

Atlantis

by Plato

from "THE TIMAEUS AND CRITIAS" of Plato
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Page 15] AFTER establishing his famous code of laws, Solon, [Circiter 638–558 B.C.] the renowned Athenian legislator, left his native country for ten years. At Saïs, in the Nile delta, he was honourably received by the priests of Neïth, [Athena] for both Athens and Saïs were under the protection of the same goddess. In conversing with the learned guardians of the temple on the antiquities of their respective countries, he discovered that there were records in the sacred edifice of events which had happened nine thousand years previously, and in which the inhabitants of his own country had played a conspicuous part. Solon had spoken of the deluge of Deucalion and Pyrrha, giving the orthodox Greek chronology of the time; on which an aged priest exclaimed: "O Solon, Solon, you Greeks are always children, and aged Greek there is none !" And then he proceeded to explain to the astonished Athenian the astronomical meaning of the myth of Phaëthon, and how that there are successive cataclysms of fire and water, destroying whole nations, and that a noble race had once inhabited the land of Attica whose deeds and institutions were said to have been the most excellent of all, and how they conquered the inhabitants of the Atlantean island, and both themselves and their enemies were destroyed by terrible earthquakes and deluges. On his return to Athens, Solon composed an epic poem embodying the information he had gleaned from the Saïtic records, but political troubles prevented the entire accomplishment of his undertaking. Now Dropides, his fellow kinsman, was his most intimate friend and fully acquainted with the whole story; this Dropides was father of Critias the elder, who had many times delighted his young grandson, the Critias of the dialogue and afterwards the most notorious of the thirty tyrants, with a recital of these wonderful chronicles.

Among the many glorious deeds of the noble autochthones of Attica, was their victory over a mighty hostile power from the Atlantic Ocean, [Page 16] which had pushed its conquests over all Europe and Asia. Facing the Pillars of Hercules [The Straits of Gibraltar] was an island larger than Africa and Asia [As known to the Greeks; that is to say, the northern coasts of Africa as far as Egypt and Asia Minor] put together. Besides this main island, there were many other smaller ones, so that it was easy to cross from one to another as far as the *further continent*. [America] And this continent was indeed a continent, and the sea, the real sea, in comparison to which "The Sea" [The Mediterranean] of the Greeks was but a bay with a narrow mouth.

In the Atlantic island a powerful confederation of kings was formed, who subdued the island itself and many of the smaller islands and also parts of the further continent. They also reduced Africa within the Straits as far as Egypt, and Europe as far as Tyrrhenia. [The Etruscan states in early times extended their sway over the greater part of Italy and furnished Rome with her polity and religious institutions] Further aggression, however, was stopped by the heroic action of the then inhabitants of Attica, who, taking the lead of the oppressed states, finally secured liberty to all who dwelt within the Pillars of Hercules. Subsequently both races were destroyed by mighty cataclysms, which brought destruction in a

single day and night, the natural features of the Attic land were entirely changed, and the Atlantic island sank bodily beneath the waves.

Such is the general sketch of this terrible episode in ancient history, given by Critias in the Timaeus, and so interested were his audience, that they requested some fuller account of these famous and highly civilized nations of antiquity. To his Grecian hearers the primaevae policy and history of their own race was naturally the greater interest. As, however, the Atlantean conflict were the climax of the narrative, Critias proceeds to give an account of their history and institutions. And thus he begins with their mythical traditions: —

In the centre of the Atlantic island was a fair and beautiful plain. In the centre of this plain and fifty stades [Nearly six miles] from its confines, was a low range of hills. There dwelt an earth-born couple, [The names were originally Egyptian, but Solon, having studied the science of the power of names, translated them into his own tongue. Evenor and Leucippe, who had an only daughter, Clito ; after the death of her parents, the god Poseidon, to whom the island had been assigned, became enamoured of the maiden. To make his love a safe dwelling-place, he surrounded the hills with alternate belts or zones of land and water, two of land and three of sea, each in its entire circumference equally distant from the centre. He also caused a hot and cold spring to flow in the centre island and made [Page 17] every kind of food to grow abundantly. Ten male children were born to the god in five twin-births. When they had grown to manhood, he divided the island into ten parts, giving one to each. And to the first-born of the eldest pair he gave his mother's dwelling and allotment, for it was the largest and best, and made him king over his brethren and the others governors of land, giving them dominion over many people and great territories. And the eldest he named Atlas, and from him the whole island and sea were called Atlantic. So they and their descendants dwelt for many generations, holding extensive sway over the sea of islands, and extending their power as far as Egypt and Tyrrhenia. By far the most renowned, however, was the race of Atlas, the kings ever handing down the succession to their eldest sons, and being possessed of such wealth as no dynasty ever yet obtained or will easily procure hereafter. Now this wealth was both drawn from foreign tributary countries and from Atlantis itself, which was very rich in minerals, especially its mines of orichalcum, now a mere name, but then the most precious of all metals save gold. The country also was exceedingly rich in timber and pasturage. Moreover, there were vast numbers of elephants. Spices, gums and odorous plants of every description, flowers, fruit trees and vegetables of all kinds and many other luxurious products, this wonderful island, owing to its magnificent climate, brought forth, sacred, beautiful, wonderful and infinite in number. Nor were the inhabitants content with the natural advantages of their glorious island, but displayed a marvellous industry and skill in engineering and the constructive arts. For in the centre island they built a Royal palace, each succeeding king trying to surpass his predecessor in adorning and adding to the building, so that it struck all beholders with the greatest admiration. Now the formation of the zones or belts round the ancient abode of the god was very regular, the circumference of each zone being equally distant from the common centre; and the outermost zones of sea and of land were each three stades [A stade is about 606 feet] broad, and the next pair of two stades each, the succeeding zone of sea being of one stade, while the central seat itself had a diameter of five shades. And they bridged [The width of the bridges was a plethrum, about 101 feet] over the water zones, making a way from and to the palace, and dug a great canal [Three stades broad, a plethrum wide, and fifty stades long, some six miles] from the sea to the uttermost zone of water, wide enough to admit the largest vessels.

They also made water-ways through the zones of land, wide enough for a trireme [A ship with three banks of oars] to pass, and roofed them over, for the height of the land zones above the water was considerable. Moreover, they enclosed the island, zones, and bridges, with stone walls, placing towers and gates at the [Page 18] bridges. The stone they quarried from the face of the centre island and from both faces of the land zones, at the same time fashioning a line of docks on each bank of the water zones, leaving a natural roof of rock.

The stone was of three colours, white, black, and red, so that many of the buildings presented a gay appearance. The whole circuit of the wall of the outer zone was covered with brass, which they used like plaster, of the inner zone with tin, and of the acropolis itself with orichalcum, which was of a glittering appearance. The palace within the acropolis was constructed as follows: In the centre was the sacred shrine of Poseidon and Clito, surrounded by a golden enclosure. Hard by stood the great temple of Poseidon [It was a stade long, three plethra broad, and of a proportionate height] of a different style of architecture to the Greek. The exterior was covered with silver, except the pediments and pinnacles, which were lined with gold. Within, the roof was a magnificent mosaic of gold, ivory, and orichalcum, and all the walls, pillars, and pavements were covered with orichalcum. The most remarkable object of the interior was a gigantic statue of the god, equal in height to the building, mounted on a chariot drawn by six winged horses, and round the car were a hundred Nereids riding on dolphins; there were also many other statues and numerous votive offerings of the citizens. Round the exterior were placed golden statues of the princes and princesses of the Royal blood, and statues erected by the kings and also by private individuals both of the city and of subject states. There was also an altar of proportionate magnificence. And they had baths for summer and winter, supplied by the hot and cold springs, there being baths for the Royal Family, for men, for women, for horses and other animals. By a system of aqueducts, the water of the springs was carried to the two land zones and utilized for the irrigation of plantations and beautiful gardens. In these zones were many temples of other gods, gardens and gymnasia both for men and horses. Indeed, in the larger belt was a splendid race-course, extending throughout its entire length, a stade broad, and lined on either side with barracks for the household troops. Those, however, of them who were conspicuous for their loyalty, were lodged in the smaller zone, and the most faithful of all in the citadel itself. Moreover, the docks were filled with shipping and naval stores of every description. At fifty stades from the outer water belt or harbour in every direction, another wall was built, enclosing the whole city and meeting the great canal at the sea entrance. The space between this wall and the first water belt was thickly built over and inhabited by a dense population; and the canal and largest harbour were crowded with merchant shipping from all parts, and the din and tumult of their commerce continued all day long and the night through. Such is a general sketch of their wonderful city. Now, as regards the rest of the country; it was very mountainous, with exceedingly precipitous [Page 19] coasts, and the plain surrounding the city was itself surrounded by mountain chains, broken only at the sea entrance. And the plain was smooth and level, and of an oblong shape, lying north and south, three thousand stades in one direction and two thousand in the other. And the mountains were said to be the grandest in the world for their number, size and beauty; they were inhabited, moreover, by many prosperous and wealthy villages, for there was an abundance of rivers and lakes, meadows and pasturage for all kinds of cattle and quantities of timber. They surrounded the plain by an enormous canal or dike, the size of which is almost incredible for a work of human undertaking. [One hundred and one feet deep, 606 feet broad, and upwards of 1,250 miles in length] By it the water from the mountains was conducted round the plain and flowed out to sea near the entrance of the great canal. Moreover, parallel dikes [One hundred and one feet broad] were cut from the upper bounding canal to that on the sea-side, one hundred stades distant from each other, and these were again joined by transverse water-ways. They also employed the canals for irrigation, and so raised two crops in the year. And the plain was divided into sixty thousand wards or sections, each supplying a certain contingent of men to the army and navy; and the army consisted of war-chariots and a kind of light car, holding two warriors, one of whom dismounted and fought, and the other drove, men-at-arms, archers, slingers, stone-shooters, javelin-men, and light-armed troops. [Their standing army consisted of upwards of a million men; their navy of 240,000 and 1,200 ships] Such was the military system of the city. And the other nine cities of the confederation had slightly different systems, which it would be tedious to narrate.

Now, as regards the polity of the Atlanteans, the kings exercised an autocracy over the people; but in their dealings with each other and for the common welfare, they followed the traditional law of their divine progenitor, which was also inscribed on a column of orichalcum by the first kings, and the column placed

in the temple of the deity. Thither they assembled every alternate fifth and sixth year to decide any disputes that might have arisen between them. And these are the ceremonies they performed before proceeding to their decision. There were sacred bulls grazing in the precincts of the temple. And the ten kings, after first praying to the deity, armed only with staves and nooses, proceeded to capture one of the herd, and sacrificed him on the column over the inscription.

There was also an oath written on the column, invoking dire curses on those of them who infringed the statutes of their divine parent. And filling the sacrificial chalice, [Crater or mixing bowl] they cast in a clot of blood for each, and [Page 20] purifying the column, they burnt the rest with fire. Then, with golden cups they dipped from the chalice and poured a libation on the fire of sacrifice; and swearing to do justice according to the laws on the column, and neither to rule nor suffer the rule of any of their number, contrary to these ancestral laws, after invoking the prescribed curses both on themselves and their descendants, if untrue to their solemn pledge, they drank and deposited the cups in the temple. Then, having eaten the sacrificial meal and busied themselves with the other necessary offices, when evening grew on, clad in most beautiful dark blue robes, they sat in darkness on the ground round the now cold embers of the sacrificial fire; and through the night they judged and were judged, but when morning came, they inscribed their decisions on a golden tablet and deposited it, with their robes, in the temple as a memorial. And the chief of these enactments were that the kings should never wage war one against the other, but should ever give mutual aid should any of the cities try to destroy the Royal race; and the chief power was assigned to the Atlantic race; nor could any king put to death a kinsman, without first getting a majority of votes from his Royal colleagues. For many generations, then, so long as the nature of their divine ancestry was strong within them, they remained obedient to these laws and well affected to their divine kinship. For they possessed true and altogether lofty ideas, and exercised mildness and practical wisdom, both in the ordinary vicissitudes of life and in their mutual relations; and looking above everything except virtue, they considered things present of small importance and contentedly bore their weight of riches as a burden; nor were they intoxicated with luxury, but clearly perceived that wealth and possessions are increased by mutual friendship and the practice of true virtue, whereas, by a too anxious pursuit of riches, both possessions themselves are corrupted and friendship likewise perishes therewith. And so it was that they reached the great prosperity that we have described.

But when their mortal natures began to dominate the divine within them, through their inability to bear present events, to those who can truly perceive, they began to display unbecoming conduct and to degenerate, destroying the fairest of their most valuable possessions. To those, however, who cannot perceive that true mode of life which leads to real happiness, they appeared most glorious and happy, though actually full of aggrandizement and unjust power. Zeus, however, the god of gods, who rules according to Law, and can perceive such things, wishing to recall a once honourable race to the practice of virtue, assembled all the gods and said

E. E. O.

[Here, unfortunately, the text of the dialogue ceases abruptly.]