

ATLANTIS: THE EVOLUTION OF A MYTH

Many Americans, taking their information as usual from those two great American sources, television and hearsay, believe that a large continent called Atlantis once existed in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, which took its name. They may also believe that Atlantis supported a highly advanced culture, rich in science and philosophy. But one day the whole continent sank into the sea, never to be seen again, and all its high civilization was lost.

So goes the myth. The fact is that there is no sunken continent in the Atlantic. Extensive scientific explorations of sea-bottom sediments have shown that there have been no significant geological changes for about seventy million years, whereas the oldest known human civilizations existed no more than five or six thousand years ago.

But myths are never made subject to facts or empirical proofs. The history of Atlantis is a textbook demonstration of myth-making. It begins on a single pinpoint of evidence.

That pinpoint is Plato, whose *Timaeus* and *Kritias*, written about 335 B.C.E., first mentioned the fabled continent beyond Gibraltar, which Plato called the Pillars of Herakles. He claimed to have heard the tale of Atlantis from Socrates, who heard it at third hand from his great-grandfather Dropides, who heard it from the legendary Athenian lawgiver Solon, who heard it from an Egyptian priest, a hundred and fifty years before Socrates lived. This priest mentioned a great Athenian empire nine thousand years before his own time (that is, about 9600 B.C.E., when there was no Athens at all), which came into conflict with the empire of Atlantis. This latter empire was founded by the god Poseidon on a continent in the western ocean.

Perhaps the name of Atlantis was suggested to Plato by his reading of Thucydides, who spoke of an earthquake-borne tsunami that destroyed an Athenian fort on the small island of Atalanta, named for the Greek Goddess of the hunt. According to Strabo, this island had been split in two, so a ship canal could be put through its center, and the tsunami wrecked one of two ships that had been drawn up on the shore.

By the first century C.E., when Philo wrote of it, "the island of Atalantes" had grown to dimensions "greater than Africa and Asia," and was submerged in a single day. But by the sixth century, the geographer Kosmas Indicopleustes presented the story as a garbled Greek version of Noah's flood. Beliefs in Atlantis were then suspended for a thousand years, and began to surface again after the discovery of the New World.

In 1553, the Spanish historian Francisco Lopez de Gomara suggested that Plato's Atlantis was America. This idea was adopted by Sir Francis Bacon in his 1624 work, *The New Atlantis*; by Buffon in the eighteenth century; and by Alexander von Humboldt in the nineteenth. But America was not the only candidate. In 1675 the Swedish scholar Olof Rudbeck tried to demonstrate that Atlantis was Sweden, which was therefore the source of all civilization. Others have since "proved" that Atlantis was Spain, Britain, Palestine, Africa, Arabia, Mexico, Ceylon, and even the arctic regions.

The progress of Atlantis toward its present place in occultism was facilitated by Diego de Landa, Spanish Bishop of Yucatan in the sixteenth century. Having confiscated and burned all the Mayan books he could seize, calling them works of the devil, the bishop later devised a way to translate the surviving few with a "Mayan alphabet" that he created by forcing the natives to invent hieroglyphic equivalents for Latin letters. He put forth the durable notion that American Indians were the lost ten tribes of Israel. This notion was also endorsed by William Penn and the New England Puritans, and later figured prominently in the Mormon mythology of Joseph Smith.

Bishop de Landa's synthetic Mayan alphabet was used by a French abbe, Charles Etienne Brasseur (1814-1874), to mistranslate one of the few remaining Mayan codices. He theorized that two letters, M and U, represented the name of the sunken continent. His compatriot, Augustus Le Plongeon (1826-1908), lived in Yucatan, dug about in the Mayan ruins, and published a book called *Queen Moo and the Egyptian Sphinx*. The title character was the queen of Atlantis, or Mu, who escaped the great deluge, went to Egypt, built the Sphinx, and became the Goddess Isis.

Le Plongeon was influenced not only by Brasseur, but also by Madame Blavatsky's works, *The Secret Doctrine* and *Isis Unveiled*. These books were published in the 1880s, having been plagiarized without credit

from Wilson's translation of the *Vishnu Purana* and the Rig Veda's *Hymn of Creation*. Blavatsky merged these sources with her own imaginary *Book of Dzyan*, which she claimed was written in the dead "Senzar" language of Atlantis, revealed to her by her "mahatmas" during her trances, which also supplied her with a convenient English translation.

Perhaps the greatest popularizer of the Atlantis myth was a Minnesota congressman, Ignatius T.T. Donnelly, who wrote *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World* in 1882. He was the first to argue that an Atlantic-ocean Atlantis was the source of all civilization. He also tried to prove in other books that Shakespeare's plays were written by Francis Bacon, and that the Pleistocene Ice Age was caused by Earth's collision with a comet.

Madame Blavatsky's "astral clairvoyance" (which has been more recently renamed "channeling") was much influenced by Donnelly's work. Other Theosophical channelers later added quantities of colorful details to the initial vision. For instance, Atlantis was occupied by various subraces such as Tlavatlis, Turanians, Toltecs, Semites, and Akkadians, who raised wheat, which they originally brought from another planet, invented the banana, and powered their aircraft by the mentally directed *vril* force -- a magical transit authority that was first introduced by the novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton in his Utopian fantasy, *The Coming Race*.

In 1912, Atlantis buffs were titillated by a hoax perpetrated by Paul Schliemann, grandson of the great archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann, the discoverer of Troy. In an article published in the *New York American*, the younger Schliemann claimed to have opened his grandfather's sealed papers and an ancient vase containing artifacts, "from the King Cronos of Atlantis." Quoting freely from Donnelly and Le Plongeon, Schliemann said this material confirmed the inundation of Mu/Atlantis. He promised to reveal all in a book, which never appeared; nor were the artifacts ever seen.

Wilhelm Dorpfeld, collaborator of the elder Schliemann, testified that his colleague had never shown any interest in the Atlantis myth and that the article in the *New York American* was a fake. Still, to this day Atlantis enthusiasts quote Paul Schliemann and even confuse him with his grandfather.

Fourteen years later, in his old age James Churchward published his book, *The Lost Continent of Mu*, which said Mu was not the same as

Atlantis, but was an Atlantean colony established on yet another huge land mass in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. He claimed to have seen "Muvian tablets" in either Mexico or India, or perhaps it was Tibet, and to have translated their unknown language by the power of his intuition. Churchward said the continent of Atlantis floated on "great gas-filled chambers" like pontoons, which collapsed and caused its sinking.

Later writers made Atlantis a wonderland and sci-fi Utopia whose people could heal wounds instantly, and grow their crops and control the "life force" by magic words. Lewis Spence, Manly P. Hall, Rudolf Steiner and other occultists adopted Atlantis as the source of their visions, often making offhand references to it, as if it were as much a part of history as Greece or Babylon. However, their information came not from any ancient writings, pictographs, or ruins, but was "channeled" from long-dead Egyptian priests, Ascended Masters, members of the mystic White Brotherhood, and similarly exotic sources.

The famous "sleeping prophet," Edgar Cayce, was a very profitable prophet indeed. He made a fortune by diagnosing and treating thousands of illnesses in his own unique way, by sleeping with the patient's letter or picture under his pillow, whereupon he would dream a strange method for dealing with the illness, and would mail it off to the sufferer. Cayce was uneducated, but he claimed to be "spiritually advanced" because he was a reincarnated Atlantean, and so were all prominent people around the world. Cayce was able to "remember" that his Atlantean ancestors fashioned great flying-balloons out of elephant hide, and also invented other kinds of airships, submarines, telephones, elevators, telescopes, cameras, radios and television. They powered everything with giant "generator" quartz crystals. Cayce said the Atlanteans colonized all the other continents, but somehow failed to take their wondrous technology with them.

He died in 1945, after predicting that Atlantis would rise again out of the sea, off the east coast of the United States, in either 1968 or 1969. Somehow it always turns out to be a mistake for any prophet to mention specific future dates.

Was there ever a factual basis for the Atlantis myth? There is one possibility: archaeological investigations show that in the fifteenth century B.C.E. the island of Thera (now called Santorin), in the eastern Mediterranean, did fall into the sea. The island blew itself apart in a

volcanic explosion even more violent than the famous eruption of Krakatoa in 1883. As a result of this cataclysm, tsunamis drowned the coastal cities of nearby Crete, while the rest of the land was smothered by volcanic ash. A sizeable Minoan city has been found on the island of Thera, buried under tons of volcanic debris. The catastrophe would have caused floods around all eastern Mediterranean shores, possibly contributing to flood myths, and probably marked the end of Minoan culture. This event would have been remembered in Greek legend, though by the time it reached the ears of Plato it would have been considerably garbled and hypertrophied.

Not satisfied with any such mundane explanation, however, Atlantis myth-makers continue to pile wonder upon wonder in their visions of the lost land. Edmund Harold, Frank Alper, and many others write of Mu and Atlantis with the utmost confidence in their own apparitions. "Memories" of the Atlantean colony Lemuria were published in the 1940s and 1950s in a series of pulp-magazine articles by L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of the Church of Scientology. Such "memories" present the reader with cities of crystal and glass, vast tunnels under the earth's crust, horned gods, half-human snakes, space aliens, magnetic energy domes that cover whole nations, pulsating crystals creating new lifeforms, and people who live for two or three thousand years. Some of these occultists claim to contact actual survivors of the Atlantean flood, who still live in "an ethereal dimension faster than the speed of light." For all their technological razzle-dazzle, the Atlanteans seem to have been guilty of hubris, which led them to tamper with forbidden laws of nature and thus arouse the ire of the supreme deity -- who might have been Yahweh, or Baal, or Ahura Mazda, or perhaps even the original Poseidon.

One may well wonder why these delirious masses of science-fiction, utopianism, mythology and quackery continue to exert such widespread appeal. One answer is that genuine history and especially prehistory are seldom adequately taught in American schools. But perhaps a more telling answer is that, although Atlantis is no more historical than the biblical Garden of Eden, it exerts much the same kind of appeal. It postulates a primal paradise -- a universally recurrent theme in all mythologies -- from which a Fall precipitated humanity into a less perfect, less comfortable world. Deluge myths the world over have been linked with unconscious memory of the birth trauma, while myths of great and wise ancestors (like the biblical giants) are associated with infantile memories of seemingly wise and omnipotent adults.

Atlantis differs from Eden in one important respect. As a product of our own intensely technological culture, which grew out of the mindset of the Industrial Revolution, Atlantis is an abundantly technological Eden. Its fabled wisdom is not scriptural fiction but science fiction. Even though occultists often express disillusionment with technology per se, they still clothe in gaudy trappings of misunderstood, misinterpreted, and popularized science their need to believe in a primal perfection. So the Atlanteans are seen as scientific wizards destroyed by their own arrogance, a fate that many fear for our own civilization. Atlanteans may be ourselves, viewed through the distorted mirrors of myth by people who fear reality and fail to recognize fantasy.

The Atlantis archetype has all the elements common to the most durable myths: moral precept and warning, the drama of catastrophe, the aura but not the discipline of hard knowledge, the ever-repeated Fall from Paradise, another version of the Deluge, and that grand old comforter of the ignorant, the story of past intellectual greatness that built its towers too high, encroached on the territory of the gods, and consequently suffered destruction.

Atlantis mythology also caters to the human love of mystical elitism: the sense of being among the chosen, of having secret information and deep intuitions not granted to the common herd. Atlantis enthusiasts are almost invariably self-declared Atlanteans themselves, having access to its exotic memories and its dreams of glory. They are willing to share their dreams with the hoi polloi, for a price of course. And there are always many who willingly believe and follow any persuasive charlatan who comes along with a vision that relieves the ordinariness of life, the more bizarre the better.

This is the basic story behind all myths. We repeat them, we enjoy them, we tell them to our children, we make them part of our culture. And, more often than we should, we believe them.