

The Greek philosopher Plato, towards the end of his life, wrote two dialogues, the Timaeus and the Critias, which are today most famous as the only sources for the enigmatic legend of Atlantis. No other writer before Plato had ever mentioned the lost island, and many of Plato's colleagues, including Aristotle, believed the entire tale to be pure fiction. After all, it did seem hard to believe that an island "larger than Libya and Asia" had once existed outside the Straits of Gibraltar in the Atlantic Ocean; that this island had a sophisticated culture back in 9600 B.C.; that its walls and palaces were covered in gold and silver; that it threatened to

destroy not only ancient Athens but also ancient Egypt; that it was obliterated by earthquakes and floods "in a single day and night", and was never to be seen again. Aristotle, in fact, was very blunt about the Island of Atlantis: "the man who dreamed it up," he wrote, "also made it disappear."

But did Plato in fact "dream it up"? The philosopher himself asserted in the dialogues that the story was true and had been told to the Greek poet Solon by an old Egyptian priest. Solon, said Plato, intended to compose a poem about Atlantis, but somehow never got around to doing so. However, the notebooks of the poet apparently survived, saving the tale from oblivion.

Could an Atlantis really have existed? Remember that scholars not too long ago denied the existence of Homer's city of Troy, claiming that Homer "dreamed it up"; then an amateur archaeologist named Heinrich Schliemann found Troy and vindicated the accuracy of the Iliad. As a result, historians gradually came to realize that there just might be some truth in many of the old Greek myths. This is not to say that every Greek myth is literally true, but rather that many myths seem to arise out of real, historical events. Thus, the legend of Atlantis might well have its origin in the actual destruction of a very real island during the formative years of Greek civilization.

It has been shown in recent years that the major Greek myths all seem to be connected with the civilizations of the Bronze Age in the Aegean, c. 3000-1200 B.C. Interestingly enough, during this period an island in the Aegean did in fact experience a catastrophic destruction: Strongulê was its name then, but today it is known as Thera.

Thera is an active volcano which erupted with incredible violence sometime around the year 1450 B.C. Prior to that eruption, the island had been a circular land mass of ten miles in diameter, with a tall

volcanic peak in the middle; after that eruption, the center of Thera disappeared, leaving pieces of land arranged in a broken ring around a deep caldera. Apparently, so violent was the eruption that the entire central cone of the volcano emptied itself and then collapsed; sea water breached the outer ring of land and poured into the central area. The effects of this catastrophe were indeed awesome: massive amounts of pumice covered the remnants of Thera and floated thickly upon the surrounding sea; ash, expelled from the volcano, was carried by strong winds towards Crete and Egypt; giant seismic sea waves (often called tsunamis) were generated and caused further destruction in the Aegean.

Only seventy miles south of Thera lay the sophisticated civilization of Minoan Crete. The archaeological record in Crete shows that major centres fell into chaos around the year 1450 B.C. Can this be mere co-incidence? Or, did the volcanic eruption on Thera in fact destroy Minoan civilization? After many years of investigation, many authorities today do indeed attribute the fall of Minoan Crete to the eruption of Thera. Crete, we now know, was covered with enough ash to wipe out its vegetation for years to come; its coasts were also ravaged by tsunamis. In addition, earthquakes which accompanied the eruption on Thera also took their toll on Crete. Crete fell into chaos.

Herein, then, may be found the origin of Atlantis. As seen from an Egyptian point of view (Solon, after all, heard the tale in Egypt), Crete would be a large island in the West which suddenly "disappeared", i.e., fell out of communication with the rest of the Aegean. This destruction of Crete would have been linked with the actual physical obliteration of a land mass, i.e., Thera, and with violent earthquakes and floods. From this start, the tale would grow and become embellished, as such stories tend to be, until the full-fledged tale of Atlantis was created.

And so, Plato's tale of Atlantis may have a kernel of truth after all. We may still want to dismiss tales of palaces covered with gold and springs with hot and cold running water, but the fact remains that once, in the Bronze Age, a violent natural catastrophe took place which destroyed both Thera and Minoan Crete. Indeed, one would expect an event of this magnitude to leave a lasting impression on the ancient mind, an impression that would naturally find expression in myth.