
Atlantis as the Americas

Soon after the discovery of the American mainland by Christopher Columbus in 1498 Spanish historians began proposing that North America, South America or indeed the Americas as a whole was Plato's Atlantis. More recently, Bolivia in South America (Allen) and Central America (Zapp and Erikson) have been suggested for the site of the fabled Atlantean city. Certainly, the Americas do match the proportions of the Atlantic 'island' described in his works the Timaeus and Critias, written c. 350 BC. If Atlantis did once exist, and it really was of the immense size proposed, there is no better solution.

In actuality, this solution has a significant drawback, for after relating the size of the Atlantic island, the old priest of Sais tells Solon that 'from it [i.e. Atlantis] the voyagers of those days could reach the other islands, and from these islands the whole of the opposite continent [author's emphasis]'.

This last statement should be seen in the context of the age in which it was written. To put it bluntly, there was no 'opposite continent' in Plato's day!

Yet Plato seems clearly to be referring to the American mainland, suggesting therefore that he was somehow aware of its existence on the other side of the Western Ocean, most probably through stories and rumours circulating the philosophical world (other classical writers such as Aristotle, Theopompus, Plutarch and Strabo also allude to an opposite continent). So if the 'opposite continent' he describes was America, this means that it cannot have been Atlantis as well. This paradox has led some writers to propose that if America was Atlantis then the Pacific Ocean was the true outer ocean and eastern Asia was the 'opposite continent'. Although there is good evidence to suggest both transatlantic and transpacific voyages to America in ancient times, there seems no reason whatsoever to draw such farfetched conclusions. America is quite clearly a continent and Atlantis was unquestionably a 'daughter of Atlas', a term used to denote an island placed in the Atlantic, or Western, Ocean. As the name suggests, the ocean came under the patronage of the Titan Atlas, who governed the lands and seas in the extreme west of the ancient world, including those that lay beyond the Pillars of Hercules - mythical rocks which stood at the entrance to the outer ocean.

Furthermore, it can be shown that the idea of Atlantis being an island landmass the size of Libya (North Africa) and Asia put together is seriously flawed. In Plato's second Atlantis dialogue, the Critias, Plato speaks clearly of a vast irrigated plain which 'stretched for

three thousand furlongs [603 kilometres] in one direction, and at its centre, for two thousand [402 kilometres] inland from the coast'.(26) In the original Greek text the great plain's measurements are specified as 3000 by 2000 stadia (552 by 368 kilometres).

Beyond the plain to the north was said to have been an extensive mountain range 'that came right down to the sea', creating a 'precipitous coastline' that 'sheltered the city from cold northerly winds'. The citadel itself was located on the southern edge of the plain, apparently on the site of a 'mountain which was nowhere of any great altitude', where Euenor, the mortal ancestor of the kings of Atlantis, had previously lived in a cave with his wife and daughter. Rivers and streams that began in the mountains were said to have flowed down into a fosse or trench that helped irrigate the fertile plain.

These facts and figures convey the idea of a much smaller island than Plato would have us believe. Only the northerly placed mountains appear to divide Atlantis' rich fertile plain from its precipitous northern shoreline. No mention is made of the extent of this mountain range, although it cannot have covered an area of land equal to that proposed by Plato when he tells us that the island was the size of Libya and Asia combined. Even the mighty Himalayas of central Asia, although around 2400 kilometres in length, are only between 160 and 240 kilometres in width. Atlantis' northerly placed mountain range cannot have been any wider than the Himalayas, implying that at its greatest extent the island was no more than 600 kilometres from coast to coast. Indeed, if the mountain range really was only a few kilometres in thickness, it would suggest that Atlantis was no more than 400 or so kilometres in width.

All these points make it highly unlikely that America is Atlantis, or that any mainland cities, prehistoric features or ancient ruins, in Bolivia, Costa Rica or anywhere else, are the remnants of the Atlantean city. We shall have to look elsewhere for the true location of Plato's island paradise.

Reading list

Allen, Jim M. Atlantis: The Andes Solution, The Windrush Press, Moreton-in-Marsh, Gloucestershire, 1998

Zapp, Ivar, and George Erikson, Atlantis in America: Navigators of the Ancient World, Adventures Unlimited Press, Kempton, Il., 1998



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