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Atlantis Theories

Among the cryptic stories everyone knows since childhood, the myth of Atlantis is probably one of the most thrilling and mysterious ones. The idea of a huge continent lying underwater, once inhabited by a supposedly ingenious civilization is intriguing on its own, and the numerous hints and clues that Atlantis was a real place make archaeologists, historians, and adventurers across the globe seek for its remains with enviable enthusiasm. Still, the myth of Atlantis is controversial and debated, and there are numerous theories regarding where it was located, which people inhabited it, and why this civilization disappeared.

First mentioned by Plato, Atlantis remained a subject of numerous research studies throughout centuries. Of course, a number of these research studies do not stand up to criticism. For example, Swedish scholar Olaf Rudbeck in 1680 claimed Atlantis was a part of ancient Sweden; moreover, he suggested that the capital of Atlantis was Uppsala, his hometown. Five years later, another scholar, Georg Kasper Kirchmaier, offered a directly opposite theory, proving that Atlantis was located in South Africa. In the 18th century, there was a popular speculation by Jean-Sylvain Bailly about Atlantis being located within the Arctic circle, somewhere near the Spitsbergen archipelago; simultaneously, Delisle de Sales claimed he could prove that Atlantis was in Central Asia.

During the 20th century, scientists and pseudo-scientists still held interest in this subject; in particular, a German anthropologist, Leo Frobenius, similarly to Kirchmaier, stated that Atlantis indeed was located in Africa, but unlike the latter, Frobenius believed that

it existed in Sudan. Several decades later, in 1952, Willy Ley, a rocket pioneer, and L. Sprague de Camp, a science-fiction author, put Atlantis in Spain (the town of Cadiz), and by the end of the decade, Dr. Angelos Galanopoulos, a Greek seismologist, introduced evidence that Atlantis was located on the island of Thera in the Aegean Sea. Surprisingly, this theory seems to have been closer to the truth than any other at the time; Thera is a sunken island, and when in the end of 1960s an English oceanographer, James W. Mavor, researched the area specified by Galanopoulos, he found evidence proving this theory to be at least partially correct (Omni.media). As we can see, however, theories regarding Atlantis are often contradictory; besides, no direct evidence such as the examples of writing, pottery, arts, armor, and so on have been found.

Before the 19th century, Atlantis was more of a myth romantic seekers of truth tried to prove; however, in 1882, Ignatius Donnelly published a book titled "Atlantis, the Antediluvian World"; in this manuscript, he proved that Atlantis was not a mere legend crafted by Plato, but could be a historical reality. Donnelly believed there must have been an incredibly advanced ancient civilization that invented metallurgy, agriculture, astronomy, and so on, and from which other, less sophisticated (according to Donnelly) civilizations must have had inherited knowledge and technologies. He also believed that Atlantis was located right where Plato described: near the Pillars of Hercules by the Straits of Gibraltar; the Atlantic ocean's "shifting waters," as he called it, sank the continent on which Atlantis was located.

Continental plate tectonics shows that Donnelly's theory is incorrect, but it happened to be extremely tenacious, so even nowadays many people believed Atlantis to have existed (if at all) right where Plato said it did. This theory also inspired other people to start looking for Atlantis, spawning dozens of newer speculations. One of them belongs to Charles Berlitz, an author who mostly wrote about various paranormal phenomena. Berlitz claimed that

Atlantis sank in the infamous Bermuda Triangle (History.com). This theory combines extremely well with the speculations of mystics researching the Triangle; people believe that since Atlantis must have been a technologically-advanced civilization, then (if it sank in the Bermuda triangle) it explains why so many ships disappeared in that region: ancient technology must be influencing navigational systems, sailors' minds, and more. Obviously, none of these theories stands up to criticism, but they still remain popular.

A more realistic explanation of the emergence of the image of Atlantis is offered by a professor of classics at Bard College in Annandale, James Romm. He believes that Atlantis was a metaphor introduced by Plato to illustrate his philosophical concepts. According to the legend, Atlantis was a prosperous state, which gradually fell to corruption and greediness, for which gods punished its people. Romm says that Plato "was dealing with a number of issues, themes that run throughout his work. His ideas about divinity versus human nature, ideal societies, the gradual corruption of human society—these ideas are all found in many of his works. Atlantis was a different vehicle to get at some of his favorite themes." In other words, the myth about Atlantis could be an illustration of Plato's ideas about a utopian state. Charles Orser, curator of history at the New York State Museum in Albany, supports this point of view. "The gods," he says, "became angry because the people had lost their way and turned to immoral pursuits," and thus decided to destroy a once-prosperous society, sinking it into the ocean. If analyzed from this perspective, Plato's story about Atlantis starts making sense, because it directly corresponds with his philosophical ideals. Besides, there is more proof that Atlantis must have been a metaphor rather than a historic reality.

Robert Ballard, an explorer who discovered Titanic's wreckage, says that even though the story of Atlantis looks logical, there is not enough evidence to state it is true. Indeed, there were numerous cataclysms occurring throughout humankind's history, causing cities and even nations to disappear (remember the eruption of Vesuvius eradicating the city of

Pompeii, for example); 3600 years ago, a powerful volcanic eruption destroyed the island of Santorini in the Aegean Sea, along with the Minoan civilization inhabiting it. However, even though this is the closest historical parallel to Atlantis, Ballard says Minoans could not be Atlantis, because the time of Santorini's destruction does not match with the one Plato mentioned in his stories about Atlantis (National Geographic).

So far, it is still not clear whether Atlantis existed or not. Romantics believe it did, continuing to invent new theories, clinging to a few unreliable theories introduced in the past; modern science, however—oceanography, in particular—proves them wrong. The most credible explanation of Atlantis is that it must have been Plato's metaphor illustrating his philosophical concepts; advocating a utopian society, Plato described a prosperous civilization which fell the victim of its own greediness, immorality, and corruption; in this regard, the legend of Atlantis makes perfect sense.



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Works Cited

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