

A Lost Civilisation in Western Asia Minor

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WHAT IS ATLANTIS?

If people are asked who or what is meant by “Atlantis”, their answers range from “a myth”, “a utopia”, or “a Sixties hit” to “a search for what is lost”, “the description of the end of the world”, “dreams of the next world” and “a legendary city that was destroyed in classical Greece”.

Atlantis: a long-lost, fairytale country that sank beneath the waves in a natural disaster aeons ago, and which still gives rise to dreams of a perfect, lost world. Countless scientists and amateur researchers have set out to find the place where that paradise might have been. They have brought back all kinds of theories: Atlantis was on Heligoland, in Uppsala or Spitzbergen, in the Canary Islands, in Mongolia, in the Bahamas, in Australia or under the ice of the Antarctic. What these “atlantologists” all agree on is that the lost paradise must have existed somewhere or other, since the whole story was told by none other than the Greek philosopher Plato.

THE “ATLANTIS-IS-TROY” THEORY

In recent years a new theory as to the whereabouts of Atlantis has been added to the countless earlier theories, a theory that at first sight seems as surprising as all the others; only on further examination does it differ from all the old Atlantis theories. The new interpretation of Plato’s text comes from an unexpected direction for atlantologists: it was put forward by a geoarchaeologist, an expert in the reconstruction of prehistoric landscapes, and was duly published in the not exactly esoteric Oxford Journal of Archaeology (ZANGGER, 1993). The main result of this new theory has been to upset received wisdom on the early history of the Aegean.

The new theory postulates that Atlantis is identical with late Bronze Age Troy – the legendary city in the north-west of modern Turkey, excavated by Heinrich Schliemann, around which, according to Homer, the Trojan Wars were fought. Now this theory has some obvious weaknesses: Troy is not an island, it does not lie in the Atlantic Ocean, is nowhere near the size of a subcontinent, did not flower 11,000 years ago and was not washed into the sea by a natural catastrophe. All those things are characteristics of Atlantis.

But apart from those inconsistencies, there are definite points of similarity between Atlantis and Troy which are likewise obvious at first glance. For example, the history of research into both of those legendary places has several common features. Even after its discovery, Troy was still considered by some experts to be a place invented by Homer. Likewise, Atlantis is often regarded as a place invented by Plato. A positive feature of this theory is that the formula “Atlantis is Troy” brings together two legendary places – it thus reduces the number of unknown quantities.

HOW DID THE ATLANTIS SAGA ARISE?

Around 360 BC, Plato began what he intended to be a three-volume work on the current state of knowledge in science and history. The books were to contain conversations between four characters, some of them historical, during a festival in Athens. Each of the three books was to be named after one of those present (Timaios, Kritias, Hermokrates), since each volume, apart from

the introduction, was to contain a monologue by the named person. The conversations were to be guided by Socrates, the fourth speaker, but the words are put into the mouths of the individual speakers. The conversations never took place, and the trilogy breaks off in the second volume. It is Plato's only unfinished work, but afterwards he wrote another extensive book, so it was not illness or death that stopped him from completing it. In the second volume of the trilogy Plato includes an account of Atlantis, which when printed amounts to thirteen pages. In the introduction to the whole work, he announces that this account represents his idea of an ideal state. This has led many experts on Plato to assume that he invented the story (RAMAGE, 1978), but there are many things which count against such an interpretation.

Although Plato liked to make up parables to illustrate his theories, he would hardly have had the idea of describing this one as "true in every respect" and of including it in such an unusual framework. In addition, one might object that Plato could have made up a much more suitable story if he had merely wanted to give a fictional account of his ideal state. That is why most classicists, classical historians and philosophers who have concerned themselves in detail with the Atlantis text are of the opinion that the story must have a factual basis.

THE NATURAL DISASTER

Almost all attempts to place the Atlantis story within a historical and geographical framework begin with the description of the natural disaster that is said to have destroyed Atlantis:

"But in the time that followed there were immense earthquakes and floods; there came a terrible day and a terrible night, in which the whole of your armed forces were swallowed up at once by the earth, and likewise the island of Atlantis sank into the sea and disappeared therein."

Possible inspirations for the description of the natural disaster in the account of Atlantis may have been the Helike earthquake of 373 BC, or the eruption of the volcano on Santorini (Thera) in the 16th century BC, which was long believed to have caused the destruction of the Minoan civilisation. In the fifty years since that theory was first mooted, many individual investigations have proved that the eruption of Santorini was less significant than at first thought. It caused neither earthquakes nor tidal waves, and had no lasting effects on Minoan civilisation (ZANGGER, 1998).

Plato's description of the catastrophes may simply be an exaggeration, an invention, or a mythologising attempt at an explanation – at any rate, the passage hardly serves to localise Atlantis. Plato is simply recounting the words of an Egyptian priest, who, addressing his Greek conversation partner, says "the whole of your armed forces" were swallowed up at once by the earth. Those natural disasters therefore took place in Greece. Atlantis is only mentioned in passing, and the statement that it "likewise... sank" is less than convincing – it had earlier been utterly defeated by Greek armies in a war. And how should identical natural disasters take place in two different places on the earth?

The description of the natural disasters also contradicts the occasional speculative conjecture that Plato did not mean to illustrate the ideal state with Atlantis, but with archaic Greece. After all, he says Atlantis was punished for its gradual moral decline by being destroyed (VIDAL-NAQUET, 1964). But if the story is supposed to be a moral parable, why is the "good" Greek side first punished with natural disasters? And why does Plato mainly describe the "barbaric" enemies instead of the old Hellenic civilisation? The traditional attempts at interpretation offer no answers to these questions.

THE CENTRAL MESSAGE OF THE ACCOUNT OF ATLANTIS

The sentence in which the natural disasters are described contains only about forty words – but the whole account of Atlantis contains about 6500. Over 99 per cent of the information given by Plato remains unused if one attempts to localise Atlantis using only the description of the disasters.

The rest of the story paints a picture that differs considerably from traditional ideas of Atlantis. The greatest part of it is taken up with the description of the city of Atlantis. Plato devotes pages of description to the architectural details of the palaces and temples, the military command structure, and above all to the water-supply systems. Reading between the lines, one realises that he has considerable respect for the technical achievements of that society. At the same time, he repeatedly hints at his disapproval, for example of the “barbaric” decorations of the temples and the archaic sacrifices of bulls. Atlantis is certainly neither a utopian state nor a place in which Plato would have liked to live – its kings had totalitarian power over their subjects and could execute anyone they pleased.

It is more or less impossible that Plato could have invented this city with all its details. After all, his main interest was not city planning, engineering, craftsmanship or materials science. There were indeed basic principles of city planning in classical Athens – Aristotle talks about them – but Atlantis does not conform to them. Nevertheless, this part of Plato’s account is consistent and free of contradictions. The city he describes has oriental characteristics, and from the point of view of an enlightened Athenian democrat it is terribly old-fashioned. But in the science of water supply the Atlanteans even surpassed the state of knowledge in Greece in Plato’s day, a further indication that Plato cannot have invented the city.

Plato says that the description of Atlantis comes from Egyptian inscriptions. When Plato’s ancestor Solon received the account, on a visit to Egypt around 560 BC, the temple priests also gave him a general description of the age in which Atlantis existed. Into these orally transmitted passages have crept the disastrous distortions that make the interpretation of the text so difficult. On the other hand, the details given by the priests help to place Atlantis in a temporal and geographical framework.

The priests reported that during the heyday of Atlantis, Greece also had a rich civilisation. Greek society in those days was divided into feudal classes: priests, hunters, shepherds, soldiers and craftsmen formed groups of their own. The Greeks produced magnificent works of art, and were able to write, which was a particularly outstanding feature of their early civilisation. And the priests said that the Greeks were well equipped for military conflicts – the soldiers had spears, shields and chariots.

On the basis of these details, the civilisation described can be placed in the late Bronze Age, around the 14th and 13th centuries BC. In that epoch, the golden age of Mycenaean culture, the splendid palaces of Mycenae, Tiryns and Pylos on the Peloponnese were built; it is the age described by Homer, the age of the great heroes Agamemnon, Ulysses, Nestor and Achilles, and of their expedition against Troy.

The Egyptian priests also soon come to speak about the event which we immediately associate with Mycenaean civilisation. Among the “many great deeds” done by Greece in those days, one “stands out by its greatness and heroism”, said the priests. It was a war waged abroad by the united Greek forces, which they were in the end able to win. In Plato’s account the enemy of the Greeks is called Atlantis – we call it Troy. So Atlantis is Troy.

Plato's description of Atlantis must of course also correspond to what we know of Troy from Homer, from other accounts and from excavations. There are indeed a large number of correspondences between the two cities: both were ports and trading cities that profited from their favourable geographical situation and their far-flung contacts; both developed steadily for an unusually long time; in both cities the mining of ore and trading in metals was important; in both cases the ruling aristocracy acquired ever greater wealth; and both cities became a symbol of the defended city par excellence, thanks to their city walls and defensive towers.

But Atlantis also has features it shares with Troy – and with no other city. For example, as a special blessing, Atlantis possessed a hot and a cold spring at the same time – the only other city in classical antiquity that is said to have had such a pair of springs is Troy. Both cities lay on a narrow strait leading to a sea that is surrounded by a real continent – the Black Sea. Both cities were plagued by unusually strong north winds. Atlantis is said to have possessed a fleet of 1200 ships; Homer says the Greeks took 1186 ships to war against the Trojans. Troy and Atlantis both had the same mythological ancestor, Atlas, who was followed in line of succession in both cities by a daughter – “Atlantis” means “daughter of Atlas”. For this reason, British historians sometimes referred to the Trojans as “Atlanteans” till well into the last century.

In Atlantis there was an extremely archaic ritual sacrifice of bulls, which can be found in identical form on coins minted in Troy (HARRISON, 1912). Another outstanding feature of Atlantis is the mining of the metal orichalkos. That is even today the Greek word for brass. In pre-Roman times brass-working was strictly speaking unknown. Nevertheless, it was described by the Greek geographer Strabo, as it was carried on in a place near Troy. Recently, archaeologists have found brass artefacts from the third millennium BC; chemical analysis has demonstrated that the ore originated from Troas, the region around Troy (BEGEMANN et al. 1992).

But the main characteristics of Atlantis were its circular layout and its water supply. In Troy, too, the principal buildings of Troy VI were arranged on ring-shaped terraces. Recently it has been proved that this concentric pattern continues outside the defensive walls – geophysicists and archaeologists have found two concentric ditches which once surrounded the city. The plain of Troy has been regarded in all ages as the classic centre of water-supply engineering. According to legend, it was Hercules himself who diverted the rivers there. And the name of the famous river Skamander below the castle means “foam produced by human hand”. Drilling probes undertaken in the last few years have shown that on both sides of the plain, buried under layers of sediment, there may have been harbour basins (KAYAN, 1995; JABLONKA 1996).

PLATO'S ROLE AS A REPORTER

Computer-supported investigations of the style in the Kritias suggest that the text is not by Plato (ZANGGER, 1992). Perhaps Plato did indeed write the story of Atlantis using only Solon's notes. On so important a journey as that to Egypt Solon probably kept a travel journal. This would certainly have been kept in his family after his death and perhaps one day entrusted to Plato, his famous descendant and director of the Academy. At any rate, that is how Plato describes it. He must have been convinced that Solon had given an authentic historical account. Solon had, however, adapted the text, and Plato knew this too. In keeping with the practice of his day, Solon “Greekified” the names – that is, in place of the foreign names he inserted a Greek equivalent, or what he thought was an equivalent. The true nature of the story and the identity of Atlantis in any case remained unknown to Plato.

It seems that the text suited Plato's concept, since it provided a detailed description of civilisations in the pre-classical era, which was to be the central theme of the second volume of his trilogy. Apart from the account of Atlantis, Plato intended to reproduce oral traditions concerning the

prehistory of Attica in the same volume. This material is interesting, but not so detailed as the account of Atlantis; it would hardly have sufficed to fill an entire volume. Plato was therefore dependent on the account of Atlantis, and even made it into the central part of the trilogy. Since Atlantis was said to lie in the Atlantic – that is, in the west – the account fitted harmoniously into Plato’s chosen “western” theme for the trilogy. Two of the four participants came from Sicily and Lower Italy; it was there, as well as in Asia Minor, that in the 4th century BC most of the scientific schools were situated from which the discoveries discussed in the *Timaios* derive. Plato repeatedly visited the west, where a new wind was blowing, a spirit of discovery, like the atmosphere in America in modern times.

Towards the end of the story, Plato seems to have realised what the account was really about. The last paragraph in *Kritias* doubtless came from Plato’s pen after he had finally recognised the similarities between Atlantis and Troy. Without motivation, Plato introduces moral yardsticks by which the Atlanteans failed – a standard classical cliché for the relations between the Hellenes and the Trojans. For centuries the Greeks had admired their oriental neighbours in Troy and evidently cooperated peacefully with them, until in the end “human characteristics prevailed. Then, they could no longer bear their wealth and became degenerate.” In the last complete sentence, Plato even uses Homer’s tools and summons the assembly of the gods with which the *Iliad* begins. But this attempt to rescue the trilogy is a failure. The great thinker abandons a book for the first and only time – right in the middle of a sentence. A work directed towards the progressive west cannot have the glorification of an oriental metropolis in ancient times as its centrepiece. Since he was experienced and vain enough never to destroy something into which he had put so much work, Plato only laid the manuscript aside.

DISTORTIONS

How could the story of Troy/Atlantis become so distorted that even its editor, Plato, initially failed to understand its true character? The account in fact contains only four errors – remarkably few when one considers its size and the complicated chain of its transmission.

First error: The dates and time-spans given by Plato clearly contradict any historical interpretation of the Atlantis account, according to which Atlantis existed 8000 years before Solon’s visit to Egypt, or about 11,000 years ago. Opponents of a historical Atlantis maintain that Plato deliberately gave such a long time-span because he wanted to make it clear that the whole story was a myth from the depths of antiquity. However, similar indications of time are given in other works by Plato and other authors. In *The Laws*, Plato says the Egyptian civilisation is 10,000 years old. According to Herodotus, the “father of history”, the Pharaohs ruled for 11,340 years. Egyptian priests had reported to Herodotus – as they had to Solon – that their documentary records covered that entire time-span. The Egyptian historian Manetho gives the age of Egyptian civilisation as 11,000 years, or alternatively 11,985 years – these figures are almost identical with those Plato gives. So if Plato deliberately inserted long time-spans to emphasise the mythological character of the account, the other authors must have had a similar intention. But that is not the case. Manetho explains just how these unacceptably high figures arise – they are “lunar years”, i.e. months – 11,985 moon years are 969 solar years. In Egypt, several different calendars were in use at the same time, and temple priests used the original lunar calendar. Plato’s figures for years must therefore be divided by 12.37. On this basis, Atlantis was defeated by the Greek forces around 1200 BC. And where those forces were at that time is described by Homer in his account of the Trojan War.

Second error: Atlantis is said to have been an island. This error, too, is typical of translations from Egyptian hieroglyphic texts. The hieroglyphic symbol for “island” originally meant “foreign

country”. In the New Kingdom, the Egyptians called the entire Aegean together with its mainland coasts “the islands”. They even called the North African coast, which has no islands, the “islands of the West”.

Third error: Atlantis is said to have lain on a narrow strait beyond the “pillars of Hercules”. In classical antiquity the “pillars of Hercules” meant the straits of Gibraltar, so Atlantis must have lain in the Atlantic – and after all, the name of the ocean is derived from it. But as early as the middle of the 19th century, a German geographer showed that the “pillars of Hercules” in the Atlantis account actually referred to the entrance to the Black Sea. The application of the term evidently moved as the Greek world expanded. The Roman grammarian Servius says “we sail through the pillars of Hercules into the Black Sea just as in Spain.”

Fourth error: Plato gives the size of the plain of Atlantis as 3000 x 2000 stadia (540 x 360 kilometres). There is obviously a confusion of units here, a common occurrence in antiquity owing to the lack of fixed standards. The area he gives is about the size of Ireland – and thus contradicts his statement that the plain was sheltered from the wind and surrounded by a ditch.

And the natural disaster? Perhaps there was no such thing, in the ordinary sense of the word. Around some of the most important late Bronze Age palaces there was a highly complex water supply system. For example, there was a dam below Mycenae, and a diverted river near Tiryns. Near Gla, the whole of Lake Kopais, 150 square kilometres in extent, was drained and a gigantic canal was built to divert 700 million cubic metres of water a year (KNAUSS, 1987). At Pylos there was an artificial harbour belonging to the palace, as large as ten football fields (ZANGGER et al., 1997a); it was kept clear of deposits by means of an ingenious clean-water flushing system. The water supply system of Troy has still to be investigated (ZANGGER et al., 1997b, ZANGGER et al., 1998).

This highly developed technology made those kingdoms vulnerable. In war, the destruction of the water-supply system offered attackers an opportunity to cause widespread destruction with a minimum of effort. That war took place around 1200 BC – Mycenae, Tiryns, Pylos, Gla, Troy and many other cities were destroyed. The water-supply systems collapsed at the same time. At Troy, the lower city was buried under metre-thick layers of mud; the harbour at Pylos filled up with river gravel. Who can rule out the possibility that their technology fell prey to hostile attacks? Huge landslides and floods would have been the result.

A WORLD VIEW IS COBBLED TOGETHER

Since “it has still not been proved that ‘Troy’ ever existed” (BRENTJES, 1993), it will naturally not be possible to prove the “Atlantis-is-Troy” theory. One thing is clear, however: the site of Hisarlik has more similarities with Atlantis than with Troy. Apart from that, the “Atlantis-is-Troy” theory has already permanently altered our view of the early history of the Aegean. Whereas only five years ago, Troy was regarded as a Greek outpost and a nest of pirates, prehistorians now see it as an oriental trading metropolis and one of the largest late Bronze Age cities in the Mediterranean. The known area of the city has increased twenty-fold since 1992 – and no limits to that growth are in sight.

A revaluation of the importance of Troy is long overdue. In the whole of classical antiquity, Troy was regarded as the city par excellence. Emperors, kings and generals made pilgrimages to its ruins. Even Caesar and Augustus traced their lineage back to one of the legendary founders of Troy. Many European capitals, including Rome, London, Paris (which bears the name of the son of a king of Troy), and even Bonn, are new foundations on the model of Troy. In the Middle Ages, Troy was one of the central interests of society, although Homer’s work was buried by time.

That millennia-old myth of Troy was forcibly interrupted in the 18th century. In an attempt to give the newly evolving Europe an individual identity, classical antiquity was declared to be the cradle of central European culture. Art history, archaeology and classical philology developed, not in order to investigate how events in the past happened, but to give central European claims to power a “scientific” foundation. The political system in the 18th and 19th century saw its image in classical antiquity. At that time the Greeks were thought to have stood “in noble simplicity and quiet greatness” against the “barbarians” from Persia. In more modern times, Europe fought against the Ottoman Empire. The world view of the philhellenes had no place for a dominant Troy in the orient. Homer’s Iliad was therefore declared to be a sun myth, in which the Greek were the sun and the Trojans were the clouds. Even today, some classicists deny that Troy ever existed.

When Heinrich Schliemann excavated the palaces in Troy and Mycenae in 1880, the scholarly world was united in the view that western civilisation sprang more or less from nothing with the beginnings of classical Greece. The existence of a still older civilisation was by definition impossible. Even long after the discovery of Troy, distinguished archaeologists still branded claims of the existence of prehistoric palaces “extraordinary hallucinations of an unscientific enthusiast”.

But when eventually many Bronze Age palaces and residences were discovered in Crete, the world view of archaeology did have to be revised. Following that, the birth of western civilisation was moved back a millennium – and the existing opinions and research methods of classical archaeology were simply transferred to the new discipline of Ancient History.

Although Schliemann and Evans discovered palaces in Crete and on the Greek and Turkish mainland, only those on European territory were regarded as representative of early civilisations. Thus arose, according to the ideas of the educated classes in Victorian times, the concept of the peaceful “Minoan” and the warlike “Mycenaean” civilisation – a travesty, distorted by ideology, of what we now call the Aegean Bronze Age. Troy was not included in it. Five thousand years of myth or not – the site was simply on the wrong side of the strait. Only now are prehistorians of the Aegean coming to realise that they have been completely ignoring a high civilisation in western Asia Minor (ZANGGER 1994; ZICK 1997). As soon as that civilisation is given the respect it deserves, the great riddles of Mediterranean archaeology will dissolve into nothing.

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