

1

Plato's dialogues.

We have a mystery to solve: what could we do ? Of course, the first elementary step of our investigation is examining the source of this one and working on its several aspects for understanding its intrinsic meaning.

Thus Plato's dialogues *Timaeus* and *Critias* comprehension becomes our starting point since they're the only documents which mention Atlantis. In fact the doubtful existence of Atlantis has been puzzling man since their first appearance in Greece in 349 BC up to now and, though the actual huge interest on the subject, they remain the best and most reliable clue on Atlantis itself. All other sources mention Atlantis only referring to Plato's dialogues but none of them is able to add some more information. Let's talk about the dialogues so that we can understand some important facts: where did Atlantis' tale take consistency ? Why ? What's its deepest meaning ?

Before all we are going to say something about the writer of the dialogues. Plato, whose real name was Aristocles, was born in 428 BC in Athens and, being introduced to philosophy by Socrates, early become involved in the politic life of his city and in the problem of metaphysical knowledge. He surely was a metaphysic and so his theories are rich of abstract concepts which can be read only knowing what he was looking for: the essence of things, which represents the supreme level of knowledge of man. The essence in fact defines univocally a thing (like a book, a storm etc.) through their unique and intrinsic features. Plato used to explain some philosophical principles with allegorical myths. For example, his philosophical system divides the knowledge into four different degrees: imagination, sensible knowledge, mathematical objects, ideas. He explains the relationship between them through the myth of the cave which I'm not going to write here but I underline just it is just made up by Plato to simplify his conclusions. The same for the myth of the winged chariot, which had to show how our three different parts of the soul work together.

The right metaphysical knowledge is a necessary instrument for solving and inquiring into Plato's most important speculation: the political and social life. Socrates' death, in Plato's thoughts, was a sign of the corruption and injustice that Athens featured in political and social life. Only a correct absolute knowledge, for Plato, can allow man to realize a right political system.

His political ideas partially come from the division of the soul. Its three part are in fact the *rational*, *irascible* and *concupiscible*. Our class, or rank, inside a society depends on which of these is the strongest: so we can be respectively a philosopher, a soldier or a peasant. A state is composed by such kind of society. Each class has its own job and in the *perfect state* built up by Plato in the *Republic* it's underlined how the ruling class is the philosophers' one. In fact the political power is owned by them, the military one by soldiers and the task of providing food and resources is performed by peasants and other workers. We are not interested now in explaining why a philosopher must own the political power and encode the law. Just remember the social division and the strong communism shown in its ideas.

Timaeus and *Critias* came after the *Republic* and they were the first two dialogues of a planned trilogy which should have been concluded by the *Hermocrates*, never written by Plato because of his death or, maybe, lack of interest. To tell the truth they don't involve political meanings or introduce new concepts regarding this subject but they just try to give a large looking at the whole history of universe up to the concretization of actual civilizations.

They show a second face of knowledge. A face that isn't characterized by an absolute meaning but just by a practical needing of facing nature: this is the so called *sensible knowledge*, which clearly describe the evolution of natural phenomena.

So, the *Timaeus* is a sort of physic of the cosmos. Obviously enough, Plato didn't believe in God but stated the matter of universe was confused at the beginning and it didn't obey to any physic law. A "godlike craftsman", called *Demiurge* by Plato, put an order in the matter thus

allowing the formation of stars and planets. This entity wasn't manlike or an intelligent being but just a symbolic force used for explaining the cause of universe laws and their rational origin. So Plato goes on explaining the physics of universe and in a passage focuses his attention to the lost civilization of Atlantis:

Many great and wonderful deeds are recorded of your state in our histories. But one of them exceeds all the rest in greatness and valour. For these histories tell of a mighty power which unprovoked made an expedition against the whole of Europe and Asia, and to which your city put an end. This power came forth out of the Atlantic Ocean, for in those days the Atlantic was navigable; and there was an island situated in front of the straits which are by you called the Pillars of Heracles; the island was larger than Libya and Asia put together, and was the way to other islands, and from these you might pass to the whole of the opposite continent which surrounded the true ocean; for this sea which is within the Straits of Heracles is only a harbour, having a narrow entrance, but that other is a real sea, and the surrounding land may be most truly called a boundless continent. Now in this island of Atlantis there was a great and wonderful empire which had rule over the whole island and several others, and over parts of the continent, and, furthermore, the men of Atlantis had subjected the parts of Libya within the columns of Heracles as far as Egypt, and of Europe as far as Tyrrhenia. This vast power, gathered into one, endeavoured to subdue at a blow our country and yours and the whole of the region within the straits; and then, Solon, your country shone forth, in the excellence of her virtue and strength, among all mankind. She was pre-eminent in courage and military skill, and was the leader of the Hellenes. And when the rest fell off from her, being compelled to stand alone, after having undergone the very extremity of danger, she defeated and triumphed over the invaders, and preserved from slavery those who were not yet subjugated, and generously liberated all the rest of us who dwell within the pillars. But afterwards 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.

So far the Timaeus. Please take note of the precise geographical description of the place where Atlantis was: there aren't hidden or allegorical meanings. In fact it's true the Mediterranean Sea is a narrow harbour if compared to the outer ocean and that the states on the east of the Pillars are Tyrrhenia and Egypt since from Herodotus and other ancient we know Greeks called Pillars of Heracles the strait of Gibraltar. There is no doubt about all and about the strait pointed out by Plato. Some researchers try to show how the Pillars of Heracles were instead the Dardanelle (in Asia Minor) or a strait in front of Peloponnesus thus denying that even Libya was within the Pillars as we can read in the passage above! Is there any contradiction in this first geographical description that can put doubts on the real location of the Pillars of Heracles ? We don't think so and we can say In Plato's mind the Pillars were just the actual strait of Gibraltar: he described the relationship between Atlantic, Mediterranean Sea, Gibraltar strait and Mediterranean nations as we would do today and as we can see today. That's so simple!

Anyway Atlantis isn't the main theme of the dialogue but we must notice how the interest of Plato looks at past and ancient events which date back even to catastrophes that periodically compelled mankind civilization to do steps backward. The early development of civilization is even discussed in the *Laws*, the last work of Plato, confirming again the interest in this kind of subject: the prehistory of mankind and the sensible knowledge. For example, there we can find a discussion on the origin of agriculture. Some people refuted the authenticity of Atlantis' tale because it was considered a "lie" of Plato for explaining his political ideas. We already saw Plato political principles. Then the question is: how his the second dialogue, the *Critias*, involved in Plato's political ideas ? We shall see. For the moment just remember the first one, where Atlantis was introduced, had clearly *no relationship* with political speculations.

The *Critias*, written soon after the *Timaeus*, shows the same interlocutors: Timaeus (a pythagoric philosopher), Critias (Plato's relative), Socrates (Plato's master) and Hermocrates. They're all historical guys and together mask, in the dialogue, Plato's thinking.

The tale of Atlantis is introduced for celebrating the exploit of ancient Athenians who, according to Plato, were successful in holding off the menace of such empire. The dialogue, whose

final part misses, describes both the ancient Atlantis and Athens though a particular attention to the geographical elements. Reading the description of the two kingdoms we can be sure they don't represent at all the perfect state of the *Republic*. Athens' society was divided into more than 3 different classes and the military class ruled assuring safety and quietness to the whole population. Atlantis instead was subdivided into ten kingdoms where a king had full powers. The nature of the kings was godlike and that allowed them to respect laws and follow the path of virtue. They weren't philosophers at all and eventually became corrupted thus making Zeus think to punish them. In the same catastrophe even Athenians were wiped out. This event occurred a short time after the war between the two empires and we are told by Timaeus it dates back 9,000 years before Solon. Some people think Plato got a confused tradition of the tale and mistook 9,000 for 900 years thanks to the similar writing of these numbers. Indeed we must say the date is true and in fact in another passage of the *Critias* Plato underlines how the fact he was speaking about happened before the great deluge and Deucalion's adventures:

In the first place the Acropolis was not as now. For the fact is that a single night of excessive rain washed away the earth and laid bare the rock; at the same time there were earthquakes, and then occurred the extraordinary inundation, which was the third before the great destruction of Deucalion. But in primitive times the hill of the Acropolis extended to the Eridanus and Ilissus, and included the Pnyx on one side, and the Lycabettus as a boundary on the opposite side to the Pnyx, and was all well covered with soil, and level at the top, except in one or two places

Here Plato is describing the ancient acropolis of the Athens which faced the Atlanteans and says it was so before the events that preceded the destruction of Deucalion (which we now to be the Universal Deluge of the Bible thanks to its clear Mesopotamian origin). Nowadays the Universal Deluge is accepted as an historical fact and occurred just in the period given by Plato for the destruction of Atlantis and Athens: about 11,000 – 12,000 years ago. Is this a lucky coincidence ? However we have shown how Plato wasn't wrong giving the date and indeed he confirms that alluding to some events we certainly know today.

Beyond all Atlantis and Athens are presented like happy and virtuous states living their own gold age though they weren't politically organized by philosophers and hadn't a severe tripartite society. So they aren't connected with the *Republic* at all. One could say Atlantis was an apology to celebrate the old virtuous ancestors of Greeks and give an example of rectitude to his contemporary citizens who became corrupted and led Athens to the end of the brilliant classical age. We must know Plato was deluded by Athens political behaviour especially after sentencing Socrates to death. This dialogue would work as example for rising up another lucky age for Athens. That means the dialogue has a moralistic (not exactly political) scope. Easily enough we can show that even this scope wasn't aimed by Plato. *Critias* in fact would look like a strange moralistic dialogue: it doesn't introduce moral concepts and it's too general showing the mentality of Athenians and Atlanteans. Moreover even Athenians, who didn't become corrupted, were wiped out by the same catastrophe which hit Atlantis. The most amazing feature of *Critias* is its richness of geographic and technical detail of the two lands ruled by the empires. We can say that more than a half of the dialogue is about this subject. Think that Plato, introducing the region were the ancient Athens developed, explained the difference between its geography in those times and in the actual times thus concluding they were minimal though earthquakes made possible the falling of detritus from mountains to coasts before being absorbed by the deep sea encircling the Peloponnesus. The geographical description of Atlantis is bigger than Athens' one. The latest described Greece through the natural elements we can see and explore actually thus giving a truthful geographical compendium of the area. We shall see for Atlantis later. The huge geographical elements of the dialogue of course can't give any help to moralistic scopes nor they can make the moral contents more reliable. We must conclude the dialogue hadn't such a scope but an historical scope: remembering the ancient past, an happy age concluded by an unleashed disaster. So Plato didn't made up all the story because he needed to find political or moralistic examples. To tell the truth the best example for Athens was the same powerful Athens of the V century BC and Plato knew that.

Though Plato didn't invent a beautiful fable it might be he got a source he didn't understand very well. From the first reading of the dialogues it's clear how in his mind the Pillars of Heracles were the strait of Gibraltar and how the war between Athens and Atlantis took place 9,000 years before Plato. What if he misunderstood an hypothetic allegorical meaning of the tale ? some guys use to assert the original meaning of Pillars of Heracles was something else thus identifying them with Dardanelles or even with the strait between Java and Sumatra which Plato (and probably all other Greeks) never knew! If so why don't we find geographical evidence of lands such India or Malaysia in Plato's dialogues ? The whole geographical context of the dialogues is referred to the Mediterranean basin and the outer world which was connected through Gibraltar. The Mediterranean itself, as Plato told, was a "narrow harbour" of the outer ocean where Atlantis laid. If so which one between Indian Ocean and Atlantic Ocean does fit better such relationship ? Of course the latter and this could be further evidence the Pillars of Heracles are where Plato thought. That's natural: if the original source, where Plato studied from, meant another strait the consequential description of the continents (on the East and West of it) and their morphology wouldn't have suited the Mediterranean one, but certainly another. So we needn't to look for strange mythical interpretations or symbols to understand where Plato located his elements.

Since searching Atlantis means finding out where and when the lost civilization *known by Plato* existed we have to look for the coordinates given by the Greek philosopher and not to imagine he misunderstood ancient symbols, allegorical meanings or did copying mistakes. The last option can be excluded as we can verify all the parts of the dialogues never deny each other: the dialogue has just one logic red line. Then he repeats the same concepts with different words and contexts in the dialogue which never deny each other. The first two options can be avoided by saying Plato was one of the most erudite scholars of the time and so he could get into such troubles hardly enough.

Plato himself underlined the story he was going to tell really happened and declared it more than one time:

Then listen, Socrates, to a tale which, though strange, is certainly true, having been attested by Solon, who was the wisest of the seven sages

Solon, who was intending to use the tale for his poem, enquired into the meaning of the names, and found that the early Egyptians in writing them down had translated them into their own language, and he recovered the meaning of the several names and when copying them out again translated them into our language. My great-grandfather, Dropides, had the original writing, which is still in my possession, and was carefully studied by me when I was a child

Very good. And what is this ancient famous action of the Athenians, which Critias declared, on the authority of Solon, to be not a mere legend, but an actual fact?

Then we must notice Plato clearly claimed Solon was the first man to bring the tale to Athens and likely even some documents or notes about it since Critias, his relative, possessed them. That is an important fact because Solon had great authority in Athens and was remembered and celebrated as one of the most important personality even being in Athens. Plato himself venerated that man: can we believe he used him for masking a false tale ? Even from this prospective the tale of Atlantis looks like a true story. Then it's likely Plato, who knew Critias very well, acquired the contents of the Critias from his documents.

Anyway we can't know how the legend of Atlantis came to Egypt. The priest who spoke with Solon (whose name wasn't Sonchis but) just says he held some ancient records and, for showing Solon how mankind civilization was old he gave some correct information about the cyclical disasters that sometimes occurs compelling man to come back to primitive life conditions:

To this city came Solon, and was received there with great honour; he asked the priests who were most skilful in such matters, about antiquity, and made the discovery that neither he nor any other

Hellene knew anything worth mentioning about the times of old. On one occasion, wishing to draw them on to speak of antiquity, he began to tell about the most ancient things in our part of the world-about Phoroneus, who is called "the first man," and about Niobe; and after the Deluge, of the survival of Deucalion and Pyrrha; and he traced the genealogy of their descendants, and reckoning up the dates, tried to compute how many years ago the events of which he was speaking happened. There upon one of the priests, who was of a very great age, said: O Solon, Solon, you Hellenes are never anything but children, and there is not an old man among you. Solon in return asked him what he meant. I mean to say, he replied, that in mind you are all young; there is no old opinion handed down among you by ancient tradition, nor any science which is hoary with age. And I will tell you why. 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. There is a story, which even you have preserved, that once upon a time Paethon, the son of Helios, having yoked the steeds in his father's chariot, because he was not able to drive them in the path of his father, burnt up all that was upon the earth, and was himself destroyed by a thunderbolt. Now this has the form of a myth, but really signifies a declination of the bodies moving in the heavens around the earth, and a great conflagration of things upon the earth, which recurs after long intervals; at such times those who live upon the mountains and in dry and lofty places are more liable to destruction than those who dwell by rivers or on the seashore. And from this calamity the Nile, who is our never-failing saviour, delivers and preserves us. When, on the other hand, the gods purge the earth with a deluge of water, the survivors in your country are herdsmen and shepherds who dwell on the mountains, but those who, like you, live in cities are carried by the rivers into the sea. Whereas in this land, neither then nor at any other time, does the water come down from above on the fields, having always a tendency to come up from below; for which reason the traditions preserved here are the most ancient.

All these facts are true. Actually Earth is in a stable geologic state but it can be modified by the heavy gathering of ice on the poles or the passage of huge meteorites which can cause serious problems through gravitational interaction or collision. In the past several ice ages succeeded in Earth: the ice grew covering part of Earth and then melted. This kind of process happened at least four times in Earth's history and the sudden melting of ice was usually taken by considerable geographical changes in the whole world. The destructions mentioned by the priest occurred during the passage from an ice age to another owing to a transitory passage from a kind of climate to another or from a geographic equilibrium to another. The last destruction, remembered by Solon and the priest as the one of Deucalion and Phyrria, dates back exactly 9,000 years before Solon when the ice age of Wurm came to an end. That has a scientific root and in fact we know from findings lot of animal races were wiped out by the violent events which took the last ice melting. So Plato didn't give a date at random but a true date corresponding to a true event which comprehensively brought Atlantis and Athens civilizations to an end. Generally this catastrophe has been recorded in many myths and folk tales as the Universal Deluge. So it's evident how Plato's speech about periodic catastrophes hasn't been made up for political or moral purposes since it meets scientific confirmation. The same fact that people found safeness in the mountains is confirmed as science has found out agriculture started from mountains soon after the end of Wurm age. There are lot of other scientific findings which give evidence to this background and we shall speak about it later. Now it's still worth pointing out how Plato's dialogues are rich of true elements untied from moral and political scopes: here we are speaking about historical events and geographic concepts! How can a fable exist in such a truthful context? It's easy showing how Timaeus and Critias have a "scientific featuring" since they clearly describe the physical evolution of universe through its laws up to the developing of complex variables like civilizations and how these underwent the same physical laws. The tale of Atlantis has been inserted in this background and not in the one of the Republic.

The definite distinction between myth and its historical root is another remarkable note. In the last passage Plato shows to know the right difference between them by saying how some real astronomic events are usually disguised in a story that becomes myth. Then he presents the story of Atlantis as a true fact and not a myth. We read that Plato used the "allegorical" myth for giving examples of his theories. That is not the case of Atlantis which has been described in a truthful context through the style of a geographic tractate. Plato himself knew he wasn't speaking about metaphysics or philosophical concepts but rather about recorded facts which could give a general picture of civilization insertion in the global environment of physics. And in our opinion this

is the purpose of *Timeus* and *Critias*: the history of our past from the origin of universe through a naturalistic perspective.

The only mythical element shown by Plato is the division of Earth through Gods and Atlantis' foundation thanks to Poseidon who created the circles of land and water around Cleito's house. Invention ? Not at all. In fact all ancient records belonging to earlier civilizations like Mesopotamian or Egyptian ones hold such memories and they were believed to be authentic facts. This shows once again how Plato just gathered a recorded tale and limited himself in bringing it to Greeks for showing how mankind civilization was old. He didn't need to add any more speculation since the story of Atlantis itself was already interesting enough. The richness of details, we know, wasn't aimed to make the story more fascinating or credible since they're too much. For example the measures Plato gave to the channels were useless for each philosophic scope and, of course, can't be an expedient for making the story more reliable. Why ? Because the measures were too big for Plato times. No one ever saw such a huge channels before Plato wrote about them. No civilization was able to build such giant channels before. If Plato just invented this detail to gather more credibility he'd pay more attention when writing about them and would give standard measures for the channels! That is another clue that demonstrates he was just copying an authentic story.

The essence of Plato's political thought consist of the role of philosophers who are intermediates between the perfect world of *ideas* and *sensible* world. Just philosophers can guide a state since they know the absolute truth (*ideas*) and is allowed to realize the concept of *good*. Beyond all Plato is aware of the abstractness of his state and didn't ever think it could have been realized, especially after the negative experiences in Sicily where he failed in guiding the tyrant of Syracuse. Where is in the *Timaeus* and *Critias* the idea of a philosophers' ruling class? Where is the concept of relationship between ideal and sensible worlds ? Are they in the measures of the plateau's channels ? Why is the *Critias* so full of geographic details ? Where is the moral scope of the tale ? How can be Atlantis the perfect state since it hadn't a class of philosophers and eventually came to corruption ? Why Athens, another virtuous state, vanquished in the same catastrophe ? Maybe we're speaking of real facts and not of beautiful fables made up for enchanting the reader...