

1. The Location of Atlantis

A seemingly endless stream of announcements reaches us through the news, with claims that Atlantis has been found. Routinely, other scholars vehemently insist that Plato was just making the whole thing up.

Nobody by his right mind is denying that part of Plato's story about Atlantis is fiction. The question is rather if all of it is false, or if some of it is true. We should not throw out the baby with the bathing water.

This book is an attempt at permanently settling the question of whether the geographic description of Atlantis was based on a real place. The answer is a resounding yes. Beyond reasonable doubt, Plato based the geographic description on Ireland.

However, that does not automatically mean that Ireland politically once was the way Plato described Atlantis. That could be part of the fiction. Extracting the truth from the fiction is a laborious task—if not impossible—around which subsequent chapters speculate.

What are our sources? The complete story about Atlantis is to be found in two dialogues by Plato, written around 360 to 347 BC: *Timaeus* and *Critias*. Plato is the only original source that mentions Atlantis.

Plato's character in the dialogue (Critias, in real life an older relative of his) is supposed to give Socrates a description of an ideal city-state. As point of origin he takes a true story that, so he claims, was told to him by his grandfather, whose father in turn heard it from the famous statesman Solon, who had heard it from Egyptian priests in Sais around 600 BC.

Sais, a city on the western Nile delta in Egypt, was at that time at its zenith as a centre for foreign trade. This was, as you understand, centuries before Alexander the Great established Alexandria. The priests of Sais claimed that their city was founded by the same people as Athens, and had the same goddess, except they called their goddess Neith rather than Athena.

In spite of this common history they naturally had a different language, since Greece later had switched to an Indo-European tongue. The original population of the Aegean region may well have been derived from north-easternmost Africa—the coast that was then called Libya.

Returning now to Solon's visit in Sais, he was telling the priests about all the oldest myths of Greece, including the one about Deucalion's deluge, when almost all of humankind succumbed. One of the old priests replied in these words (in Benjamin Joett's translation):

-O Solon, Solon, you Hellenes are never anything but children, and there is not an old man among you.

Solon in return asked him what he meant.

-I mean to say, he replied, that in mind you are all young; there is no old opinion handed down among you by ancient tradition, nor any science which is hoary with age. And I will tell you why. There have been, and will be again, many destructions of mankind arising out of many causes; the greatest have been brought about by the

ATLANTIS from a Geographer's Perspective

agencies of fire and water, and other lesser ones by innumerable other causes.

Thereafter he said that the myth about Phaëthon was based on a real event, a disaster, even though it now had the form of a myth. In the Greek myth Phaëthon, the son of Helios, wanted to prove that he was the son of the sun, by driving his chariot over the sky one day. However, he could not control the horses; first, he came too high and it got cold on Earth, then he came too low and burnt the land. At that time, his father intervened and destroyed him with a thunderbolt. He crashed in the sea, and his sisters, the Heliads, cried over him. Their tears turned into amber (amber is only found on the shores of the North and Baltic Seas, incidentally).

The priest in Sais told Solon, that this myth is really about a declination of the bodies moving in the heavens around the earth, and a great conflagration of things on the earth, which recurs after long intervals. When it happens, those who live in the mountains or on dry, open places are more exposed, than those who live by rivers or at the shore. Those who lived in Sais had the river Nile for such protection. When, on the other hand, the gods inundate the earth with flash floods, the only survivors in Greece are the shepherds on the mountains, he said, while those who live in the cities, are carried out in the sea by the water. The water in the river Nile rises from below, he continued, and does not come flashing down from above. For that reason the archives of Sais were the oldest.

The explanation of Phaëthon's ride, and the words about natural disasters, can serve as a litmus test. If they reflect genuine knowledge, then parts of the tale may indeed come from Egypt.

Based on my knowledge of geomorphology (the landscapes and the processes that shape them), and from my background of studying natural hazards, my impression is that Plato's text does reveal genuine knowledge of rare natural disasters. Present-day natural hazard fears are typically focused on earthquakes and hurricanes, in a global perspective. However, the truth is, earthquakes rarely kill anyone (it is the poorly constructed housing that is lethal), and in a hurricane, it is the flooding that kills. Finally, meteorites are hardly even on the radar screen today, but they do pose the greatest danger in the very long term, just as Plato wrote. So, that old text contains grains of truth that go beyond even the present-day "conventional wisdom".

Allow me to summarize the natural hazards. Inundations can roughly be divided into flash floods, and floods in which the river overflows its banks. The former occur at or near where it is actually raining, when the water cannot reach the rivers as fast as the rain is falling. The latter may occur far from the rainfall, on the low and flat portions of the river, and are caused by the water being unable to flow out of a stretch of river as fast as it flows into it. Overbank flow of this kind (*desborde* in Spanish) is good for the soil, and the risk of fatalities is small. A flash flood on the other hand is extremely dangerous, and the survival rate of those carried along by one, is low.

Even more dangerous are the mudflows. When thick mountain soils become saturated with water, they may flow away like porridge, similar to the lahars we see every now and then from volcanoes. This has happened in China in the last decades. Deforestation is what makes it possible, and torrential rains—perhaps in combination

with earthquakes—are the triggers. Everything on the valley bottom is obliterated, and the flows in China have obtained depths of tens of metres. Massive boulders, the size of houses, are moved along.

As if this was not enough, we have the tsunamis to consider. Submarine earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, or landslides, can set off long-period surface waves (many minutes). When they reach land, they rise in height and may reach far inland. Greece is very seismic, and events such as the explosion of Thera (Santorini), probably in 1159 BC, will surely have wrecked havoc on all harbours in the Eastern Mediterranean. That event was probably the last big disaster before their conversation.

Incidentally, the Latin word “disaster” literally means ‘evil star’, while the Greek “catastrophe” literally means ‘down-bending’, ‘declination’. The English expression “go under” means ‘cease to exist’ (the world, for instance), though literally it just means ‘travel below’. It appears that all these terms refer to collisions with heavenly bodies. It is also apparent that much of the old mythology—such as the Greek god Zeus, the Nordic god Thor, and the Irish god Manannan—originally may have dealt with these heavenly bodies. A lot of superstition has obfuscated our ability to understand the old tales.

Since Phaëthon’s ride already then had the form of a myth, it must refer to a meteorite that fell in the sea well before (many centuries at the least, perhaps millennia) the conversation in Sais. The Kaali crater on the Estonian island Saaremaa (Swedish: Ösel) in the Baltic Sea, is out of the question, since it has been dated to 800 – 400 BC. A possible date would be the meteorite that fell on, and obliterated, a town on the Arabian Peninsula around 2,500 BC. We now know that meteorites may break apart

when entering the atmosphere, and fall down in many pieces, just like a certain Columbia. A piece may have fallen in the Aegean Sea, and brought evil destruction to Greece.

The conclusion is that the words by the Sais priest were very sober and truthful so far. It is a bit comical, though, to read that the Greeks are like children with no long tradition, since they are now among the most historically aware. You can buy Strabo in paperback on a subway station of Athens, printed in both the original and in Modern Greek (Strabo is the "father of geography" and lived over 2,000 years ago). While Greece is now preserving the ancient memories, I suppose much of the old Egyptian archives were destroyed with the library of Alexandria. Plundering libraries and museums has devastating effects for civilisation. Then again, perhaps that is why some powers do it? May the verdict over those in charge never die.

Enough said; let us not get tied up in the events of our millennium, but transpose ourselves to classical Athens, when Parthenon was fresh and new, and you would have had to wait for almost two thousand years if you would have ordered coffee at a local café. However, as they say in Greece, if you want good coffee you must have patience.

In this coffee-free environment, you might have been able to hear Plato recite the dialogue, telling you this:

Atlantis was an empire in the Atlantic Ocean, which attacked—unprovoked, in a war of aggression—all of Europe and Asia. In those days, ships could still sail the Atlantic Ocean. Outside of the strait known to the Greeks as the pillars of Heracles, there was an island, bigger than Libya and Asia combined. It was also the

way to other islands, and from these one could pass to all of the opposite continent that surrounded the true ocean; because this sea that is within the Straits of Heracles is just a harbour, with a small opening, but the other is the real sea, and the surrounding land can in truth be called a borderless continent.

On the island Atlantis there was an empire by the same name, which had rule over the whole island and several others, and over parts of the continent, and, furthermore, over parts of Libya within the columns of Heracles as far as Egypt, and of Europe as far as Tyrrhenia. In a campaign of war, they tried to subdue Athens, Sais, and the whole area inside the straits. In this war, the Athenians alone stood their ground and defeated the invaders. They thus saved the other peoples from slavery, and liberated all who dwell within the pillars.

However, soon afterwards, violent earthquakes and floods occurred, and in one single day and night all Athenians, in a body, sank into the earth. The island Atlantis disappeared in the same way in the sea. The sea on that spot became impassable and impenetrable, since there was a shoal of mud in the way, caused by the subsidence of the island.

Those are the basic facts. It is already obvious that there are elements in the story that are known to us today, but that were not known to the Greeks in Plato's time—such as the fact that the Atlantic is a true ocean, and that there is another continent on the other side: America; or that there is a chain of islands between them, which constitutes the easiest way for primitive ships to get across. I am of course referring to the route the Vikings took. No leg is longer than a few days on that route, and due to the high latitudes there is not even