

# Atlantis: Myths, Ancient and Modern

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*Abstract In this paper I show that the story of Atlantis, first sketched in Plato's Timaeus and Critias, has been artificially shrouded in mystery since antiquity. While it has been thought from Proclus to the close of the twentieth century that Plato's immediate followers were divided on the issue of whether the story was meant to be historically true, this results from a simple misunderstanding of what historia had meant when the early Academic Crantor was first being cited as an exponent of a literal rather than an allegorical interpretation. The term was then applied to straightforward stories that were told as if they were true. Iamblichus argued for a deeper meaning that did not exclude the truth, and Proclus' belief in an inspired Plato leads him to assume that a Platonic historia must be true. Hence he misreads Crantor as having been committed to historical truth and opposes him to allegorical interpreters. Scholars have continued to see Crantor as a proponent of the historical Atlantis without adequate examination of the evidence, an indication of our own need to preserve the tantalizing uncertainties of such powerful stories.*

## I. Introduction

Human beings, it seems, have a natural need for myth, a need that has not passed with the advent of the written word, but rather mutated. The advent of modern science, offering strikingly new ways of explaining the workings of our world, has not overridden the need to hear a plausible account of how this world began, as if we still need a narrative of its birth in order to understand how it is. It is rather like our need to appreciate details of a fellow human's childhood if we are to comprehend the personality that eventually emerges. The

biography is the literary vehicle through which most of us seek to understand persons, and the biography traditionally gives a chronological account that covers parentage, growth, development, and complex responses to external events. The story that we require when we try to understand people is not so different from the story that we require when we try to understand how our world--our village, our landscape, our city, our nation, or our universe.

*Beginnings* are in particular need of a story-like explanation, but so too are *ends*. It is not just death that remains a mystery, but there is a huge fascination with the demise of great nations and civilisations, and with the end of those great forces that we needed in order to explain how the present has arisen. We feel the need to know not just *that* dinosaurs or our own sub-human ancestors became extinct, but *why*, and hence *by what stages*. In the case of any present order we need to know how and why it came to triumph over a previous order. And triumphant moments can be just as much in need of a story to explain them as moments of defeat. Such moments include those in which the enemy is evil itself, that power which can seem both real and immediate, but yet is always beyond the kind of cognition that usually offers us that feeling of immediacy. In all these cases humans are particularly ready to resort to some kind of story, offering a narrative explanation.

When they work correctly there is something special about such stories, which allows them to offer us inspiration whether or not we accept them as true in any straightforward manner. It is possible for them to acquire considerable personal or communal importance without ever being an object of belief in the strong sense of that word. A community's identity can depend upon them without any similar dependence on their truth. They can come to permeate all aspects of our lives without our having given any rational assent to them. Hence to prove them false, to affirm that they must not be believed or followed, can be to deny others a fragile rock upon which their lives have come to depend.

## II. Plato and Myth

It is not difficult to paint the history of western philosophy, and particularly its earlier phases, as one in which mythical explanation of the universe, of moral forces, and of ourselves is progressively replaced by rational explanation. The movement from myth to *logos* stands out as something important from the Presocratics to Hellenistic Philosophy. But if we continue on to the Neoplatonists, especially Damascius, and to Christian philosophy including that of Pseudo-Dionysius, we shall find that the province of what might be called scientific knowledge is distinctly limited, and fails to shed light on what they most wished to understand.<sup>1</sup> The result is a profound re-mythologising of philosophy, in which the alternative to myth is not *logos* but silence. The discursive thought with which we are familiar stops short of our goal, and the noetic vision that extends at least some distance beyond it usually eludes us.<sup>2</sup>

The Neoplatonists will shortly be relevant to this study, but the ambiguity towards myth pervades even Plato, and makes him at times the source of profound disagreements over the appropriate way to interpret him. Neither the total demythologising of Plato, nor an uncritical equation of everything that he tells us in myth-like speech with Platonic belief yields satisfactory results. His exercises in myth-like writing include studies of the origins of civilisation; of the universe; of love; and of types of life. It includes studies of what death means to us, and of the demise of whole civilisations. It includes an account of the origin of the life of hardships, involving the passing of an old and desirable universal order, and a world that even with our own care cannot be saved from degenerating. Plato was aware where myths were appropriate, and he was aware of their huge importance in shaping the education of the community, regardless of their truth.<sup>3</sup> A great many myths he considered suspect

because they encouraged dangerous beliefs, while he makes free use of others at various points of his dialogues.

Throughout the first two millennia of Platonism's 2400-year history the *Timaeus* has been considered the most important of his works, though almost certainly it is not a single work in its own right. It forms a single dramatic sequence with the *Critias* from which it was artificially severed in antiquity.<sup>4</sup> The long central monologue of this work is what has often been thought of as 'the *Timaeus*', and in it Plato offers us what he calls a 'likely myth' that tells of the creation of the world--both its body and its soul--by a benevolent craftsman, and of the subsequent creation of human beings and of their physical parts by other divine beings to whom he entrusts the exercise. The creation narrative involves some extremely sophisticated explanation of the workings of both ourselves and our universe, but has been the source of endless debate about whether its author ever believed in a temporal creation such as this narrative account must inevitably imply. The prevalent view among his followers was that the time sequence was employed for didactic purposes only,<sup>5</sup> but it seems that denying the validity of a temporal understanding of its meaning was to take away something that many others needed.<sup>6</sup> At least one Platonist was able to deny the literal meaning of the creation process, while still keeping the Platonic narrative as the basis of his account of Platonic physics, allowing one a range of responses to the Platonic narrative depending on one's personal perspective, and thus ensuring the preservation of what is mostly a rather routine work until modern times.<sup>7</sup> It is as if the central feature of a successful myth is our inability to affirm or to deny its literal truth.

### III. Atlantis

On either side of the cosmological speech of Timaeus lies a combination of conversation and narrative, and in this case the story narrated is described as a *logos* rather than a *muthos*, a meaningful account rather than a mere story. The narration is by 'Critias', which is itself a problem, since the first person of that name who comes to mind is the hated leader of the régime of Thirty Tyrants (in which case his words might seem less than trustworthy), while serious prosopography<sup>8</sup> would require somebody much older to be telling the tale, presumably the grandfather of this Critias, a senior member of Plato's own family. Before Timaeus' cosmology we get the claim that Solon heard in Egypt a tale about prehistoric Athens, which was then governed according to the principles outlined by 'Socrates' in the *Republic*, halting the expansionist ambitions of a huge island-state located in the Atlantic. Ultimately cataclysmic events overtake both warring parties, with Atlantis being entirely lost beneath the waves and Athens losing her entire army. After the cosmology we meet a detailed description of ancient Athens and of Atlantis, an account of how the people of Atlantis grew too arrogant and incurred the displeasure of the gods, and an enigmatic conclusion: 'Zeus spoke'. What he said is left, whether by accident or design, to our imagination, and we never meet the promised account of the glorious deeds of ancient Athens that had been what 'Socrates' was promised. If Plato had wished to perplex us, then he could scarcely have done a better job.<sup>9</sup>

Here, however, I want to tackle a more modern myth, a myth about the Atlantis story, which was perhaps encouraged in late antiquity by the Neoplatonist, Proclus, but has since been perpetuated by scholars intent on preserving for us the mystery of the story. While I witnessed the destruction wrought by the tsunami that wiped out so many coastal communities in south-east Asia, I had, with the Australian Research Council's support, been translating the very part of Proclus' mighty *Commentary on the Timaeus* that dealt with Atlantis. The tsunami had regularly featured in attempts to explain how a civilisation like that of Atlantis could have been lost, and such theories were given added credibility by the fact

that Critias prefaces his treatment of the war between Athens and Atlantis by what passes for an account by Egyptian priests of how human memory is periodically erased by catastrophic fires or floods. Volcanic activity is not specified, but naturally comes to mind. Like most Platonists I had been intensely suspicious of any attempt to view Plato's story as an attempt to write ancient history based upon some exceptionally reliable evidence from Egypt, since Plato's so-called myths are usually constructed from a variety of traditional materials, woven together into a new fabric designed to fulfil a specific role within a dialogue, and it had always seemed preferable to me to assume that the story of the destruction of Atlantis and of its warfare with some prehistoric Athenian martial state fitted into this category.

Even so, I had tended to take on trust the commonly held view, orthodox throughout the twentieth century,<sup>10</sup> that there had always been controversy among Plato's immediate followers about whether the story was intended by Plato as historical truth or as some other kind of offering: cautionary tale, or allegory, or perhaps as a philosophically apposite substitute for the rejected text that had hitherto provided the Greek model for heroic action, i.e. for the *Iliad* itself. Believing that Plato's own circle was as undecided about the status of the story as we were somehow increased the mystique of this lost civilisation. Aristotle can be reasonably held to have spoken of Atlantis as a fictional city; the earliest known interpreter of the *Timaeus*, working within Plato's school perhaps only half a century after its founder's death, is said to have considered the story to be pure history. This is the *modern* myth, and it needs both to be challenged and to be understood.

The greater part of the first book of Proclus' *Commentary on the Timaeus* is given over to a discussion of Plato's treatment of the Atlantis story and related material. When I speak of related material I mean (1) the account of the story's Egyptian origins and its transmission to Solon, Critias the elder and Critias the narrator; (2) the account the Egyptian priest of recurrent catastrophes caused by fire and flood, and how they have affected Egypt less than

Greece and other lands; (3) his interpretation of the Phaethon myth in this context; (4) his account of prehistoric Athens and of its similarities with Sais itself; and (5) his account of the prominence of this Ur-Athens in the repulsion of the militaristic island kingdom of Atlantis. The valiant deeds of the ancient Athenians have still not brought an end to the war when all its army is wiped out by the most severe flooding, which likewise causes the whole civilisation of Atlantis to be engulfed by the Atlantic Ocean and lost for ever. The story of Atlantis needs to be remembered as one that was not just about a lost civilisation, but also about the conflict that occurred between that civilisation and the equally mythical prehistoric Athens: an Athens run largely according to the principles set about by Socrates in books two to five of the *Republic*.

#### IV. The Beginnings of Atlantis-Interpretation

Let us go back to the first stage of interpretation of the Atlantis story to find any hint in Proclus' commentary. At 1.190.4-8 we find a link with the earliest phase of the interpretation of Atlantis, seemingly stemming from Aristotle:

Hence one should not say that the one who obliterated the evidence [*elenchon*] undermines his subject-matter [*hypokeimena*], just like Homer in the case of the Phaeacians or of the wall made by the Greeks. For what has been said has not been invented [*peplastai*], but is true.

We know from Posidonius<sup>11</sup> as reported by Strabo that Plato had once been accused of explaining the lack of evidence for his fictional creations by having his narrative destroy them: like Homer when he accounted for the destruction of the Achaean wall (*Il.* 12.1-33, cf. 7.433-63), another case of a destructive flood engineered by Poseidon. That Aristotle was the accuser is strongly suggested by Strabo again at XII.1.36, where his name is attached to this

same Homeric example (though Strabo does not here mention Atlantis). The Phaeacian example given by Proclus is not in Strabo, but involves more destructive waters sent by Poseidon, this time at *Od.* 13.149-87, so it must surely have belonged to the same original Atlantean context. It looks as if there had been an early response to this story, which took it as something that we should understand at face value, but yet as being a simple fiction. Here in fact we find something that certainly concerned the truth-status of the story, and deriving from a stage of interpretation that is not properly documented in Proclus. It is likely to go right back to the most celebrated pupil of Plato, who, if anybody, should have been in a position to know the status of the story. In any case it must be earlier than the first century BCE.

The first interpretation of the story to which Proclus attaches a name comes in Proclus' introduction to the story:

Some say that the whole of this tale about the Atlantines is [76] straightforward *historia*, like the first of Plato's interpreters, Crantor. He says that [Plato] was actually mocked by his contemporaries for not having discovered his constitution himself, but having translated the [ideas] of the Egyptians. He took so little notice of what the mockers said that he actually attributed to the Egyptians this *historia* about the Athenians and Atlantines, which says how the Athenians had at one time lived under that constitution. The prophets of the Egyptians, he says,<sup>12</sup> also give evidence, saying that these things are inscribed on pillars that still survive. (75.30-76.10)

The passage is full of difficulties. Crantor's account implies that Plato had to make *a positive decision* to attribute the Atlantis story to Egyptian sources, placing its Egyptian origin in doubt, and so undercutting its only claim to have been faithfully preserved; yet he seems also to refer to archaeological evidence for it that was still extant in Egypt. Proclus, seemingly dependent upon Porphyry's commentary, understood *historia* here to imply the truth of the tale, but was that ever Crantor's word, and if so had he had that intention? Did Porphyry himself intend his own report of Crantor's view to be an argument for historical *truth* rather



than a straightforward story? The key question here is what *historia* had meant in the commentary tradition.

Now we have good reason to believe that for several centuries one's ability to write *historia* was not seen in terms of one's ability to research and evaluate historical truth. Certainly Cicero could discuss the merits of those who engaged in *historia* without any consideration of truth and accuracy at *de Legibus* 1.6-7, speaking rather in terms of whether their stylistic abilities were suited to the historian's job. Certainly in non-philosophic writings uses of the term abound that imply only plausibility and the absence of fantastic or supernatural elements, in contrast to the implausibility of myth.<sup>13</sup> But there is proof *even within Proclus* that *historia* in the commentary tradition had meant something other than historical fact:

The *historia* asserts that Phaethon, the son of Helios ..., veered off course when driving his father's chariot, and Zeus, in fear for the All, struck him with a thunderbolt. Being struck, he fell down upon Eridanus, where the fire coming from him, fuelling itself on the ground, set everything alight. Such is the account from *historia*. Upon his fall, his sisters, the Heliades, went into mourning. It is a basic requirement that the conflagration should have happened (for that is the reason for the story story's being told), .... (109.9-19)

It is immediately evident that the term *historia* here means little more than 'narrative' or 'tradition' or 'traditional narrative'. The story is called *historia*, but Proclus still treats it here as what we know as an aetiological myth: as a tale invented to explain an actual occurrence, the conflagration. Proclus, however, affirms that he is here offering here a 'historical' treatment of the story, marked by the adverb *historikôs* at 109.8 that will serve to contrast it with a 'physical' one (*physikôs*) offered by those explaining the physical world,<sup>14</sup> and a philosophic one (*philosophôs*) involving loftier hidden meanings.<sup>15</sup> The actual conflagration is

the sole happening that Proclus needs to postulate in order for this to be classed as a 'historical' treatment! The equivalent 'minimum historical content' for declaring Herodotus to be writing *historia* would be the postulation that Persians really did invade Greece, and the minimum for the Atlantis-story to be *historia* would be the actual destruction of a civilisation by inundation. As long as the extended story was meant to be offering an explanation of that inundation then it would be an historical treatment. This is manifestly less than Proclus himself meant when he postulated an historical truth behind the story, and is perhaps a trace of an earlier very different understanding of *historia* that the commentary tradition had preserved.

Once *historia* is seen to pertain more to a type of writing than to its truth-status in the debates that had preserved Crantor's position, it is obvious that *psilê* had nothing to do with any 'unadulterated' truth as the 'modern myth' assumes, but signifies rather a bare 'lightweight' story, with no weighty hidden meaning. And when one realises that the information about Crantor's treatment had been selected to show that Plato's story was a simple story, without the weightier meaning that it had become fashionable to find there, then both Plato's reason for writing and the Egyptians' cooperation in finding some relevant inscriptions point in the same direction: readers were not required to discover any hidden meaning.

Modern scholarship on Plato as a dramatic writer makes it natural to add one further point. It is not clear whether Crantor had been distinguishing between what Critias, an early candidate for the title 'unreliable narrator', was offering in his own narration of the story and its provenance, or whether he was slipping into the assumption that all this is somehow 'what Plato says'. Even if it were correct that Critias' adoption of a Herodotean pose created an expectation that his account aimed at some significant historical truth, it would still not be

safe to expect that our author is offering any such truth. Hence there is no reason to suppose that Crantor had ever denied the fictional character of the Atlantis story.

## V. The Allegorical Interpreters

The interpretation which appealed to Crantor was opposed most obviously to this one:

Others say that it is a myth and an invention, something that never actually happened but gives an indication of things which have either always been so, or always come to be, in the cosmos.  
(76.15-16)

Interpreters then mentioned are Numenius, Origenes, Amelius, and Porphyry. Amelius had wanted to explain the story as some kind of allegorical picture of the movement of the heavenly bodies, while the others all felt that it was designed to correspond with wars that were eternally taking place between better and worse demonic or psychic entities within the universe. ‘Myth’ is for them all a rival type of communication, in which a story with a *temporal* sequence of events is consciously composed so as to reflect *eternal* truths: ‘false on the surface and true in its hidden meaning’. This contrast is brought out again at 129.10:

... it is neither a myth that is being related nor a straightforward *historia*. While some understand the account only as *historia*, others as a myth, ....

In this second passage the contrast between two types of discourse is achieved without reference to truth-status, suggesting that it was not central to the original dichotomy. In Porphyry’s day, as can be seen from his miniature treatise *On the Cave of the Nymphs* (which like his Atlantis-interpretation is indebted to Numenius, lack of a credible surface meaning

could be taken as an important proof that an allegorical meaning is to be sought for.<sup>16</sup> In a *historia* one may legitimately *expect* to find what passes for literal truth, and in its absence it is natural to look for mythical meaning.

## VI. The Iamblichan approach

A third group of interpreters, beginning with Iamblichus, now try to reconcile the other two, claiming that myth and *historia* are not incompatible, since a powerful underlying meaning referring to eternal forces does not exclude the possibility that these forces have actually revealed themselves in the very way suggested by a surface meaning. It would seem that Iamblichus had indeed assumed that an *historia* would involve a degree of historical truth, and he seems to have been particularly dependent on Critias' claim that the story was 'totally true' (*pantapasin alêthês*): something that Porphyry and his circle seem not to have taken seriously. Even so, the new kind of interpretation offered by Iamblichus and to a large degree by Proclus concentrates on the deeper meaning, while arguing that *we should not despair of* the presence of historical truth. It *might* have happened (76.17-18), and 'nothing he said happened was impossible' (190.9), as Proclus says in relation to the size and inundation of Atlantis. In fact one might easily suspect that Iamblichus' attitude is reflected in Proclus' claim at 182.1-2:

We must not be sceptical of it, even if one took what is being said as *historia* only.

This cannot now be using the term *historia* to mean 'pure historical truth', for taking it in this way would actually *exclude* scepticism. It could perhaps mean something like 'an historical claim', but the key thing is that such a claim would have no 'deeper meaning'. So even at this point, where Proclus seems to speak on his own authority and his interpretation of Atlantis is

almost at an end, the contrast is primarily one of types of discourse. 'We should not be sceptical of it, even if it is the type of discourse to lay claim only to factual truth.'

What I believe has happened is something like this. Iamblichus has not entirely mistaken the terms of the previous debate, but has sought to correlate the terms *historia* and *muthos* with two possible levels of truth. In view of his insight into the possibility of deeper meanings that do not invalidate the surface meaning, he had introduced a distinction between two types of mythical discourse, similar in some respects to one which appears later in Neoplatonism. Olympiodorus (*On Plato's Gorgias* 46.4-6) distinguishes a poetic kind of mythical discourse whose surface meaning is objectionable and dangerously false, from a philosophic kind whose surface meaning is unobjectionable. Iamblichus had perhaps used the Olympiodoran idea that philosophic myths, unlike poetic myths, need not have ridiculous surface meanings that compelled the thinking person to look elsewhere for truth (46.4). It is precisely the ridiculousness of the surface meaning that had confirmed for Porphyry and his Numenian predecessors that Homer's description of the Cave of the Nymphs was an allegory.<sup>17</sup> Iamblichus was clearly not troubled by his predecessors' finding a deep meaning in the Atlantis story, but by their insistence on its being pure (and ridiculous) fiction, a concoction (*plasma*) without any merit when understood historically. Their mistake, he surmised, had been in applying methods developed for Homeric myths and the like to the more cautious tales of Plato, whose myths never contained obvious or objectionable falsehood *at any level*.<sup>18</sup>

What Iamblichus was claiming was not that the story of Atlantis had been accurately preserved in all its details, for he seems to have made no effort to claim any more than its plausibility, and he attaches no importance to the tortuous account of its Egyptian provenance as if it did not offer an historical argument. Further, no Neoplatonist seems to have set much importance on the contents of the *Critias*, which fell outside the Iamblichan curriculum. Rather, Iamblichus was attacking his predecessors' hasty assumption that myths must lack

any relation to historical tradition, and saying that in *a certain kind of myth* the deeper universal meaning actually implied that historical events of this kind were *likely* to have taken place. So the basic story was plausible, yet still there was no commitment to the idea that the whole of Critias' narrative was historically true! Right up to this time, in spite of our 'modern myth', there is no evidence that any Platonist interpreter in antiquity credited Plato with an attempt to preserve historical truth.

## VII. Longinus' Philology and the Contrast of Discourses

The 'modern myth' arises from mistaking a distinction between two categories of written communication, *muthos* and *historia*, for quite another distinction between false narrative and true. It may help to see why it had been categories of communication that were relevant. The key is the figure who set out to stem the rising tide of allegorical interpretation. Though Crantor (c. 300 BCE) is the only promoter of *historia* named in Proclus' pages, one must postulate at least one literalist to revive that view *after* Numenius (c. 150 CE) had promoted allegorical interpretation. Consider the arguments for the literalist position summarised by Proclus at 1.129.11-23.

The arguments may be summarized as follows:

- Plato's remarks at *Phaedrus* 229d discourage ingenious non-literal interpretations;
- Plato's methods of communicating doctrine are not obscure, like those of Pherecydes, but in most cases direct;
- allegorical interpretation is only necessary if one cannot explain the presence of an episode otherwise, whereas this episode is adequately explained by the need to seduce readers into continuing;

- if one tries to offer a non-literal interpretation of everything, one will end up wasting as much time as people who explain every detail of Homer.

Clearly somebody was cautioning against the trend towards allegorical interpretation that had begun with Numenius. Although Proclus represents these points as arguments for the story being just *historia* and not *muthos*, there is nothing here that would amount to an affirmation of the story's truth. No mention is made of Egyptians who can corroborate the account and point to the relevant inscriptions, nor of travel writers who could confirm from local sources that islands off the west coast of Africa had disappeared. These are arguments for *historia* in the sense of a narrative to be understood in its simple meaning, not as an allegorical *muthos*.

We may discern who it was that argued against an allegorical interpretation in this way. There is just one important predecessor of Porphyry's Atlantis-discussions who is not mentioned in Proclus' introductory remarks on the interpretation of Atlantis. This is his early mentor Longinus, who, in spite of his relative lack of interest in the Atlantis story that emerges at 204.18-24 (= fr.37), is nevertheless mentioned more than any other interpreter in the detailed discussion (= frs 32-36), mostly as an object of attack. His overall view of the story was never openly stated. Generally a literalist, he is attacked there by Origenes in the following passage:

Longinus raises the difficulty of what the presentation of this narrative means for Plato. For it hasn't been composed for the relaxation of the audience nor because he requires them to remember it. He solved this, as he thought, with the observation that he had taken it up prior to the physical theory to charm the listener on and to make the presentation an early antidote to the dryness of its style. Origenes used to say that the narrative had been contrived, and to this extent he agreed with Numenius' party, but not that it had been contrived in the interests of artificial pleasure, like Longinus. (1.83.19-28)

Whereas Origenes accepts Numenius' kind of manufactured story, that is the manufacture of a vehicle to carry an encrypted meaning, as worthy of Plato, he cannot accept Longinus' hedonistic kind: the manufacture of a piece of writing that gives enough pleasure to seduce the reader into persevering.<sup>19</sup> So Longinus can be said with confidence to have postulated Plato's desire to seduce the reader as the reason for the story's inclusion, not the momentous events of hitherto unrecorded historical facts, and one must doubt whether his insistence on taking the story literally had anything to do with a belief in its historical truth.

Once this is understood, the four arguments against finding deeper meaning in it can readily be attributed to Longinus. They exhibit both signs of his language<sup>20</sup> and his reason for Plato's having included the Atlantis episode: to seduce the reader into persevering. Remarks about his views on the Atlantis story confirm that Longinus was resisting the trends that he detected in Platonic hermeneutics, making much of some details of language and puzzling over others. Interestingly he thinks that Plato is not committed to the remarks about Solon's poetic status offered by the elder Critias at 21c-d (fr. 34 = 90.18-20), and he goes to great length to explain away Plato's seemingly non-factual remark on Athens' climate (fr. 35 = 162.15-27). This presupposes that Plato should normally be taken literally.

Longinus was the Neoplatonists' favourite example of how not to do philosophy, being too fascinated with literary and linguistic matters. Modes of communication were as central to his teaching as philosophic lessons. So it was above all Longinus, the literary interpreter, who promoted the debate about the status of the Atlantis story in terms of types of discourse, contrasting Herodotean-style narrative with allegorizing myth, and opting for the former, probably claiming the support of Crantor--who thus becomes the champion for his view! In due course his pupil Porphyry, to whom we ultimately owe the account of the contrasting positions, took over from him this discourse-based contrast. The contrast between types of discourse never wholly disappears, though a generation or so later Iamblichus introduces



greater discussion of literal truth and falsehood. Even then there is no necessary connection between the term *historia* and historical truth, and his innovation was probably more concerned with countering the view that all myth, like the myths of the poets, must be literally false. Plato's myths were not like that, and could thus be regarded as potentially true at the surface level. Proclus, though often preserving uses of the term *historia* without any implication of historical truth, at times appears to make a stronger connection between *historia* and literal historical truth. This is not because he misunderstands the significance of the term *historia*. Rather it is because he highlights Critias' claim that the story is 'true in every sense', so that, given the story is meant to have a literal and an allegorical sense, it must also be true in both of these senses. Proclus' reverence for Plato makes it difficult for him to imagine the author encouraging a literal reading without insuring its literal truth.

### VIII. Dénouement

So the 'modern myth', as I have called it, is false. Until Proclus in the fifth century CE, there is no evidence that any of Plato's followers either knew of, or argued for, the literal truth of even the bare outlines of Plato's story of Atlantis. Proclus himself, and some others who denied a deep meaning, may have assumed that Crantor had done so. Though Iamblichus was content to claim that myths were not in all cases of such a kind as to have no plausible superficial meaning, by Proclus' time the veneration for Plato meant that, where the author gave appropriate indications, the superficial meaning of a myth had to be historically true.<sup>21</sup> It seems, then, that the concept of myth found in Porphyry and his contemporaries was superseded by a more complex one in Iamblichus, which was taken still further in Proclus. Hence he at last finds it necessary to make statements such as that found at 1.190.7-8:

'For what has been said is not invented, but is true.'

In Proclus' eyes at least Plato has indeed taken the story of the Atlantine war from *historia* (193.16-17), a significant claim even where *historia* only means the investigation of oral tradition.

So how does Proclus set about proving that the story of Atlantis was indeed historically true? The primary piece of evidence seems to be the character Critias' claim that the tale is 'entirely true', interpreted as meaning 'true in every sense'. This really shows us just how little evidence that Atlantis had existed had survived into late antiquity. Where are the relevant Egyptian inscriptions, which should have been enough to clear the matter up if one is to go by the 'evidence' of Crantor as most people have understood him. These stones should have been famous, but apparently, though they had survived for 9000 years before Solon, they perished over the next millennium. Though knowledge of the world beyond the Pillars of Heracles had increased considerably in Roman times, it seems that the more reputable ancient geographers and natural history writers did not have any site for Atlantis on their map. Instead of citing 'reputable' sources for some historical Atlantis Proclus can only make uncommitted mention of 'those who write about the outside ocean', appealing to the statements of an unknown Marcellus about a group of ten islands, one about a thousand stades long and sacred to Posidon, where the people preserve the memory of a huge island of Atlantis that really existed, and had long controlled the Atlantic isles.<sup>22</sup> Wisely, Proclus chooses to make little of such sources, and even there no mention was made of any contact between such a power and eastern Mediterranean civilisations.

What we have seen in the 'modern myth' is how modern scholars, well versed in ancient Greek and with all the abilities required to interpret *historia* in Proclus' reports on Crantor correctly, have somehow needed to preserve against the odds a real possibility that the Atlantis myth is true, at least in outline. They have seized on a phrase in Proclus, failed to analyse it, divorced it from its wider context, usually assumed that it is Crantor's own phrase,

and taken it as clear evidence that Plato's early successors read the Atlantis story as being literally true. We need these myths. We need to bring Atlantis to mind as we sip our Greek coffee on any one of the many cafés on the rim of the caldera of Santorini, the ancient island of Thera, long linked to the Atlantis story by J. V. Luce and others.<sup>23</sup> We may need to think of it also when modern tsunamis devastate communities around the Indian or Pacific Oceans. But our need for it does not entail that we believe it, but rather (as is typically the case with myths) that we accept it as part of our cultural heritage. Above all, our need for it does not mean that it was ever intended to be read as history (in our sense).

We have seen also how late antique Platonists had prepared the way for the 'modern myth' by their own unwillingness to write it off as a story to be read as an allegory alone. They too needed to keep the possibility of historical truth open. Proclus had also encouraged us to regard the literal interpretation as quite respectable by juxtaposing literal and allegorical interpreters as if, before Iamblichus, there had been a genuine hermeneutic dilemma. In a sense there had been in Longinus' time, though the choice was not between 'true' and 'false'. Yet Proclus' dilemma was essentially contrived, contrived to preserve the great mystery that has always surrounded the story, and contrived so as to represent Iamblichus' position as offering the solution to that dilemma.

Human beings need myths, and philosophers need 'possible worlds'. Frequently they can assist in the understanding of our own. Discussion of mythical creatures like chimaeras and unicorns can assist in our efforts to think through problems of a much more immediate nature. I know little of non-Euclidean geometry, but I know that I shall never use it to solve the real problems that confront me, yet I acknowledge that it will be important to mathematical theory. I have little confidence in the detail of the theories of Freud, but he offered us a new story of ourselves bringing new analytic tools, and his unquestionable genius was very much needed in order that the foundations of psycho-analysis should be put in place.

In a sense, Freud took over myth in order to keep us supplied with a similar range of possible worlds to that which myth had offered.

This paper has dealt with just one example of how sophisticated human beings devise strange ways of preserving myths that inspire or benefit them. What has become culturally important, as anything fully qualifying for the term 'myth' must have done, will always be extraordinarily difficult for us to overthrow, for the urge to defend it in the face of doubts is powerful indeed. Even if it has not been through a rational assent, engendering belief, that our myths have come to have that importance, once others challenge them our need to preserve them takes over, and what we have long been content to accept as 'ours' becomes something for which we seek a new kind of validation, usually known as proof. Acceptance becomes 'belief', and we fail to attend properly to those who do not believe. What this means for religion is important for us all. What had once been a culturally imbibed attitude to ourselves and to the greater forces around us becomes a belief system that requires, in its potentially most damaging form, strict adherence to the letter. It is no accident that Proclus, who did most in antiquity to promote the acceptance of the literal truth of the Atlantis story, also excelled others in his philosophic efforts to establish the scientific and systematic truth of the dying Greek pantheon.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> See for example R. J. Mortley, *From Word to Silence* (Bonn, 1986), 2 vols.

<sup>2</sup> See especially Sara Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism: Non-Discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascius* (Cambridge 2000).

<sup>3</sup> *Republic* 376e-378b, 414b-415c; *Laws* 712b-714a.

<sup>4</sup> For a collection of essays that attempts to correct this, see T. Calvo and L. Brisson (eds), *Interpreting the Timaeus-Critias, Proceedings of the IV Symposium Platonicum Selected Papers* (Sankt Augustin, 1997), especially the contribution of Diskin Clay, 'The Plan of Plato's *Critias*', 49-54. On the artificiality of ancient arrangements of Plato's writings see Harold Tarrant, *Thrasyllan Platonism* (Ithaca, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Relevant followers were Speusippus, Xenocrates, and Crantor; on them see John Dillon, *The Heirs of Plato* (Oxford, 2003), and on this issue Harold Tarrant, *Plato's First Interpreters* (London, 2000), 44-46.

<sup>6</sup> A temporal interpretation of the *Timaeus* was demanded by many, including Plutarch, Atticus, and early Christian authors; see for instance John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists* (London, 1977), 252-4.

<sup>7</sup> Alcinous, *Didascalicus* chapters 12-21; strictly speaking, Alcinous (10) has the kind of Aristotelian first god whom one would not associate with creation processes or temporality of any kind, but the universe comes into being (cyclically?) after the intellect of the world-soul has been stirred into response.

<sup>8</sup> See the entry for Critias in Debra Nails, *The People of Plato: a Prosopography of Plato and Other Socratics* (Indianapolis, 2002); the problem is that if 'Critias' is making up his story, then the account of how it was passed down to him is quite as unreliable, and serious prosopography becomes irrelevant.

<sup>9</sup> Serious Platonists have helped to clarify the problem of late. Of these I have particularly used T. K. Johansen, *Plato's Natural Philosophy: a Study of the Timaeus-Critias* (Cambridge, 2004); but see also C. J. Gill, 'The Genre of the Atlantis Story', *Classical Philology* 72 (1976), 287-304; and also his 'Plato's Atlantis Story and the Birth of Fiction', *Philosophy and Literature*, 3 (1979), 64-78; Gerald Naddaf, 'The Atlantis Myth: an Introduction to Plato's Later Philosophy of History', *Phoenix* 48 (1994), 189-209.

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- <sup>10</sup> See here Phyllis Y. Forsythe, *Atlantis: The Making of a Myth* (Montreal 1980), 1; Diskin Clay, 'Plato's Atlantis: the Anatomy of a Fiction', *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium on Ancient Philosophy*, 15 (1999), 1-21; also John Dillon, 'Pedantry and Pedestrianism? Some Reflections on the Middle Platonic Commentary Tradition', in H. Tarrant and D. Baltzly (eds.), *Reading Plato in Antiquity* (London, 2006), 19-31, at 22-23.
- <sup>11</sup> F49.297-303 Kidd = Strabo II.3.6; note that the same verbs (*plassô*, *aphanizô*) are used by Strabo and Proclus for 'invent' and 'obliterate', verbs are tailored to remarks about the status of the Atlantis story, since Plato himself uses *aphanizesthai* for the vanishing of Atlantis (25d3) and *plassô* for the invention of stories (26e4).
- <sup>12</sup> The subject to be understood with this was taken to be Plato by Alan Cameron, 'Crantor and Posidonius on Atlantis', *Classical Quarterly* 33 (1983), 81-91; I prefer to see it as Crantor in the light of the previous 'he says'; for more on the details of interpretation see H. Tarrant (trans.), Proclus: *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, 2006), 60-70.
- <sup>13</sup> See Alan Cameron, *Greek Mythography in the Roman World* (Oxford, 2004); all indexed discussion of *historia* is potentially useful, especially 90-91.
- <sup>14</sup> Note *physikôs* at 109.9, *physikôteron* at 109.31, *epibolai physikôterai* at 110.22. Domninus (110.1) is hailed as the best interpreter in this category.
- <sup>15</sup> Note *philosophôs* at 109.9, which is not further used of the third approach, whose outline commences at 110.22; the key word here becomes *hypsêlôteron* (110.23).
- <sup>16</sup> *De Antro Nympharum* 2.1-4, 4.1-5.
- <sup>17</sup> See *De Antro Nympharum* 4.1-5.
- <sup>18</sup> Here it might be noticed that the view of Plato's character 'Critias' which Proclus takes at 70.21-71.15, presumably following Iamblichus, places him at a higher level than the character 'Hermocrates', and goes to some lengths to defend the historical person too. This rosier view of 'Critias' is opposed to another, held by unnamed interpreters best identified with Porphyry, that Plato's 'Critias' is inferior to 'Hermocrates' (71.27). I infer that Porphyry and his contemporaries did not respect 'Critias' and hence did not need to avoid having him tell lies. Iamblichus, however, with a tendency to venerate anybody related to Plato, took a more exalted view of him and so elevated him above the status of Iamboulus.

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<sup>19</sup> Longinus apparently supported his view that the story was meant to give pleasure with reference to the term *charis* at *Tim.* 21a2.

<sup>20</sup> I refer to the language of literary seduction (*psuchagôgia*), which had occurred at 59.28 (Longinus fr. 28.20) and 83.23 (fr. 32.5). For this term's place in literary criticism see M. Patillon and L. Brisson (eds), *Longin: Fragments, Art rhétorique* (Paris, 2001), 314-15.

<sup>21</sup> Even so, it has to be said that even where there seems to be some confirmation from a travel writer called Marcellus of there having been a great island power in the Atlantic, Proclus seems not to set much store by it (177.10-21).

<sup>22</sup> in *Tim.* 177.10-21.

<sup>23</sup> J. V. Luce, *The End of Atlantis* (London, 1970); the book followed closely after the excavation of Thera by Spyridon Marinatos begun in 1967, as did less well known books by A. G. Galanopoulos and E. Bacon, *Atlantis: The Truth behind the Legend* (London, 1969), and James Mavor, *Voyage to Atlantis* (New York, 1969).