



Meet Me in Atlantis: My Obsessive Quest to Find the Sunken City

By Mark Adams

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In *Meet Me in Atlantis*, Adams racks up frequent-flier miles tracking down these Atlantis obsessives, trying to determine why they believe it's possible to find the world's most famous lost city—and whether any of their theories could prove or disprove its existence. The result is a classic quest that takes readers to fascinating locations to meet irresistible characters; and a deep, often humorous look at the human longing to rediscover a lost world.

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Editorial Review

Review

“The lively, skeptical but open-minded travel writer Mark Adams...takes readers along to four plausible sites, without quackery and with a contagious spirit of curiosity, interviewing scores of experts and fanatics, and painting pictures that will make even the most levelheaded traveler yearn to repeat his fantastic itinerary.”—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Infused with humor and pop culture references, Adams makes what could have been a tedious recitation of theories into an exciting adventure.”—*Chicago Tribune*

“Adams maintains a journalistic skepticism and a buoyant sense of humor, making *Atlantis* a gripping journey.”—*Entertainment Weekly*

“Always entertaining, *Meet Me in Atlantis* also introduces a significant amount of Platonic philosophy and devotes generous space to legitimate archaeology like that in Akrotiri. Perhaps the most enjoyable aspect is Adams’s knack for clever descriptions of places and people.”—*The Daily Beast*

“Writing with the same jaunty style as *Turn Right at Machu Picchu*, Adams merrily entertains the lost-cities audience.”—*Booklist*

“Few mythic places exert a more powerful pull on the imagination than Atlantis, and here the fabled lost city has found its perfect chronicler. Adventurous, inquisitive and mirthful, Mark Adams gamely sifts through the eons of rumor, science, and lore to find a place that, in the end, seems startlingly real indeed—like a vivid dream surfacing from the weird and murky depths of human consciousness.”—*New York Times* bestselling author Hampton Sides

“The collision between Adams’ youthful zeal and journalistic sensibilities provide an arresting dichotomy to an absorbing search... Fact or fiction, Atlantis, as the author ably demonstrates, still has the power to enthrall inquiring minds.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

About the Author

Mark Adams is the author of the acclaimed history *Mr. America*, which *The Washington Post* named a Best Book of 2009, and the *New York Times* bestsellers *Meet Me in Atlantis* and *Turn Right at Machu Picchu*. A writer for many national magazines, including *GQ*, *Men's Journal*, and *New York*, he lives near New York City with his wife and children.

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PROLOGUE

Near Agadir, Morocco

We had just met the previous week in Bonn, my new German acquaintance and I, and here we were on the west coast of Africa on a hot Thursday morning, looking for an underwater city in the middle of the desert.

Our destination was an unremarkable set of prehistoric ruins. The shared interest—about the only thing we had in common—that had brought Michael Hübner and me together in Morocco for what felt like a very awkward second date was Atlantis. Hübner was certain he had found it.

Hübner was far from alone in this belief. I'd already met plenty of other enthusiastic Atlantis seekers who'd used clues gleaned from Renaissance maps or obscure Babylonian myths or unpublished documents from the Vatican Secret Archives to pinpoint its supposed location. There did not seem to be a lot of consensus. Morocco was the eighth country on three continents that I'd visited as I pursued those who pursued Atlantis, the legendary lost city. I'd become as fascinated by them as they were by their quest. I hadn't seen my wife and children for a month.

Hübner's unique search strategy was data analysis. He had scoured ancient literature for every mention of Atlantis that he could find and then plugged that data into an algorithm far too complicated for a math novice like me to understand. His results were clear, though. According to his calculations and the laws of probability, the capital city of Atlantis had absolutely, positively existed just a few hundred feet ahead at the nexus of GPS coordinates we were tracking. "It is very, very improbable that all these criteria are combined by chance in one area," he had already told me several times, his monotone voice betraying not the slightest doubt.

I wasn't so sure. Perhaps the defining characteristic of the landscape around us, the foothills of the Atlas Mountains, was its complete lack of water. Twice on the way here my driver had slammed on the brakes to avoid crashing into herds of camels crossing the road. The one thing that everyone knows about the legend of Atlantis is that it sank beneath the seas.

Hübner had a ready explanation for this aquatic discrepancy. An earthquake in the Atlantic Ocean, a few miles west of where we were hiking, had caused a tsunami that had flooded the Moroccan coast and then receded. The ancient story of this deluge had simply gotten garbled over generations of retelling.

A few months earlier, I would have said Hübner's explanation sounded crazy. Now it had a very familiar ring to it. I had heard a lot of location hypotheses that hinged on tsunamis and other improbable agents: volcanic explosions, mistranslated hieroglyphics, the ten biblical plagues, asteroid impacts, Bronze Age transatlantic cocaine trafficking, and the Pythagorean theorem.

All of these ideas had been presented to me by intelligent, sincere people who had devoted large chunks of their lives to searching for a city that most reputable scientists dismissed as a fairy tale. Most of the university experts I'd approached about Atlantis had equated the futility of searching for it with hunting down the specific pot of gold that a certain leprechaun had left at the end of a particular rainbow. Now I was starting to wonder if I'd been away from home too long—because the more of these Atlantis seekers I met, the more their cataclysmic hypotheses made sense.

Perhaps the second most famous attribute of Atlantis was its distinctive circular shape, an island city surrounded by alternating rings of land and water. At the center of those rings, the story went, stood a magnificent temple dedicated to the Greek god Poseidon. That innermost island, with its evidence of an advanced civilization suddenly destroyed by a watery disaster, was the proof that every Atlantis hunter most longed to find. Incredibly, this legendary island's precise measurements, as well as the dimensions of the temple and the city's distance from the sea, had been handed down from the philosopher Plato, one of the greatest thinkers in Western history. The clues to solving this riddle had been available for more than two thousand years, but no one had yet found a convincing answer. Hübner insisted that according to his own calculations, what we were about to see was close to a perfect match.

Hübner wasn't an especially chatty guy, so we trudged silently up the slope, the only sounds coming from

our feet scraping the sunbaked ground and the occasional bleating of stray goats. Finally, the incline leveled off and we looked out onto a large geological depression, a sort of desert basin enclosed on all sides. I leaned against a leafless tree and wiped sweat from my eyes.

“You remember how I showed you the satellite photo, how it was like a ring?” Hübner said, waving his hand across the panorama. “That is this place here.”

Of course I remembered. The image he’d shown me on his computer screen was like a treasure map leading to Atlantis; it was that photo that had convinced me to come to Morocco. I scanned the horizon from left to right and slowly recognized that we were standing above a natural bowl, almost perfectly round. In the middle was a large hill, also circular—a ring within a ring.

“On that hill in the center is where I found the ruins of the gigantic temple,” Hübner said. “You can check for yourself the measurements. They are almost exact with the story of Atlantis.” He sipped from his water bottle. “I would like to show this to you. Do you think maybe we should go down there?”

CHAPTER ONE

New York, New York

A few years ago, for reasons that presumably made sense at the time, a friend who worked at a popular women’s magazine called to ask if I’d consider taking on an unusual writing assignment. Might I be interested in compiling a list of the greatest philosophers of all time and explaining, in easily digestible chunks, why their work was relevant to America’s working mothers?

Having dropped the one philosophy course I’d signed up for in college, I knew little about the subject. But easy money is hard to come by for a freelance writer, and this job sounded like a cakewalk, so I set to work contacting professors at various reputable universities and asking them to rank their top ten philosophers. To my surprise, there was no disagreement about who deserved the top two slots on the list. Every professor I phoned or e-mailed named the ancient Greek philosopher Plato number one, followed by his protégé Aristotle.

I knew a thing or two about Aristotle, since he’d been one of the final entries in the lone Aa–Ar volume of a children’s encyclopedia that my mother had purchased at the supermarket one Saturday to keep me quiet while she shopped. (I wrote many grade school papers on the differences between aardvarks and anteaters.) Aristotle’s genius is still evident to a modern reader, and his work is very much in line with what most of us assume philosophy is. He talks a lot about ethics and logic. He was a master of classification who sorted messy subjects like language and nature into neat categories that we still use today. He’s a little dull, but “invented deductive reasoning” is a pretty impressive accomplishment for anyone to list on his resume.

Aristotle’s teacher, Plato, was in many ways his opposite. Where Aristotle’s work is dry and rational like a science textbook, Plato’s philosophy is entertaining and figurative. His writings unfold as dialogues between characters, some drawn from real life. It’s not always clear if he’s being serious or ironic. Yet Plato’s influence has been so great that the eminent British logician Alfred North Whitehead once commented—in a remark that I must’ve heard a dozen times during my reporting—that Western philosophy “consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.”

What had seemed like a quickie writing assignment stretched into weeks of research as I struggled to get a grip on Plato’s engrossing but slippery ideas. One afternoon, while reading Julia Annas’s introductory survey

Plato, I came across a sentence so striking that I had to reread it twice before its significance sank in: “In terms of sheer numbers of people affected, probably the most influential thing Plato ever wrote was his unfinished story of Atlantis.” In other words, the most impactful concept ever put forth by the most celebrated philosopher of all time was the famous tale of a lost civilization that sank beneath the waves.

That the story of Atlantis—much beloved by psychics, UFO spotters, and conspiracy theorists—should have sprung from one of history’s greatest minds struck me, to put it lightly, as a little odd. It was like hearing that Wittgenstein had helped fake the moon landings.

Around this time the Ocean extension of Google Earth was launched. The Atlantis seekers almost immediately flooded the Internet with claims that they’d located it at the bottom of the Atlantic near the Canary Islands. But what had initially looked like the street plan of a vast underwater metropolis turned out to be a grid pattern caused by ships’ sonars. After a few days the excitement faded. I assumed the seekers turned their attention back to more important matters, like searching for Bigfoot.

I did not yet understand that Atlantis is a virus, and that I’d been exposed.

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Starting in the late 1970s, a hugely successful movie trilogy was released that changed the lives of a generation of American boys. These three tales of incredible journeys, inspired by ancient myths and conflicts that transpired a long time ago in places far, far away, were cinematic catnip for preadolescent suburban youths with overactive imaginations and limited athletic skills. Some of my fondest childhood memories are of being dropped off with my best friend at the local Lake Theater and vibrating in our seats with anticipation. It didn’t matter that the dialogue was hackneyed or that we knew good would triumph over evil in the end. Even today, reading the titles of those three film epics gives me a chill that Luke Skywalker’s adventures never could: *In Search of Noah’s Ark*, *Beyond and Back*, and *In Search of Historic Jesus*.

What made these movies, and their beloved stepsibling, the Leonard Nimoy–hosted television show *In Search Of . . .*, so enticing was their willingness to explore what were known then as “unexplained phenomena” by straddling the worlds of history and myth. My Catholic school education didn’t allow for a lot of gray areas and ambiguities. Rather than declaring everything to be either true or false, these movies and programs left things open-ended. (*Could this thing that looks like a dirty tablecloth actually be the burial shroud of Jesus? Probably not—but maybe!*) A lot of what I watched was simply goofy—even at age ten I had doubts about anything involving Martians or communicating with plants. But usually, by the time the credits rolled I felt an uncontrollable urge to solve some mystery of my own. With enough hours in the library and one of those cool archaeologist’s brushes, why couldn’t I find Noah’s ark or figure out the meaning of Stonehenge?

I should have known I had no natural immunity against a contagion as powerful as Atlantis, but the symptoms crept up on me slowly. Just as a couple who’s thinking about having a baby suddenly starts seeing pregnant women on every street corner, I began to notice mentions of Atlantis online or on TV. The popular notion that Atlantis had sunk in the middle of the Atlantic seemed to have fallen out of fashion. I watched a BBC documentary that argued the Greek island of Santorini had been the original Atlantis, then saw a Discovery Channel special that strongly suggested the lost city had once been located in Antarctica. Months passed. Another writing assignment took me to a banquet for people who’d achieved incredible medical results through alternative health therapies. As a conversation starter I mentioned my new interest to my tablemates and nearly started a fistfight between a homeopath and an aromatherapist. One knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that Atlantis had been in the Bahamas while the other angrily insisted that only an idiot would search anywhere but the Mediterranean.

The more I became intrigued, the more apparent it became that searching—*actively* searching—for Atlantis, a discipline sometimes referred to as Atlantology, is something of a growth industry. Using clues embedded in Plato’s dialogues, Atlantologists had variously “located” his lost island empire in Scandinavia, Alaska, Indonesia, and just about every country that touches a large body of water. A few arguments were even made for landlocked, mountainous countries such as Bolivia, which seemed a little ambitious considering that whole sank-into-the-sea aspect. According to the most thorough tally I could find, more serious hypotheses about the location of Plato’s lost civilization had been proposed in the last ten years than in the previous twenty-four hundred, going all the way back to the days when Plato walked the streets of Athens.

Virtually all these possible sites had been found by energetic amateur sleuths. Serious historians and archaeologists, when they deigned to consider Atlantis at all, have always tended to treat Plato’s tale as a fiction invented to illustrate his complex political philosophy. At least the polite ones did. One specialist in archaeology and ancient history had written an entire book that treated the urge to find Atlantis as a sort of mental disorder.

And yet, almost universally believers and nonbelievers both agreed that Plato had done two things that made a real Atlantis seem believable. First, he embedded dozens of precise details in his story, including measurements, landmarks, and its position relative to other known places—the same sorts of particulars that have been used to find other lost cities. Second, Plato claimed repeatedly that the story was true and had been passed down to him from very reputable historical sources. This assurance only raised more questions. Was his pledge of veracity a clever philosopher’s trick to make a fantastic tale sound more realistic, or did he really believe that Atlantis had once existed? Was it possible that Plato believed the story but had been given false information? No original manuscripts of Plato’s works exist. Could his writing have been corrupted with errors over the centuries through the process of being transcribed by hand, over and over? Or had Plato, as some believed, hidden a coded message in his works that might be deciphered?

Because Plato is the only known source for the Atlantis tale, people had been debating the truth or falsity of the city’s destruction since his death in 347 BC. Academics typically gave the last word to the levelheaded Aristotle, who is quoted as having dismissed Plato’s sunken kingdom with the words, “He who invented Atlantis also destroyed it.”

Proof that the Atlantis tale was true wouldn’t just make for a great episode of *In Search Of* . . . It would also help solve some of ancient history’s greatest mysteries. The details of its sudden destruction may help explain a bizarre chain of natural catastrophes and apocalyptic famines that caused several advanced Mediterranean societies to collapse suddenly at the end of the Bronze Age. Some believed, with good reason, that the details in Plato’s Atlantis tale were closely related to stories in the Old Testament.

The virus continued to incubate. I set up an e-mail news alert for “Atlantis and Plato.” About once a week I’d receive notice that someone had devised a new location theory, as often as not pinpointing someplace like the Great Pyramid or the Bermuda Triangle.

The day after the devastating Fukushima tsunami in Japan—descriptions of which eerily echoed the “violent earthquakes and floods” that Plato claimed destroyed Atlantis—I was sitting in my office when Atlantis news alerts started pinging like a pinball machine. Evidently, someone had found the lost island for real this time, or at least serious media outlets around the world were treating the latest discovery as news.

I was torn. The logical, Aristotle half of my brain told me that it couldn’t be possible, that any search for Atlantis was bound to be the wildest of goose chases. The daydreamy, Plato half of my brain said that nothing was beyond imagining. Perhaps this was something I should look into further, I thought. I searched out a passage I’d underlined in Plato’s *Meno*, in which the characters discuss the limits of knowledge. One

philosopher says to another, “We shall be better and braver and less helpless if we think that we ought to inquire than we should have been if we indulged in the idle fancy that there was no knowing and no use in seeking to know what we do not know.”

Bumper sticker translation: If you don’t ask questions, you’ll never find any answers.

CHAPTER TWO

Lowenstein Academic Building, Fordham University

When I first read that Plato was the source of the Atlantis myth, I imagined the Atlantis I knew from Saturday morning cartoons: a city of hyperintelligent beings who dwelled beneath the waves in air-locked bubble houses powered by magic crystals. It turned out that Plato’s original version is a bit more complicated and a lot more interesting.

The Atlantis tale unfolds in two parts, stretched across a pair of Plato’s later works, the *Timaeus* and the *Critias*. Few non-Atlantologists without PhDs are familiar with these dialogues, and for a good reason: They are extremely weird. They are also, however, closely related to Plato’s most famous dialogue, the *Republic*, which would finish first in a poll to determine the most influential philosophical work of all time. The *Republic* is logical and forceful and covers a lot of ground—not many books can be called foundational texts of both Christianity and Fascism—and is packed with brilliant, radical ideas.

The *Timaeus*, a dialogue that Plato wrote as a sort of sequel to the *Republic*—and which introduced Atlantis to the world—is messy and confusing. It contains mathematics, cosmology, natural sciences, an explanation of why time exists, possibly ironic musings on what types of animals humans transform into after reincarnation, and, as the philosopher Bertrand Russell drily noted, “more that is simply silly than is to be found in [Plato’s] other writings.” The *Critias*, which provides most of the details used to search for Atlantis, reads like a Greek myth rewritten by a middle schooler whose grade depends on using lots of numbers and adjectives. It ends unresolved, halfway through a sentence.

Two painful attempts to plow through the *Timaeus* and *Critias* convinced me that I needed a guide. Enter Brian Johnson, who was teaching Introduction to Plato at Fordham University. I was swayed by his near-perfect ratings on RateMyProfessors.com, which included encouraging comments such as “Philosophy can be reallllly boring, but he makes it interesting.” Johnson invited me up to his tiny, windowless office on the eighth floor of a high-rise on Manhattan’s west side. He was slim, bespectacled, and cheerful. We purchased gigantic coffees in the university cafeteria and retired to the silence of the philosophy department.

One reason why the *Timaeus* is so confusing, Johnson explained, is that it was the product of a rather daunting assignment Plato had given himself—to formulate a theory that explained pretty much everything in existence, known and unknown. “There’s no such thing as a cosmic book that you can open up and it explains the laws of nature,” Johnson said. “Plato’s concerned about the grounds for knowledge. He’s looking for regularity in a chaotic world. In the *Timaeus* there’s this attempt to associate all things with numbers,” Johnson said. “He’s trying to give a theological account that provides something like the geometric logic of nature.” According to tradition, over the entrance of the university Plato founded in Athens, the Academy, were posted the words LET NO ONE IGNORANT OF GEOMETRY ENTER HERE.

For Plato, the earth is a globe that rotates because that is the most perfect shape and the most perfect motion. Everything in the natural world can be broken down into four elements: fire, air, water, and earth. These elements are in turn composed of four geometric solids: four-sided, six-sided, eight-sided, and twenty-sided.

A fifth, twelve-sided polygon represented the universe. Johnson pulled an animated diagram of the Platonic solids up on his computer screen. They looked like the multifaceted dice from *Dungeons & Dragons*. These five solids, according to the *Timaeus*, can be subdivided further into two types of triangles, both of which have measurements that correspond to the Pythagorean theorem: $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$.

The *Timaeus*, with its emphasis on a world created by a single god, was hugely influential in the development of Christian and Islamic ideas. The speaker Timaeus explains how the cosmos was fashioned from chaos by a single demiurge, or Divine Craftsman. This creator is good, and therefore the world is good. This will sound familiar to anyone raised in a modern religious household, but it was a fairly radical departure from the traditional Greek pantheon of gods who drank, fought, engaged in various sexual hijinks, and capriciously meddled in the affairs of mortals. Unlike the Old Testament God, Plato's Divine Craftsman does not create the cosmos ex nihilo. He uses a set of ideal blueprints but must work with the imperfect materials the universe has presented to him, which is why the world often falls short of mathematical perfection.

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Plato's odd choice to sandwich his theories about the creation of the cosmos between the two halves of the Atlantis tale has been discussed and debated almost since the moment he died. So has the question of whether he meant the story to be true or not. I mentioned to Johnson that Aristotle had famously dismissed the story, and he nodded in agreement. Aristotle spent twenty years studying at Plato's Academy, which was the world's first university. During and after his time there he seems to have rejected many of Plato's ideas. According to one melodramatic bit of ancient gossip, following Plato's death, his star pupil was angry at being passed over to replace his mentor as the head of the institute. One later writer, Johnson told me, said Plato had referred to Aristotle as "the foal that kicks its mother when it's had too much milk."¹

I was curious to know if stories like that of Atlantis were common in Plato's writings. "There are things about it that are typical," Johnson said. "It's a story within a story. It's a way of Plato distancing himself from making it literal. It allows Plato a little free range." The philosopher was certainly fond of inserting myths into his dialogues. The *Republic* ends with the Myth of Er, about a soldier who comes back to life on his funeral pyre after dying on the battlefield. "He claims to have seen the transmigration of souls," Johnson said. "You get to pick your next life." According to this myth, those who choose to live justly go to heaven, while those who seek money or power are condemned to misery.

"One thing I noticed is that Plato stresses over and over that the Atlantis story is true," I said.

"You've probably heard about the Noble Lie."

I had. This was Plato's mandate in the *Republic* that in order to maintain the class structure necessary for an ideal society, the rulers would need to tell the lower caste that the system had been put in place by God. In this way the wisest would continue to lead and the others would be satisfied with their station in life.

"Maybe when he insists on the truth of Atlantis, that itself is sort of a Noble Lie," Johnson said. He reached for his thick *Collected Works of Plato* and scanned the pages with his index finger. "One other thing that seems typical is that the story resolves itself through natural disaster. Here it is, in the *Laws*." The *Laws* was one of Plato's final works, an attempt to draw up a blueprint for the society he'd outlined in the *Republic*. It's infamous for being even harder to comprehend than the *Timaeus*, and mind-bendingly dull. "Even people who study ancient philosophy tend to dip in and out of the *Laws* rather than reading the whole thing," Johnson admitted.

Johnson read aloud. "The human race has been repeatedly annihilated by floods and plagues and many other

causes, so that only a fraction of it has survived.”

That sure sounded a lot like Atlantis. In the *Timaeus*, an Egyptian priest tells his Greek visitor, “There have been, and will be again, many destructions of mankind arising out of many causes; the greatest have been brought about by the agencies of fire and water, and other lesser ones by innumerable other causes.” Might it have been a story Plato made up to show an idealized state, like the one he proposed in the *Republic*, that was corrupted and thus had to be punished by the gods?

“Here’s a hypothesis that could be wildly wrong,” Johnson said, closing the book. “It seems like the Atlantis myth does cash in on some ideas from the *Republic*. Have you bumped into this idea of the Golden Age?”

I had. The Greeks were great believers in the Good Old Days. For Plato, who was a bit of a snob, this would have been an imaginary time when Athens was ruled by wise aristocrats rather than a mob ignorant of geometry.

“I gather that Atlantis was supposed to be like his philosopher-kings model and that it was destroyed by natural disaster,” he said. In the *Republic*, Plato proposes that the best possible leaders would be philosopher-kings, monarchs who ruled wisely because they had been trained in the philosophic arts, especially mathematics. “Plato says that the ideal state cannot last. He seemed to think its own downfall is built into the very structure of nature.”

Johnson had a fascinating poster on his wall that at first glance looked like the concentric circles of Atlantis. I was disappointed to learn it was actually a re-creation of a map from the movie *Time Bandits*. I seemed to recall the movie beginning with a boy’s fascination with ancient Greece and leading through a long, complicated journey based on possibly unreliable source materials. I couldn’t remember if it had a happy ending.

“I’m guessing Atlantis isn’t discussed much in professional philosophy circles,” I said.

“It isn’t. Insofar as it is referenced, it’s going to be to ask, what philosophy can we extract from this myth?”

“So do you think it’s possible that Atlantis ever existed?” I asked. I didn’t mention anything about actually going to look for it.

We sat in silence while Johnson formulated an answer. He had the sympathetic look on his face that teachers use when they don’t want to discourage classroom discussion, even though the students obviously haven’t understood the assigned reading. The five Platonic solids rotated merrily on his computer screen.

“I guess I’m open to the idea,” he said, finally. “So long as it’s reasonable.”

CHAPTER THREE

Saïs, Egypt (ca. 600 BC)

This is a detective story, one that starts in ancient Greece and follows a twisting path through (to list just a few locations) Pharaonic Egypt, Nazi Germany, and contemporary Saint Paul, Minnesota. And as with any good detective story, it helps to assemble all the available evidence in one place.

The story begins in the *Timaeus*, which takes its title from the character of that name, whose elaborate musings on the nature of the universe have kept philologists busy for two millennia. As was common in

Plato's dialogues, some of the speakers are historical figures whom Plato knew personally. Socrates, who in real life was Plato's beloved philosophical mentor, sets the scene by reminding everyone that the previous day he had given a speech on the ideal city, a reference to the *Republic*. He asks his three companions—Timaeus, Critias, and Hermocrates—to each tell a story to illustrate his ideas. Hermocrates suggests that Critias should start by sharing “one that goes back a long way.”

Critias, a relative of Plato, prefaces his tale by saying it is “a very strange one, but even so, every word of it is true.” To stress its veracity, Critias explains that he heard it from his very old grandfather, who heard it from his father. The original source was unimpeachable: Solon, one of the great statesmen in Athenian history and Plato's great-great-great-great-grandfather. The story Critias tells his friends recounts a great moment in the history of Athens, “the most magnificent thing our city has ever done.”

Following so far? Two historical figures, Socrates and Critias, have a presumably invented conversation about a supposedly true story passed down by one of Plato's ancestors. Let's proceed.

Long ago, Critias tells his friends, Solon paid a visit to the Egyptian city of Saïs. He was greeted as an honored guest by priests who were scholars of ancient history. One day Solon began to speak with his hosts about figures from Greek antiquity, but one of the Egyptians interrupted him and said, “O Solon, Solon, you Greeks are never anything but children, and there is not an old man among you.” The priest explained that Greek society had been repeatedly wiped out by floods or fire, while Egypt had been spared these disasters. The collective history and culture of the Greeks had been all but erased many times, leaving behind only an illiterate band of survivors on each occasion. Therefore, the priest told Solon, the Greeks had no memory “that the finest and best of all the races of humankind once lived in your region.” The Egyptians, having avoided such catastrophes, had maintained in their temples records of the great or noble acts of all peoples, including those of the Athenians.

Before the most devastating of all floods, the priest explained, the laws and military deeds of Athens had been the greatest ever known. This was in the far distant past, nine thousand years ago. The most glorious Athenian deed of all, the priest continued, was its halting of a vast sea power called Atlantis. Atlantis had insolently attacked all of Europe and Asia, and its empire was larger than Libya and Asia combined. Atlantis was situated on an island in the infinite Atlantic Sea, located in front of the straits that the Greeks called the Pillars of Heracles.² Without provocation, Atlantis had conquered all lands up to Egypt and Tyrrhenia. It sought to subdue and enslave Egypt, Greece, and all other countries within the Mediterranean. But the noble Athenians, deserted by their allies, fought on alone and defeated the invaders, thus freeing all those “within the boundaries of Heracles.”

Plato, via the priest, has spun a classic story of heroism—the virtuous underdogs defeating the powerful, evil empire. *Star Wars* in sandals. But then Plato adds the twist that has made the Atlantis story immortal. After the Athenian victory, the priest continues, “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 which reason the sea in those parts is impassable and impenetrable, because there is a shoal of mud in the way; and this was caused by the subsidence of the island.”

Then, just as the story is heating up, Critias pauses to tell Socrates that actually, Timaeus should speak first, because his tale deals with the creation of the entire universe. Timaeus, a Pythagorean philosopher from Italy, takes over the dialogue by asking a very Platonic question—“What is that which always is and has no becoming; and what is that which is always becoming and never is?”—and then commences to explain at length Plato's kaleidoscopic scientific speculations about the order of the cosmos and how at the atomic level everything is composed of tiny triangles.³

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We're only part of the way into the Atlantis story—we haven't even gotten to its supernatural creation—but already Plato's character is giving an account that a TV judge would call unreliable, considering that it would need to have been transmitted absolutely error-free through six generations from Solon to Plato. Unfortunately, Plato also contradicts himself on its source. In the *Timaeus*, Critias claims to be speaking solely from memory and complains of having lain awake all night trying to remember the story's details as he's heard them from his grandfather. In the *Critias*, however, the speaker Critias says that he possesses Solon's original notes from his conversation with the Egyptian priest at Saïs.

Even if we take the leap of faith and assume that Solon did write Dictaphone-perfect notes of his conversations in Saïs, there is the question of whether the priest himself was a reliable source. He tells Solon—whom most experts agree really did visit Egypt—that the great events of antiquity had been inscribed in Egyptian temples. The temples were certainly real; Saïs has long since vanished, but researchers are still digging out archaeological clues in the area where it once stood. It seems certain, though, that Solon neither spoke the Egyptian language nor read hieroglyphs. Thus, the absolute best-case scenario is Plato having two-hundred-year-old, thirdhand information, relayed by a priest who might have wanted to impress his distinguished visitor. Not exactly evidence you'd want to bring before a grand jury.

Then there's the question of what defined accurate information in Plato's day. Recorded history in the fourth century BC was a fairly recent invention. Herodotus, celebrated as the "father of history" by Cicero, began compiling his historical narratives based on firsthand accounts more than a century after Solon died. Prior to that time, events had been recorded in stories passed down orally, such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Plato himself was ambivalent about the relatively new technology of preserving information through writing. In his dialogue the *Phaedrus*, he has Socrates discredit writing as inferior to memory because it cannot be probed by questioning and so offers "the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom."

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The quality of Plato's evidence for Atlantis may be debatable, but he did not stint on the quantity. In the sequel to the *Timaeus*, the *Critias*, the eponymous speaker once again takes up the story he says originated with Solon. This time Plato puts so much detail into his character's mouth about the lost island kingdom that a curious reader naturally starts to wonder where it all came from.

Critias starts with a recap, adding some specifics: Roughly nine thousand years have passed since war broke out between those who lived outside the Pillars of Heracles and those who lived within; Atlantis sank and "became an impassable barrier of mud to voyagers sailing from hence to any part of the ocean." He explains that some of the names of great men from Athenian history have been passed down from long ago but that most of the details of their deeds had been erased by the intervening catastrophes the Egyptian priest described. The only survivors of these disasters were illiterate mountain dwellers who were too preoccupied with trying to survive to be concerned with the events of the past, which is why the story of Atlantis was forgotten.

Here, Critias starts dropping hints that only a classics professor who dabbles in numerology—or an Atlantologist—would look at closely. Nine thousand years ago, Critias explains, all of Greece had been fertile, but floods washed much of its soil into the sea, leaving behind "the mere skeleton of the land." Simultaneously, "there were earthquakes, and then occurred the extraordinary inundation, which was the third before the great destruction of Deucalion." The flood of Deucalion is a Greek myth, probably based on a historical event, with many parallels to the tale of Noah's ark, most notably that a good man is spared the watery wrath of an angry god by building a wooden vessel. Nine thousand years before Solon's time

mammoths and saber-toothed cats still walked the earth; for now, let's just say the date is important but problematic.

Way back then, the Acropolis of Athens, the rocky hill atop which the Parthenon was later constructed, was much larger and more fertile than the skeletal ruins—covered outcrop seen on posters in Greek diners. The warrior class of Athens lived there communally, in simple buildings on the north side of the hill. A single spring provided sufficient water, but it was smothered by the debris of an earthquake. Athens's population of military-aged men was kept steady at about twenty thousand. Then, in a single night's storm, all the topsoil from the Acropolis washed into the sea.

That's an awful lot of detail for Plato to have invented and we haven't even gotten to the really strange stuff yet.

As for Atlantis, Critias says, we don't know what it was really called, since all the names in the original story were long ago translated into Egyptian, which Solon then translated into Greek. This is a key point: Atlantis wasn't actually called Atlantis by the citizens of Atlantis. Here, Plato really starts piling on the specifics. Atlantis was under dominion of the god Poseidon. Atlantis was beautiful. At its center was a large, fertile plain. Near the plain was a short mountain on which dwelt Cleito, the mortal mother of Poseidon's children. Around this hill Poseidon cut a series of concentric circles—two of land and three of water, laid out perfectly equidistant from one another as if shaped “with compass and lathe.” (Remember that: three concentric circles of water.) Poseidon installed two springs, one hot and one cold. Cleito bore Poseidon five sets of twin sons, so the island was divided into ten districts with each son receiving dominion over one. The finest of these belonged to Atlas, who inherited his mother's lands in the central plain. The second-best allotment was given to Atlas's twin, Eumelos, who was called Gadeirus in the language of Atlantis. His plot faced the Pillars of Heracles, opposite the land that Critias said was now known as Gades, probably in his honor.

Atlantis was the wealthiest kingdom ever known, Critias continues, and what few things it could not provide for itself it obtained through trade. Atlantis was rich in orichalcum, a glistening metal whose preciousness was second only to gold. Fruits, flowers, and domesticated grain crops flourished, and the island's lush plants supported abundant wildlife, including many elephants.

At this point Plato starts to sound less like a philosopher than a zealous urban planner. A canal was dug that pierced the three circles of water so that ships could pass to the center; it measured three plethra (three hundred feet) wide, one plethron (one hundred feet) deep, and fifty stades (at six hundred feet to the Greek stade, a little under six miles) long. Bridges were constructed over the rings, and smaller water passages large enough for a single warship to pass were dug next to each bridge. Atlantis's interior island measured five stades across, or about three thousand feet in diameter. Around it was constructed a stone wall. Stone for building was quarried from beneath the central island and other zones—this stone was white, black, and red. (The tricolor stone: remember that.) The space where stone had been removed was used as harbors for ships, with stone roofs. The walls around the outer rings were decorated in brass and tin; the wall around the central citadel “flashed with the red light of orichalcum.”

Just think: Solon or one of his assistants was scribbling all this down. Wouldn't his hand get tired?

In the innermost circle of the concentric rings, the kings of Atlantis built a spectacular palace, “a marvel to behold for size and for beauty.” There was also a shrine to Poseidon and his wife, Cleito, which was surrounded by a wall of gold. This temple was one stade long and half a stade wide (approximately six hundred by three hundred feet) and had “a strange, barbaric appearance.” The walls and ceilings were covered in precious metals and ivory; inside, gold statues had been erected, including a roof-scraping Poseidon guiding a chariot led by six winged horses. A beautifully crafted altar stood outside the temple.

Nearby were two springs, one hot and one cold; their overflow was used to irrigate the grove of Poseidon, in which grew “all manner of trees of wonderful height and beauty.”

Atlantis was a busy maritime port; its large navy sailed in triremes, warships pulled by oars. A wall fifty stades (about six miles) from the outermost ring of water ran around the central circles. Inside the wall lived a densely populated mercantile society whose ports “kept up a multitudinous sound of human voices, and din and clatter of all sorts night and day.”

The capital of Atlantis abutted an oblong plain that measured three thousand by two thousand stades, or approximately 340 by 230 miles. The island sloped southward toward the sea, and the central plain was surrounded by mountains that “were celebrated for their number and size and beauty, far beyond any which still exist.” (The plain, the mountains—those will come up again.) These peaks protected the island from strong northerly winds. A great canal was excavated around the entire plain. Water trickled down from the mountains into a grid of massive irrigation channels that crisscrossed the plain, spaced one hundred stades (eleven miles) apart. Atlantis had two growing seasons per year.

The plain was divided into sixty thousand districts, each of which was led by a military commander who was expected to raise at least twenty men, including ten armed soldiers, four sailors, four horses, and four horsemen. The Atlantean navy had twelve hundred ships.

(One can almost imagine Timaeus counting on his fingers and giving Socrates the side eye.)

The ten kings of Atlantis ruled according to the laws of their father, which had been inscribed on a pillar of orichalcum in the Temple of Poseidon. The kings gathered every fifth and then every sixth year to determine if any of them had violated the sacred laws and to take part in the ritual capture of bulls that had been set free in the temple. They caught the beasts using only staffs and ropes (“but with no iron weapon”), then slaughtered them on the pillar as a sacrifice. The kings put on magnificent blue robes for a ceremony in which they passed judgments and swore to rule fairly. Above all, the kings vowed never to war among themselves. If one of their number should attempt to overtake the kingdom, all the rest promised to join forces against the insurrection. They understood their great material fortune and saw their wealth as a burden.

Over the generations, though, the Atlanteans became debased, filled with “avarice and unrighteous power.” Zeus could see that the Atlanteans must be punished for their waning virtue. So he hailed the gods to their pantheon, from which all the world could be seen. “And when he had called them together, he spake as follows—”

There, Plato breaks off the story abruptly, as if someone has kicked the plug out of the phonograph. Whether Plato terminated the story abruptly for dramatic effect or because Aristotle had just arrived with his lunch order is impossible to know.

CHAPTER FOUR

County Leitrim, Ireland

Getting philosophy professors to rank their top ten thinkers had been surprisingly easy. Getting academic specialists to discuss searching for Atlantis proved to be somewhat more difficult. Brian Johnson had been correct; those philosophy professors who wrote about it tended to dismiss it outright as a clever invention, a literary device created by Plato to illustrate his political ideas. Julia Annas, perhaps America’s preeminent

expert on Plato, decreed that it has been “convincingly established” that the story was fictional. A symposium held at Indiana University devoted to the topic “Atlantis: Fact or Fiction?” had awarded the title to the latter in a knockout. Most of the e-mails I sent and re-sent to addresses ending in .edu went unanswered. One prominent archaeologist whom I contacted wrote back to inform me that no serious scholar would ever entertain the idea that any part of the Atlantis tale had been real, and that I was foolish even to inquire about such things. Her definitive sign-off was ominous: “I hope you listen, for the sake of your reputation as a writer.”

I couldn't blame academics for being wary. Any online search for information about Atlantis quickly sucks one into a wormhole of conspiracy theories and magic portals to untapped dimensions. Anyone with credentials who dared to entertain the possibility of Atlantis having existed was probably inundated by weirdos.

As I typed Atlantis-related search terms into Google, one glaring exception came up again and again, a site called the Atlantipedia. It was comprehensive, with hundreds of entries, all of which were written in an evenhanded style, offering dry commentary where appropriate. (Of one theorist who suggested that the Atlanteans had access to space travel, lasers, and cloning, the site's author noted, “A cynic might be forgiven for attributing his outlandish views to his unrepentant support for the use of marijuana.”) The tone was skeptical but not dismissive. The range of subjects was exhaustive. Several feasible location theories were presented and dissected. The Atlantipedia, it emerged, was the work of one person, an Irish retiree named Tony O'Connell.⁴

I e-mailed Tony and asked if he might be open to answering a few questions. He suggested a list of books to read and invited me to come over to Ireland and stay with him as long as I liked. “The simple fact is that these theories cannot all be right and quite possibly all are wrong,” he cautioned. “Take it slow or your head will spin.”

A month later, as Tony and I drove west from the Dublin airport, he explained over the sound of the windshield wipers how he'd gotten involved in Atlantology. Years before, he had owned a small trucking dispatch company in Dublin, an all-consuming job that required him to keep track of thousands of details. One early morning while he and his longtime boyfriend, Paul, were working late in the warehouse, a gang of robbers entered and held guns to their necks. Afterward, Tony had a revelation. “I was sitting atop a forklift and I realized, I can't do this anymore.” He left the city for a tiny village in County Leitrim, which is probably best known for being Ireland's least-populated region. When Tony's mother began to suffer from dementia, she moved in with him. “As she descended into madness I decided that I needed a distraction,” he told me. He had the idea of compiling an Atlantis encyclopedia.

The more evidence Tony amassed about the various location theories, the more he became convinced that Plato's story was probably true. And the more he learned about the subject, the more he felt able to narrow down the area in which Atlantis might have existed.

Tony lived about a mile outside of a village that consisted of two pubs, the ruins of two medieval abbeys, a grade school, and a visitors center that never seemed to be open when I passed by. He and Paul (who had moved in for a while with his own ailing mother) lived in a house that had until the 1950s been the station for a narrow-gauge railway line. Their home was cozy, with two bedrooms upstairs and a small office on the ground floor that held Tony's impressive Atlantis library. The kitchen smelled of spices and cigarettes, since Paul was a passionate cook and smoker. Tony did most of his Atlantis-related work in the front room, tapping away on a laptop perched atop a coffee table as the BBC News played on the television, muted. He was round and bald and walked with a limp from gout. A mischievous gleam in his eye hinted that he might be pulling someone's leg and made you hope that it wasn't yours. He raised his eyebrows above his wire-

framed eyeglasses whenever emphasizing his doubts about something. When he laughed, which happened often, his whole body shook. He reminded me of an off-duty department store Santa Claus.

Like most men of a certain age, Tony had a daily routine that varied only slightly. Tony and Paul kept almost opposite hours. Tony got up early. Paul, who was a couple of decades younger, was a night owl and usually woke in the afternoon, when Tony brought him breakfast in bed. After dinner, Tony usually dropped Paul at one of the two local pubs; Paul carried a reflective vest and penlight for his 2:00 A.M. walk home. His mortal enemy, a nasty Doberman, lived a few doors down. “If you decide you’d like to go for a walk, you’d best go in the other direction,” Paul warned me, lighting another cigarette to steady his nerves.

Tony usually conducted his online Atlantis business in the mornings while drinking a mug of tea and wearing his bathrobe, which gave the impression that he was puttering about on the web. Later, I’d log on to the Atlantipedia site and find that he’d written three new entries while I was in the kitchen eating my morning muesli. The Atlantipedia served as a sort of clearinghouse for amateur, and occasionally professional, Atlantologists. “Some person has identified Mesopotamia as an island surrounded by two rivers,” he called out one morning from the living room. “Not the Mesopotamia where Iraq is, which might make some sort of sense. It’s the one located in Argentina.”

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Late each morning, Tony and I drove over to the small city of Carrick-on-Shannon to do a little shopping and run some errands, like placing horse racing wagers for Paul at the off-track betting office. One day we stopped by the local registry so that Tony could pick up the paperwork for a civil partnership. After twenty-odd years as a couple, Tony and Paul were making things official. Once our tasks were completed, we’d stop for a coffee and slice of cake.

When I had initially asked Tony why he thought the Atlantis story was true, he had pointed me to a fascinating scholarly essay by a former NASA scientist, the late A. N. Kontaratos, which cites twenty-two instances in which Plato attests to the veracity of the Atlantis story.

“Solon was a very important lawmaker, a very just man, and highly regarded,” he told me at the coffee shop, whose jazzy decor made it seem as though we were discussing lost cities on the set of *Friends*. “Plato using him would be like you writing a book and invoking Benjamin Franklin as your source. You wouldn’t do it if it wasn’t true. I think the most powerful argument is when he expresses reservations—like he does about the ditch around the plain.” Critias pauses his description of the enormous channel carved by generations of Atlanteans to explain that while he knows that its incredible proportions seem unrealistic, he’s only passing along what he was told. “No one’s ever going to express reservation about his own argument,” Tony said. “That’s counterproductive.”

On the other hand, Tony noted, “no one ever asks if Solon made it up. Or if the Egyptians made it up to impress their visitor. You’ve got to tread very carefully.”

But though Tony believed that the core story—that a large maritime power had waged a war against the eastern Mediterranean—was true, almost everything else should be viewed with skepticism, most particularly numbers and measurements, such as the claim that Atlantis had been larger than Libya and Asia combined. Libya in Solon’s day was the coastal strip of North Africa from the Atlantic Ocean up to Egypt. Asia was Asia Minor, or modern Turkey. The Greeks of Plato’s era had no methods to measure large areas of interior land. Greek sailors followed the coast and navigated by landmarks and other recognizable features, as in Herodotus’s advice, “When you get eleven fathoms and ooze on the lead, you are a day’s journey out from Alexandria.”

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