myth category applies first to (a) what the Greeks consider their ‘most venerable’ stories, e.g. the first man and the Deluge, told by Solon to the Egyptian priests (22a4–b3), one of whom derides them as children’s myths (23b5).⁸ The allegedly historical knowledge is dissolved in myth because of the Greeks’ childish lack of memory of their own origins. Here, ‘muthos’, as is the case of Phaethon’s chariot in 22c7–d1, stands in sharp contrast to ‘truth’. Which is definitely not the case of (b) the atopic story of the origins of Athens and its war against Atlantis, indeed presented by Critias as an ‘entirely true’ logos (20d7–8), and after him by Socrates as ‘genuine history’ (alêthinon logon) as opposed to ‘fabricated’

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⁵ More generally speaking, a relation between myth and game can famously be read in Tim. 59c5–d2.
⁶ The previous day (20c6–d1; 26a7–b2); and in the morning (26c3–7).
⁷ Cornford’s translation (1952 [1937]) hereafter, and except when explicitly noted my reference translation of Timaeus.
⁸ πατίδων (...) μυθών.