Flood legends abounded in the ancient Mediterranean world, not surprisingly so when the causes of normal floods were still poorly understood and those of the extraordinary inundations that may accompany seismic activity not understood at all. People who lived to describe these floods must in many cases have been totally unsure of what they were witnessing, and the Greeks would naturally have held Poseidon responsible. In the retelling of the stories, events were mutated and magnified, often with the accretion of a moral message. The tales became a vehicle for teaching, for helping to impart to others something about the conditions under which human beings live; not simply those of people attracted to the rich and fertile plains that major rivers such as the Nile regularly wash over, but also those of people who in any way exceed their mark and invite retribution from the forces that control our world. Because the flood tales were didactic, they were something that humans needed to have and would not readily label as fiction.

The topic of Atlantis now generates its own international conferences, and we have recently witnessed the publication of a varied and extensive set of proceedings from one of these.¹ My interest, however, is accidental, deriving from my work on how the ancients read Plato. The story of Atlantis is told by a character in Plato, and tells of a great maritime nation destroyed by a flood. As part of a project funded by the Australian Research Council, I have just published a translation of the first book of Proclus’ 5th century AD commentary on Plato’s Timaeus, of which about two thirds is devoted to interpreting Plato’s story.² Almost all that we know about how the ancients read Plato’s story comes from here. One obvious point to be made is that informed readers often treated it as some kind of allegory, rather than as a vehicle of any kind of remote historical truth. Why did they do so? And does not such an interpretation call into question the periodic claims of underwater archaeologists to have ‘found Atlantis’ in one region or another? The name “Atlantis” seems to be Plato’s invention, and if Plato’s tale were fictional then it would make nonsense to claim that the subject of that tale has been discovered.

The story of Atlantis is told by a character in Plato’s dialogues Timaeus and Critias who bears the name ‘Critias’, and it would have been very difficult for Plato’s readers not to have associated him directly or indirectly with the infamous leader of the oligarchic regime of the Thirty installed in Athens in 404 BC. That alone invites our caution about anything that he tells us. His story has several parts, and involves fascinating questions of oral and written transmission:

1. Solon is told a story by an Egyptian priest, for whom it has been preserved for 9000 years on an inscribed stone.
2. It was then passed down orally through Critias’ family.
3. The story is said to illustrate the success of prehistoric Athens, governed approximately along the lines of the state described in Plato’s Republic.
4. Athens’ bravery is revealed when it halts the expansionist ambitions of the huge island state of Atlantis, beyond the pillars of Heracles.

5. The whole land of Atlantis, plus the Athenian forces, is eventually wiped out by cataclysmic events.

Critias’ Egyptian priest had begun the story with remarks about the way memory of such events is lost by periodic disasters of fire and flood, which have the capacity to wipe out highlanders and lowlanders respectively. He claimed that Egypt was affected less than other lands by these fires and floods, owing to the regular nature of its climatic cycle. As an example of a disaster through fire, the Egyptian priest cites the story of Phaethon, son of the Sun-god Helios, who failed to control the horses of the Sun-chariot and crashed down to earth, causing a conflagration. Coupling the Atlantis story with the Phaethon myth does nothing to convince us that the former is true. However, both conflagrations and disappearing islands have suggested to some that volcanic and seismic activity may somehow be involved in the ancient destruction of a land called Atlantis. That is why it has sometimes been seen as attractive to connect the story of Atlantis with the mighty volcanic eruption that changed forever the shape of Thera and deposited ash huge distances around.²

Some have found subtle linguistic hints that all this is Plato’s invention. Others observe that ‘Critias’ says that the story is true in every way: Παντάπασιν ἀληθῆ.⁴ Commentators from the period AD 280–440 will make a lot of this phrase. But clearly it was the earliest interpreters of Plato, who had studied with his own school (the Academy), whom we should most expect to have been aware of how he intended his story to be read. However, during the 20th century the orthodox position was that his earlier followers were divided on the issue. A good case can be made that it was Aristotle who first treated the story as a Platonic invention, whereas Crantor, whom Proclus describes as ‘the first exegete’ (of the Timaeus) and had studied in the Academy in the late 4th century BC, was thought to have held that the content was ‘pure history’. In a recent article I refer to this understanding of Crantor as the modern myth,⁵ since the words it takes as ‘pure history’ (ψιλὴ ἱστορία) cannot have that meaning. The latter term does not imply historical truth, and the former signifies only the absence of any deeper meaning. Proclus’ words have been repeatedly misunderstood, I suggest, not because scholars lack the ability to translate accurately, but because we humans have a psychological need to preserve the mystery of the Atlantis story by balancing the evidence on either side.

The following quotation shows us how Proclus himself has tried to resist the tendency to dismiss the Atlantis story as fiction:

“Hence one should not say that the one who obliterated the evidence undermines his subject-matter, just like Homer in the case of the Phaecians (example 1) or of the wall made by the Greeks (example 2). For what has been said has not been invented, but is true” (in Ti. 1.190. 4–8).

Much the same point about the Atlantis story, using similar terminology (where italicised) but only regarding example 2, had already been made by Posidonius in the early 1st century BC. Other evidence shows that he was

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⁴ There may be a little ambiguity even here, as in our ‘true in every detail’; many a tale that is false overall has been composed of details that are true in other contexts.

⁵ H. Tarrant, “Atlantis: Myths, Ancient and Modern,” The European Legacy 12 (2007), pp. 159–72; the article provides the full argument for much of what is said here.
drawing on Aristotle. The idea is that a story-teller can destroy within his story the expectation that any evidence might have survived. Further, both Homeric examples refer to the destruction of ‘evidence’ through violent waters, and both also involve Poseidon, the god named by Plato as the ancestor of the Atlanteans. So the examples were well chosen to suggest that Plato had created his own war between two mythical civilisations, only to tell of their destruction in such a way as to arouse no expectations that evidence might survive.

So it is likely that Plato’s own pupil Aristotle had referred to the collapse of Homer’s Achaean Wall and the destruction of the Phaeacian ships when claiming that Plato had invented both Atlantis and its destruction by cataclysmic events. Why then have scholars hesitated over accepting this indication of Plato’s intentions? Because it is assumed that Crantor, when writing a work of interpretation on the Timaeus, claimed that the Atlantis story is ‘history’. As a member of the Plato’s school, the Academy, just one generation later, he too should have been aware of Plato’s intentions. So the ‘modern myth’ assumes that Aristotle and Crantor, both in an ideal position to know Plato’s mind, were of opposite opinions about whether or not Plato thought he was recording history! It looks at first sight as if the evidence is nicely balanced. I offer three reasons why this may be so:

1. We humans seem to need puzzles and mysteries.
2. Proclus himself represented the authorities as deeply divided, partly in order to promote an alleged compromise.
3. The evidence offered by Proclus has been deeply misunderstood, and some of the misunderstanding goes back to Proclus himself.

In order to make progress, it is essential to understand the origin of Proclus’ information. It is now acknowledged that Proclus followed Porphyry’s Commentary on the Timaeus for early interpreters (up to Porphyry’s time, the 3rd century AD). These interpreters include Crantor, as a representative of the literalist side, and several representatives of the allegorists. Porphyrian tradition represented the debate as one between those who took the Atlantis story as historia (ἱστορία) and those who thought it was mythos (μῦθος). The terms historia and mythos are never explained, but mythos clearly referred to a story which is not intended to be taken literally, but should rather be read as an allegory. A historia is therefore a story that one reads literally. But does that imply literal truth? If historia did not imply historical truth, then Crantor may never have been claiming that Plato’s story was historically true.

Proclus’ own evidence confirms that this word had not been understood to imply historical truth. First, Plato had made Atlantis huge, bigger than ‘Libya’ and ‘Asia’ together. Proclus tells us that “One must not doubt [its size], even if one took the tale to be historia only” (in Ti. 1.182.1–2). This reveals that those who interpreted the story as simple historia were quite at liberty to regard it as unhistorical.

Second, Plato introduced cases of catastrophic destruction with a reference to the Phaethon myth. Proclus affirms that the story of Phaethon could be interpreted in three ways: historically (historikós ἱστορικῶς), physically
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(physikós φυσικῶς), or philosophically (philosophós φιλοσόφως). He then goes on to say:

“...The *historia* asserts that Phaethon, the son of Helius ..., veered off course when driving his father’s chariot, and Zeus, in fear for the universe, struck him with a thunderbolt. When hit, 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), ...” (*in. Ti.* 1.109.9–19).

The Phaethon myth can be seen as a *historia* without any problem, but the only thing that has to have actually happened is the original event that the myth purports to explain, a great conflagration. The explanation itself does not have to be taken to be true.

Third, at *in Timaeum* 1.129.11–23 Proclus offers a list of four arguments for taking the story as a *historia*:

1. The allegorical unveiling of this kind of story appears to Plato to be ‘for a hard-working person who is somewhat wide of the mark’.
2. Plato’s communicative method does not use riddles like Pherecydes’, but gives explicit teaching on a host of doctrines....
3. Allegorical unveiling of the story is unnecessary here, as there is an acknowledged reason for the narrative’s presence: seducing the listeners.
4. If we explain away everything, then we shall suffer the same fate as those who waste time with tricky minutiae of Homer.

Note that these arguments do not employ any evidence at all for the story’s having been historical in our sense, only about the pitfalls of allegorical interpretation. They employ Plato’s own discouraging comments on the allegorical interpretation of myths (*Phaedrus* 229d), and show strong interest in the literary presentation of Plato’s ideas. The language shows that the arguments come from Porphyry’s original teacher Longinus—usually a literalist interpreter, and considered by Plotinus as a literary critic rather than a philosopher (ϕιλόλογος, οὐ ϕιλόσοφος). In Longinus’ time any literary critic would have known a distinction between history and myth recently discussed by Alan Cameron: *mythos* is a story containing fantastic elements, while *historia* contains nothing totally impossible. So much of what we call ‘myth’ was at that time quite naturally called *historia* without assuming its truth.6 So the anti-allegorical camp simply treated the Atlantis story as without any deeper meaning. And this is all they would have meant in adopting Crantor as the first exponent of their view.

So the ‘modern myth’ can now be discounted. As far as we may tell Plato’s earlier followers were not after all divided over the intentions of this story. They took it as a simple, uncomplicated story. In the 2nd and third centuries AD several thinkers opted for allegorical interpretation. By late in the 3rd century AD it was argued that the story was to be understood *primarily* as an allegory of opposing
forces in the universe, but that the events could nevertheless have happened. Only with Proclus in the 5th century do we find an interpreter willing to affirm that the events depicted were indeed literally true. But this is not because of any external evidence, from the geographers or others. He knows some of these sources, many of them unreliable and treated as such by Proclus himself. His position relies only on the Platonic text and the claim by Plato’s character Critias that the story was ‘true in every way’. No other supporting evidence is thought worth a mention. While believing in the story, even Proclus made little of its supposed historical truth.

The logical conclusion would be that this story is just like other Platonic ‘myths’: a creative amalgam of traditional elements and philosophic theory. Philosophic theory, however, would have taken account of recent cataclysmic events. Like Aristotle, Plato would have been impressed by the recent devastating destruction of Eliki and Voura on the Corinthian Gulf in 373 BC by a huge wave that followed an earthquake. He would also have known of the massive damage to the island of Atalanta (Talantonisos, in the straits across from Euboia) early in the Peloponnesian War:

“[2] About the same time that these earthquakes were so common, the sea at Orobiae, in Euboea, retiring from the then line of coast, returned in a huge wave and invaded a great part of the town, and retreated leaving some of it still under water; so that what was once land is now sea; such of the inhabitants perishing as could not run up to the higher ground in time. [3] A similar inundation also occurred at Atalanta, the island off the Opuntian-Locrian coast, carrying away part of the Athenian fort and wrecking one of two ships which were drawn up on the beach.” (Thuc. 3.89.2–3).

Similarly Plato was aware of the story of Deucalion’s flood, and probably of other flood-myths too. It is entirely possible that he had some knowledge of Egyptian (or other) stories of various terrible natural disasters, involving quakes, tsunamis etc. in Thera, the Near East or elsewhere. What we may say with absolute certainty is that no events exactly matching Plato’s report ever took place. Atlantis is Plato’s name. Its story is Plato’s story. Archaeology can reveal the wonder of sunken and lost civilizations, and it performs a huge service by doing so; but naming them ‘Atlantis’ adds nothing to the value of the finds. Nobody can ever discover ‘Atlantis’ as Plato described it. Therefore nobody needs to appropriate Plato’s name.