Atlantis, Plato and the Philosopher-Liar

by P.Y. Forsyth

One of the best known Greek myths is the tale of Atlantis as told by the Greek philosopher Plato: there once existed, somewhere beyond the Straits of Gibraltar, a mighty island empire that was destroyed by the gods in a single day and night. Indeed, people still continue to search for evidence of this lost civilization, including two Canadian enthusiasts who have recently argued that the remains of Atlantis are to be found underneath the ice of Antarctica. It was the publication of this theory that led me, last March, to an interview with a CBC team at work on a "documentary" on Atlantis.

What I found most interesting as the interview began was the reporter's apparent unease with two conflicting beliefs: he really didn't believe that Plato's Atlantis ever existed, but was disturbed to think that such a great philosopher would ever record something that was not true: after all, he pointed out, Plato clearly says the tale is true when he writes about Atlantis in two dialogues called the Timaeus and the Critias. In brief, he asked, "would a guy like Plato lie to us?"—to which I boldly answered, yes!

Now, charging Plato with lying may seem like pretty serious stuff, so let me explain before his heirs bring a slander suit against me. In the Republic, one of Plato's most important works and one still read in university courses today, the Greek philosopher expounds upon the concept of the "philosopher-king," that is, an all-powerful and very wise ruler specially educated to lead his city-state (Plato, you see, was no fan of democracy). One of the duties of such a ruler was to improve the city and its people, and, at least to some extent, the end would justify the means. So, in other words, if improving the city and the citizens meant telling them something that was not literally true, but that would benefit them in some way, it was permissible. Thus was born Plato's concept of the "noble fiction, one of those necessary untruths" that serve a useful social purpose (Republic 3.414). A good ruler was, then, allowed "to use lies for the good of the city" (3.389); if spreading such a "noble fiction" (read "lie") would benefit the city and its people, then, says Plato, its literal "untruth" becomes "poetic truth".

Now this is where Plato's tale of Atlantis enters the picture. Like other stories found in the dialogues of Plato, the myth of Atlantis served as a candy-coated drug - rather than boring his readers to tears with some complex philosophical argument, Plato created an engaging tale to get a moral point across. (We still do this with children today: "and the moral of the story is...") In the case of Atlantis, the philosopher was issuing a warning to the rulers of his day: don't get too high and mighty, don't get too greedy for power and wealth, because if you do, the gods will destroy you and your city just as they destroyed Atlantis. It is even likely that Plato was addressing his warning to one specific ruler of his day, Dionysius, the tyrant of Syracuse in Sicily: we know that Plato had made several visits to Syracuse over the course of his life, all in an attempt to create a real-life philosopher-king out of Dionysius or his son, but to no avail. The tale of Atlantis, then, may well have been invented by Plato in one final effort to get his message across.

Plato never did live to see a philosopher-king rule in his world, and, towards the end of his life, he even backed away from advocating the rule of such a philosopher-king as an ideal (you can see this for yourself in his final work, the Laws). But even if he died a disillusioned man, Plato is probably having a good laugh at our expense these days: there are still people all over the world eagerly searching for the lost Atlantis - whether in the Atlantic Ocean itself or in Antarctica, Russia, Greenland, Ireland, Great Britain, the North Sea, France, the Aegean, or even Spain (where fishy tales seem quite popular of late). I do wonder, however, what my CBC friend made of all this when the lights finally went out and the tape was stopped; maybe I'll find out someday when the documentary hits the airwaves!

Postscript: The documentary was shown on April 17, 1995, on Prime Time News. The author is now awaiting a movie offer.