

Santorini and the Lost Kingdom of Atlantis

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For centuries the fabled kingdom of Atlantis, a utopian paradise which suddenly vanished into the sea, has been the source of seemingly endless fascination – and endless debate. Is Atlantis fact or fiction or a mixture of both? If Atlantis did exist, where was located? Today archeological and other evidence point to the island of Santorini, some 200 km from the mainland of Greece in the southern Aegean, as the site of this lost kingdom.

The story of Atlantis first appears in Plato’s dialogues, “Timaeus” (“Timaios”) and “Critias” (“Kritias”). According to Plato, after the Olympians seized power from the Titans, Zeus was given dominion over the sky; Hades, over the underworld; and Poseidon, over the oceans and the seas. As Poseidon inspected his domain, he discovered a large circular island rich with precious metals and overflowing with flowers, fruits and crops of all kinds. He was enchanted by the extraordinary health, intelligence and moral character of its people and by the island’s beauty, especially the beauty of one of its women, Cleito. After Poseidon married Cleito, he built her a spectacular palace which, in order to protect her from harm (or to insure her fidelity), he surrounded with five concentric circles of land and water.

The couple then populated the island with half-divine half-mortal beings whose agricultural economy continued to expand and whose innovations in science, medicine, technology and the arts made Atlantis the most enlightened civilization in the known world. The Atlantians also established close contact in both trade and ideas throughout the ancient world by

means of their vast navy. Plato credits the Atlanteans' prosperity to the "divine portion" of their character which made them unselfish and peace loving and to their good fortune in being ruled by the descents of Poseidon, who were faithful to his laws of justice.

Over time, however, the Atlanteans became discontent with their abundance and began attacking their neighbors. But their goal of conquering the world was interrupted by the Athenians, who, although vastly outnumbered by the Atlanteans, heroically defeated them. Shortly thereafter, the gods, angered by the arrogance, greed and moral corruption of Atlantis, sent earthquakes and floods to Atlantis plunging it and all its inhabitants into the sea.

Nobody knows how much, if any, of Plato's story was based on history or if Plato even believed that Atlantis existed. Most scholars agree that Plato's main purpose in telling the tale was to glorify the Athenians and to warn them against overreaching ambition and the worship of the false gods of idleness, luxury and temporal power. But even if Plato's story served as cautionary tale and contains some embellishments, that doesn't mean that Atlantis is all fairy tale.

Atlantis is not named after the Atlantic Ocean, but after Atlas, the first born son of Poseidon and Cleito, known for carrying the world on his back. Nevertheless, areas touching upon the Atlantic Ocean, from the Azores and Spain to Sweden and Ireland, have been combed for traces of the lost paradise. In the 1660's Francis Bacon wrote that Atlantis was "somewhere in the Americas," resulting in search expeditions to Bolivia, Cuba and the Bahamas. Others believe Atlantis lies buried under the Pacific or Indian Ocean or in Indonesia, Malaysia, India and even Antarctica.

In the 1800's US Congressman, Ignatius Donnell, among others, claimed that every

ancient civilization had its roots in Atlantis, including the Mayan and Aztecs cultures of South America. Some Nazis believed that Aryans were superior because they were descents of Aryan Atlanteans. Edgar Cayce wrote that Atlantis had ships and airplanes powered by mystic energy sources and would rise again in the Caribbean in 1968. Still others allege that the civilization of Atlantis was so progressed for its time that it could only have been founded by extraterrestrial aliens.

To date, there is little or no evidence for any of these claims. Instead, the most compelling evidence points to Santorini, or possibly Crete, as the site of this ancient paradise.

Santorini, also known as Thera, is a small circular archipelago of five islands, four of which are uninhabited. All are the remains of an enormous volcanic explosion which destroyed what used to be a single island. The abundance of red, black and white rocks on Santorini are unmistakably volcanic in origin.

There is some debate about whether volcano erupted around 1500 BC or around 1650 BC instead. But there is no debate that the Santorini explosion, sometimes called the Minoan Eruption, was massive – about a 100 times greater than that of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD – and had the force of 500 to 1000 atomic bombs. It sank most of the lands where the Santorini archipegallo is situated and created tsunami waves as high as 200 meters which ravaged the coasts of nearby areas and, according to some, devastated Minoan Crete. Remnants of the millions of tons of rocks spewed out by this volcano have been found in Crete, Cyprus, Turkey and Egypt.

Plato's Atlantis had hot and cold springs and rocks of black, white and red, all of which can be found on Santorini today. Although Plato described Atlantis as being circular, perhaps its

shape was changed by the volcanic eruption. Harder evidence for the Santorini hypothesis is based on excavations begun in the early 1970's near Akrotiri, a village on Santorini. Here archeologists uncovered a sizable Bronze Age settlement resembling Plato's Atlantis. The volcanic eruption preserved frescoes, pottery, furniture, three story buildings, advanced drainage systems and other signs of a highly advanced civilization such as described by Plato. Loom workshops suggesting organized textile weaving for trade and ceramic and other artifacts from other countries further indicate that the area was once, like Plato's Atlantis, a major port with extensive contacts throughout the ancient world. Of particular note is a wall painting depicting what is thought to be Thera as a lush prosperous circular island surrounded by concentric rings of water and land, similar to the circles of land and water which surrounded Cleito's palace.

Plato's claim that Atlantis was bigger than "Libya and Asia together" seems impossible. But some experts point out that Plato or someone before him might have mistaken the Greek word for "between" (Mezon) with "bigger than" (Meson) and that Plato said Atlantis consisted of two islands, one large and one small. Because the excavations on Akrotiri have so many Minoan characteristics, perhaps Crete was one of these islands. If Atlantis did include the widespread maritime culture of Minoan Crete, then the vastness Plato ascribes to the naval empire of Atlantis becomes much more plausible.

Today the legend of Atlantis lives on in songs, television series, Walt Disney's *Atlantis*, *The Lost Empire* and other films, the first *Tomb Rider* and other video games and in literature, from science fiction to comic books. The search for Atlantis also continues, for it is more than a quest for knowledge of the past. The concept of a Golden Age, where people were naturally virtuous and, as in the biblical Garden of Eden, had everything they needed, if not more, but then

succumbed to greed and vice is a source of ongoing interest, not only for scholars, but for many people.