



The Skeptics SA guide to Atlantis

Atlantis, a mythical island, is claimed to have existed in the Atlantic Ocean, and, according to different versions of the story, was either close to, or far to the west of, the Pillars of Hercules (Straits of Gibraltar). However, the truth appears to be that the entire myth was created by Plato about 350 BCE when he described the island in two of his dialogues, *Timaius* and *Kritias*.

The Atlantean story that Plato told was concerned with the visit of Solon, the great Athenian lawgiver, (circa 630 – 560 BCE), to Egypt. According to Plato's story, Solon was criticized by an Egyptian priest of the city of Saïs (in the West Nile delta), about his lack of knowledge concerning the ancient history of Athens.

He was told by the priest that some 9000 years before, Athens had fought a great war with Atlantis, a great island located in the Atlantic Ocean that was larger than both Libya and Asia. The priest explained how, after the Creation the Greek gods divided Earth amongst themselves, and Atlantis had been granted to Poseidon, who blessed and protected the island.

By the mortal Kleito Poseidon had ten sons, all wise and beneficent demi-gods, the eldest of whom was Atlas. Poseidon divided the land

into a hereditary coalition of ten separate kingdoms, each ruled by one son.

Atlantis was described as a rich, fertile land, populated by dignified, refined, beautiful, highly intelligent people, with an advanced culture, who resided in magnificent buildings. The principal city was circular, some 24 kilometres in diameter, with a great canal through the centre. Strangely enough, although the city had been built during the Golden Age, a time when all races lived in harmony, it was surrounded by a huge defensive wall, with a huge circular fortress, some 4.8 kilometres across, located in the centre. One can better understand this description of such a heavily defended city when one realizes that Plato obviously modelled this mythical city upon Greek cities that he knew, where such defences were standard.

Yet, according to Plato, despite their wealth and wisdom, the Atlanteans had gradually succumbed to human weaknesses, becoming increasingly more selfish, dishonest and warlike. A major sea power, they built a huge fleet and assembled the greatest army ever known in order to attack and conquer all of Northern Africa as far as Egypt, and those parts of Europe that are now Spain, Portugal, France and

Italy as well as many other parts of Europe and Africa until finally, the Athenians and their allies defeated them.

Even worse, according to Plato, the Atlanteans became increasingly impious, neglecting the worship of their gods. As a result of this, Zeus summoned a meeting of the gods and it was agreed that he, and Poseidon, should destroy Atlantis.

According to the Egyptian priests this destruction had occurred in about 9600 BCE, when,

“There occurred violent earthquakes and floods, and in a single day and night of misfortune, all your warlike men in a body sank into the earth and the island of Atlantis in like manner disappeared in the depths of the sea.”

For some 2000 years Plato's stories about Atlantis were almost completely forgotten but interest in Atlantis was revived after the discovery of America. Europeans found many similarities between Indian beliefs and their own. They had similar social patterns, religious beliefs, and most importantly, pyramids and a written language. Certain 'experts', like Augustus Le Plongeon (1826-1908), even claimed that Mayan and Egyptian hieroglyphs were very similar. To explain these similari-

ties a theory evolved claiming that the styles of architecture and writing in East and West had evolved from a common source: Atlantis.

It was explained that a few Atlanteans had survived the inundation and had travelled east and west, taking their advanced knowledge with them. The primitive cultures into which they had settled received an enormous technological boost, propelling them into civilized cultures. Of course, such a claim would of itself totally invalidate Plato's story since he described the Athenians as having been an advanced culture, since they had fought Atlantis on equal terms before the island was destroyed.

The greatest influence on the theory of Atlanteans spreading civilization was Ignatius Donnelly (1831 – 1901), a Philadelphian lawyer, who published his book, *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*, in 1882. He reinforced the idea that the Atlanteans had been the first to discover agriculture, writing, astronomy, art, and other advanced skills and that a few surviving Atlanteans had planted this knowledge amongst other undeveloped races.

Despite the fact that Donnelly's book was pure speculation and full of spurious claims, at the time it was printed no one could disprove his claims. The book was tremendously popular and continued to be printed through to the 20th century. Since that time thousands of books have been printed on Atlantis, and so entrenched is the belief in Atlantis that it has been found that four out of five students commencing studies in archaeology actually be-

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lieve that Atlantis was a real place!

So what are the real facts? Well, it appears that the stories Plato told about Atlantis were a complete myth. That Atlantis was a myth was acknowledged by people close to Plato. Even Aristotle, a former student of Plato, insisted that Atlantis was completely fictional.

A clue that Plato made up the story is revealed in the story itself; one must ask why, given that the Egyptians had their own deities and elaborate creation stories, an Egyptian priest would narrate to Solon the Greek version of creation? It would be rather like asking a Jew or a Christian to explain how the universe was created and having them recount the Greek version of creation instead of the Judeaean-Christian version found in the Bible.

What about the claims that Plato based his stories upon earlier factual historical material? The fact is that there were no references to Atlantis before Plato. Some claim that Herodotus mentioned Atlantis in his Histories, 4.184.1 (circa 484 BCE) but this is incorrect. Herodotus' references were not to an island but to Mount Atlas, which he located at the westernmost part of Africa, a place he believed to be the western edge of the world. Mount Atlas, he claimed, was "a peak so high that its top was never seen", inhabited by the "Atlantes" a race who "eat no living creature, and see no dreams in their sleep." In many ways Herodotus was notoriously unreliable as a reporter; he tended to include the most fantastic traveller's tales as being factual events. Nevertheless he was on more substantial ground as a historian, and in

this respect he did mention certain information that was in his time, common knowledge, and some of these tend to cast serious doubt on the claims made by Plato concerning Atlantis. For instance, Herodotus mentioned that:

- although Plato described Atlantis as a huge island, Herodotus stated that Sardinia was the largest known island in the world
- the greatest danger Athens had ever faced was from the Persians at the Battle of Marathon in 480 BCE
- King Minos of Knossos had created the earliest sea power known in the Mediterranean.

The claims that Atlantis was the source of early civilization in America, Egypt, and Mesopotamia were based upon dubious 18 – 19th century pseudo-scientific nonsense. Archaeology, anthropology and linguistics were still so primitive that so-called experts could make the most absurd claims without fear of being contradicted. Translations were based upon subjective conjecture rather than genuine scholarship, leading to quite incredible conjectures such as those by Le Plongeon, who claimed that the last words spoken by Jesus on the cross were actually Mayan.

In the late 20th century the various claims that the pyramids in America and Egypt and the hieroglyphic characters of the Amerinds and the Egyptians came from a common source were revealed to be completely false. The fact is that each culture evolved independently, and developed their own cultural patterns; however, since the problems faced by all cultures

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tend to be similar, it is not unusual for them to develop similar solutions. Furthermore modern research has shown that even objects such as the pyramids did not simply appear in the form that we are most familiar with, but that in both Egypt and America there were a number of preliminary steps where small mounds were constructed for burials or for religious worship. Over time these grew larger and more permanent until they reached the point of development where they had become huge stone structures.

The mystical nonsense associated with Atlantis has made it very popular with believers in the occult, especially with the 19th century Theosophists and the 20th century New Agers. They have variously credited the Atlanteans with possessing various forms of esoteric knowledge, supernatural powers, the ability to harness energy from crystals and other mysterious sources of forgotten physical and metaphysical energy. Such stories were possibly based upon Plato's descriptions of how the buildings of Atlantis were decorated with precious metals, gemstones, and an unknown substance called oreichalkos (mountain copper), which radiated an everlasting fiery glow.

Atlanteans are very popular with believers in past-lives, many identifying themselves as former Atlantean princes or princesses. Some, like Karl Zschaetsch, identified the Atlanteans as the ancestors of certain noble white European races, "the original Aryans, blond, virtuous vegetarians and teetotallers."¹ Such ideas were popular with certain Nazis, such as Himmler.

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Using a process called 'astral clairvoyance', based on the belief that all events in the past leave a trace in the astral plane, in the Akashic Records, Theosophist W Scott-Elliot explored the 'history' of Atlantis going back more than a million years. He claimed Atlantis had originally been inhabited by the Toltecs (the rulers) and the Rmaohals, a race of 3.6 metre tall black giant slaves. Then, because the Toltecs had become involved with black magic, a gradual deterioration of their character had ensued, leading to their final destruction. Then, some 200,000 years ago some of them had migrated to Egypt, founding the Egyptian civilization and designing the pyramids. Others had visited Britain where they supervised the building of Stonehenge.

Helena Blavatsky, the founder of the Theosophists, identified the Atlanteans as the Fourth Root Race, (the first had been astral jellyfish) the 8.2 metre tall descendants of Lemuria. This claim appears to be loosely based upon Greek mythology in which Atlas and his brothers were described as the Titans, a race of giants, the first beings created by the gods. Blavatsky claimed she had learned about Atlantis and Lemuria from the Akashic Records which had been revealed to her by the Mahatmas, her spirit guides in Tibet, and she claimed that her multi-volumed work, *The Secret Doctrine*, consisted of quotations from the *Book of Dyzan*, a book written in the long-lost Senezar language of Atlantis. However, as was later shown by William Emmette Coleman, an elderly Californian scholar, most of the material had been plagiarized from such books as

HH Wilson's translation of the very ancient Indian, *Vishnu Purana*, and an English translation of the *Hymn of Creation* in the ancient Indian *Rig-Veda*. She had liberally added large amounts of her own total gibberish, such as, "... (the) Universal Mind was not, for there was no Ah-hi to contain it... The Wheel whirled for thirty crores more... The Great Chohans called the Lords of the Moon, of the Airy Bodies."

The American 'Psychic' Edgar Cayce (1877–1945) claimed to have been the heir to the Throne of Atlantis in a previous incarnation. He claimed Atlantis had been a highly advanced civilization with aircraft, submarines and even nuclear energy, and that a secret chamber would be found under the Sphinx containing details and records from Atlantis and that the island would be rediscovered in 1968 or 1969.

Theosophist Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Anthroposophy, claimed that the Atlanteans had incredible memories and mental abilities, with the ability to control elemental 'life-forces', and to extract this energy from plants. They had craft powered by unknown energies that floated above the ground. Like Blavatsky, he too claimed they were the descendants of Lemuria, but unlike the Lemurians they had no telepathic abilities, and so developed the first oral language.²

In 1912 Dr. Paul Schliemann announced in an article, 'How I Discovered Atlantis', that he had inherited from his famous grandfather Heinrich Schliemann, the discoverer of Troy, a quantity of documents and an owl-headed vase

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containing coins made of an alloy of platinum, aluminium and silver. He even claimed when his grandfather was excavating Troy he had discovered a bronze vase, inscribed 'From the King Cronos of Atlantis'.

The fact is, the physical structure of the floor of the Atlantic Ocean has been extensively mapped and this modern evidence clearly reveals that no island as large as Atlantis could ever have existed in the Atlantic!

The ocean was formed over hundreds of millions of years when the super-continent, Gondwanaland broke apart. As 'America' moved 'westward' and 'Europe and Africa' moved 'eastward' on their tectonic plates, lava filled the ever-widening gap, leaving a relatively 'smooth' ocean floor. The few Atlantic island groups, such as the Azores, claimed by some to be the tops of Atlantean mountains, are the peaks of relatively small sub-marine volcanoes, which have arisen in, geologically speaking, relatively recent times.

A map published by Donnelly shows huge underwater ridges connecting the legendary island with South America, and Africa, yet the modern surveys show no evidence of these ridges; it appears that they exist only in the imagination of Donnelly.

Many Atlantis 'experts' have tried to overcome such problems by suggesting alternative locations for Atlantis such as Algiers, Antarctica, America, Bimini (Bermuda), in a lake in the high plains of Bolivia, the Canary Islands, the Celtic Sea off Cornwall, Haig Fras near the Scilly Isles, southern Sweden, Tartes-

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sos, the Sahara, and West Africa. Locations in the Mediterranean basin include Troy, the drowned city of Eliko (Helike) on the southern coast of the Gulf of Corinth, the islands of Thera and Therasia (now known as Santorini), or lying in 1.6 km of water off the southern tip of Cyprus. They all fail to meet at least some of the necessary criteria.

While Plato was quite clear that Atlantis was located in the Atlantic Ocean, of the date of its destruction, and the size of the island, it is important to understand that ancient writers were not true historians and were much given to manipulating facts to improve the story. Thus the Greeks were much given to setting stories in mysterious far-off locations, such as Hyperborea, or in the Atlantic Ocean, which to people in that age was as far away as it was possible to imagine.

Most of the previously mentioned recent alternative locations for Atlantis can be quickly disregarded since they are either in areas unknown to Plato, or they represent the wishful thinking of people with fanciful theories who are seeking to prove what is simply a myth.

However, this is not to say that Plato did not use material that would have been common knowledge in his time. The Greeks knew of islands being destroyed by volcanic eruptions or earthquake and submersion: these included Thera circa 1628 BCE, and much closer to Plato's time was the city of Eliko, destroyed during his lifetime, circa 373 BCE, when it appears the city sank due to an earthquake and the sea rushed in to cover the land-slip.

Thera may also have contributed to the Atlantis myth. The island and its people were a well-known part of the great Minoan Empire, which had extensive trade routes throughout the Mediterranean, one of their principal customers being the Egyptians.

Thera was obliterated in a huge volcanic explosion that, according to some experts, was probably equal in force to more than 100 hydrogen bombs being detonated simultaneously. The explosion resulted in a huge portion of the island being literally blown into the sky, leaving only a thin rim of land surrounding a crater 13 km wide and 1.5 km deep.

The explosion and the deluge, as the waters of the Mediterranean rushed in to fill this enormous chasm, caused enormous tsunamis that radiated out from the former island, swamping islands throughout the Mediterranean. The ensuing disaster when these waves hit islands such as Crete, then the centre of the Minoan Empire, would have had an enormous impact on their economy. It seems very likely that most of their huge mercantile fleet would have been destroyed at this time, and what is known is that the Minoans' power declined rapidly from that time and, within 50 years they disappeared from history.

Later sailors who sailed to Thera and found a shattered remnant of the former island, and not understanding it had been blown into the air, probably assumed that the missing portion of the island had sunk beneath the waves.

With little comprehension of large numbers, an event that occurred 1300 years before,

would have seemed little different to something that occurred 9000 years before. Without accurate historical records it was simply an event in the distant past. In addition, even though Thera itself was only a small island, it had been part of a huge marine empire that extended throughout most of the Mediterranean, and in the memory of later reports it is likely that the fine distinctions between the sizes of Thera and the Minoan Empire were probably lost. Most Greeks had no real appreciation of the size of the world, or how large the Mediterranean Sea was, so the idea that Thera had been a huge island could have been accepted as valid.

In addition, we now know that much of the Minoan culture was far in advance of their neighbours. They had large, multi-storied houses decorated throughout with beautiful murals, they had hot and cold fountains, and some homes even had running water and even flush toilets. Their lifestyle was so far in advance of the Greeks that they must have seemed to be an exceptionally advanced civilization, just as Plato portrayed the Atlanteans to be.

It seems very likely that the origins of Atlantis are to be found in Plato's personal sense of disillusionment with politics. In his early years he had considered politics as a profession, and was even urged to stand for public office, but in time he became increasingly disillusioned with politics. In particular he saw how the higher principles of humanity were replaced in the struggles for personal power by the worst

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aspects of human behaviour that had led to internal and external warfare.

There appears to be little doubt that Plato devised the stories about the mythical island of Atlantis as a fictional analogy. He was shrewdly warning the citizens of Athens that, just as Atlantis had once been a great and prosperous civilization, the emergence of aggressive warring political factions had started the island on a downward path to destruction.

In similar fashion Athens, which was at the height of its power, was being threatened by disruptive internal political division, and aggressive expansionist policies, so that, unless these problems were rectified urgently, Athens was likely to suffer the same fate as the glorious fictional kingdom of Atlantis.

References

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- 2 Guiley, RE, 1991, 'Atlantis', in *Harper's Encyclopedia of Mystical and Paranormal Experience*, Edison, NJ: p 38

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