Page 2 | The Temple of Poseidon. Set design for the opera *Atalanta*, c. 1950, by Sir Gerald Hargreaves.
Pages 4–5 | America as the real Atlantis. Map from N. and G. Sanson's *Cartes générales*, 1670.

**ART+IMAGINATION**

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# ATLANTIS,

the vanished land between Europe and America, is the noblest setting ever conceived for a drama that has haunted imaginations through the centuries: the drama – the tragedy – of a primordial glory that was lost. It takes many forms, and it interweaves two perennial myths or daydreams, the Golden Age and Ancient Wisdom.

Classical literature is the best-known context for these. Greek poets, such as Hesiod in the 8th century BC, speak of the 'golden race' that flourished before the rise of the present gods. The golden people lived free from care, feeding on the bounty of nature, without disease or decrepitude. They had no government, therefore no misrule; Astraea, goddess of Justice, dwelt among them. Then Zeus (Jupiter in Roman parlance) seized power and the golden world ended. A lesser humanity was taught the arts of life by Prometheus, one of the Titans or elder deities, and Zeus punished him for it.

*The golden people lived free from care, feeding on the bounty of nature, without disease or decrepitude. They had no government, therefore no misrule …*

Hinduism has its Golden Age in what is known as the Krita Yuga, an age long ago. All creatures were virtuous and wise, fulfilling the inbuilt law of their nature. The Krita Yuga gave way to a series of inferior yugas (ages). Earthly enlightenment began with the Seven Rishis, semi-divine seers or sages, described as 'mysterious beings connected with the origin of humanity and knowledge'. In the *Bhagavad Gita* Krishna, who is the Supreme God incarnate, recalls how he created the Rishis, and himself taught an 'eternal yoga'. But through 'long lapse of time' it was forgotten, and Ancient Wisdom in general decayed with the decline of the world.

→ A Christian vision of a paradisal world: *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, c. 1500, by Hieronymus Bosch.

This Atlantean quest has antecedents in the beliefs about Eden, and in medieval guesswork as to its nature and whereabouts. Paradise was lost, yes … but where had it been? Was it there still, even though mortals could not re-enter? A majority view placed it far to the east (the Bible does say 'east') and very high up. Alexander the Great was said to have reached it in the course of his conquests, but not gone in. Sceptics remarked that neither Alexander nor anyone else had been able to give directions for finding it. To which St Thomas replied:

> The situation of Paradise is shut off from the habitable world by mountains, or seas, or some torrid region, which cannot be crossed; and so people who have written about topography make no mention of it.

Christians who knew the world to be round – as many did – could imagine approaching Paradise by going westward instead of eastward. After all, you would come to the same place. Columbus himself thought it was up the Orinoco. But long before him, some Christians had reflected on paradises lying westward in non-Christian mythology. Homer spoke of the 'Elysian plain at the world's end', where 'no snow falls, no strong winds blow and there is never any rain', and favourites of the gods enjoyed a carefree immortality. Greek legends also pointed to Isles of the Blest or Fortunate Isles, likewise westward across the ocean.

Ireland, too, had a rich Atlantic lore; much richer indeed than the Greek. Irish voyage-romances conjured up an archipelago stretching off into the sunset. Out there lay blessed regions 'without grief, without sorrow, without death', such as Tir na nOg, the Land of Youth, and Mag Mon, a Celtic Elysium itself. Echoing and also promoting beliefs like these, the great Christian voyage-romance of St Brendan the Navigator told of a monk, Barinthus, reaching the borders of Paradise by sailing west, and Brendan himself, inspired by his example, discovering a medley of Atlantic islands and finally attaining the same sanctified territory, in a country of continental extent, after weeks of travel by sea and land.

→ The Mount of Purgatory in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, with the Earthly Paradise at the top. Detail from a fresco in Florence Cathedral, 1465, *Dante and his Poem* by Domenico de Michelino.

The gifted Toltecs were eight feet tall and had a magnificent capital, the City of the Golden Gates, which is now under the sea, west of Senegal. Their civilization was very splendid and very knowledgeable. They expanded into America, Egypt and Britain, building pyramids and Stonehenge. (The occultist Dion Fortune, following up some of Scott-Elliot's revelations, claimed that Somerset was an Atlantean colony and that Brent Knoll, near the Bristol Channel, was a pyramid – or anyhow, a hill artificially shaped by the colonists.) The Toltecs had aircraft using a kind of jet propulsion, limited in power, so that aviators could not fly over hills of any height but had to go round. They practised magic, and, for a long time, applied their psychic and paranormal techniques benignly. But some took to sorcery for selfish and evil ends. This led to an inundation followed by further disasters, culminating in the final debacle. The fall of Atlantis was essentially a moral fall.

*The gifted Toltecs were eight feet tall and had a magnificent capital, the City of the Golden Gates, which is now under the sea.*

← Toltec statues from the Post-Classical period at Tula, Mexico. William Scott-Elliot's Toltecs were the standard-bearers of Atlantean civilization in America, Egypt and Britain, and had psychic and paranormal powers. The statues at Tula are, however, far more recent than his Atlantis.

Thus far William Scott-Elliot. Rudolf Steiner, who started out among the Theosophists and then moved off on his own, had his say about Atlantis but did not add very much. One of the ablest members of his circle was Dimitri Merezhkovsky (1865–1941), a Russian historical novelist of some note, whose *Atlantis/Europe: The Secret of the West* appeared under Steinerite auspices. Merezhkovsky is closer to Donnelly than to the occultists. For him too, Atlantis was the locale of the Earthly Paradise. It was also the Avalon of Arthurian legend. Its civilization was the source of others and 'the seed of Europe'. Merezhkovsky traces connections with known mythologies, identifying Atlas, the lost land's original overlord, with the biblical Enoch. Seven Atlantean gods, he thinks, survived the disaster and found their way into later pantheons: Adonis, Osiris, Tammuz, Attis, Mithra, Dionysus, and Quetzalcoatl. He also foreshadows the ideas of some feminist prehistorians concerning an ancient, eclipsed goddess-worship and the need for its reinstatement.

SINCE it leads to so much confusion to read Plato literally or even semi-literally, the only way to shed any light is to ask what he was actually doing and how his mind worked; to take Atlantis, not literally indeed, but seriously.

When he wrote of it Plato was, primarily, creating a myth. That can be said without prejudice to any enquiry into his sources or the factual background. He believed that small well-organized states were better than empires. Empires decayed, city-republics such as Athens had superior moral force, and, though they also could decay, they had a power of regeneration. Not long before Plato's own time Athens had played the leading role in repulsing the aggressive empire of Persia. He evoked an ancient Athens more or less fulfilling his own ideals and thus capable of defeating an even greater empire, the greatest ever. In the making of this political fable, his literary skill – on the face of it – ran away with him, so that he devised a tale far richer, far more circumstantial, than his purpose required.

*The Flood, in Greek mythology as in the Bible and elsewhere, is temporary. The waters ebb and the land reappears, it does not stay submerged as Atlantis does.*

But where did he get the ingredients?

One false clue may be cleared away. The Greeks, like numerous other peoples, had a legend of a great Flood. Plato mentions it in the *Timaeus*. But he does not associate it with the fall of Atlantis, and in fact neither this nor any of the analogous Flood stories can have any relation to it. The Flood, in Greek mythology as in the Bible and elsewhere, is temporary. The waters ebb and the land reappears, it does not stay submerged as Atlantis does.

→ An allegory of the religions and traditions after the Flood: in Donnelly's terms, legacies of Atlantis, conserving portions of its wisdom in altered forms. Watercolour by Joseph M. Gandy (1771–1843).

First, the seven islands: the principal Lesser Antilles can be fairly counted as seven, namely Guadeloupe, Dominica, Martinique, St Lucia, Barbados, St Vincent, Grenada. Then, the three large ones: the greater members of the chain (Jamaica lies outside it) are just three, Cuba, Hispaniola and Puerto Rico. 'Immense' may sound extreme, but all three are big by Proclus's Mediterranean standards, and he shows what he is prepared to call 'immense' when he gives the breadth of the middle one as a thousand stadia, a little over 100 miles – which is close enough to the actual breadth of Hispaniola. Furthermore, the native Caribs and the tribes of Hispaniola itself did have a sort of Atlantis tradition. They said many of the islands had once been connected, as parts of a single mass, but a cataclysm ages ago had submerged the connections and left only the fragments they lived upon.

*The native Caribs and the tribes of Hispaniola itself did have a sort of Atlantis tradition. They said many of the islands had once been connected … but a cataclysm ages ago had submerged the connections …*

There is a bare chance that Proclus is on the right track. Thanks to unrecorded explorers, some report of these islands, and the islanders, and their tale of ancient disaster, may have got back to Greece. Whatever the uniting land was actually called, Plato may have seized on it as the lost Atlantis he wanted, and 'described' it in terms suggested by Homeric legend and traditions of Crete, the only antiquity he felt at ease with. The land would coincide partly with Lewis Spence's Antillia. Spence did not derive this name from the Antilles. On the contrary, 'Antilles' is derived from 'Antillia', which was the name given to an island that pre-Columbian geographers, such as Toscanelli, speculated about; Spence adopted it from them. No one knows how they hit on it to begin with, but it has been explained as a corruption of 'Atlantis' itself. At any rate, the nearest we can get to a meaningful 'real Atlantis' is seemingly in and around the West Indies – which have historically been subject to eruptions and earthquakes. The visionary Edgar Cayce, with his revelation about the Bahamas, may not have been too wide of the mark.

→ Thomas More's vision of Atlantis as an island. Woodcut by Ambrosius Holbein from a 1518 edition of *Utopia*.

# WHEN AND WHERE?

Few of Plato's fellow Greeks took Atlantis literally. Yet his account is so impressive that there have been many attempts to find a factual basis. Some readers have simply believed it. Others, aware of difficulties, have speculated about a tradition that was garbled before it reached him: one that originally referred to another place, another time.

After the opening-up of the New World, several authors concluded that Atlantis was America. The obvious objection was that America was still there. Investigators have pointed to small-scale Atlantises, such as the former wooded tract under Mount's Bay in Cornwall, part of legendary Lyonesse. Could Atlantis have been launched by a more spectacular submergence of the same type, later misplaced and misunderstood?

The Thera eruption has been claimed as a key, not merely to the working of Plato's imagination, but to the origin of the whole story. Thera was an outpost of Minoan Crete, and Atlantis's Cretan touches are admitted. Perhaps Plato's Atlantean empire was simply the Minoan, long since defunct, and exaggerated and set adrift by the passing of nine centuries? A related theory focuses on the war. Solon's Egyptian informant may have recalled an alliance of 'Sea Peoples' who succeeded to Minoan maritime power and threatened Egypt. They included Tyrrhenians and Libyans, both mentioned by Plato. It has even been suggested that it might be Troy and its devastation in the Trojan War, as related in Homer's epics, that gave rise to the legend. The trouble is, however, that there are too many such conjectures, professedly pinning down the 'real Atlantis' not only in the Mediterranean but in widely separated parts of the world.

The American seer Edgar Cayce delivered messages in a trance about the West Indies having been part of Atlantis. His revelations happen to agree fairly well both with hints by Proclus, one of the few Greek authors who believed in it, and with folk memories among the Caribs about a sunken land formerly connecting their islands. If a literal Atlantis is wanted, Cayce's hint seems as good as any.

Volcanic action on the island of Thera (Santorini), 1925.

Atlantis in North Africa: another relocation. From Dr A. Petermann's *Mittheilungen aus Justus Perthes' Geographischer Anstalt*, part 73, 1927.

Columbus reaching the West Indies, where the native Caribs had a tradition that their islands were once part of a single land-mass. Woodcut from 1493.

Atlantis by the Red Sea. Detail of a map from Carl Friedrich Baer's *Essai sur les Atlantiques*, 1762.

Egyptians under Rameses III fighting the Sea Peoples in a war which the story of Atlantis's aggression may echo. Relief from Medinet Habu, *c.* 1190 BC.