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The Lure and Lore of Atlantis:
An Analysis and History of Plato's Timeless and Controversial Myth

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ABSTRACT

Plato wrote the island of Atlantis into existence over two-thousand years ago, yet it remains well-known today in popular culture and conspiracy theories about the ancient past. Throughout the past two millennia, scholars, thinkers, and everyday folk have been fascinated by the story and the lost civilization it referenced. In three chapters, this thesis seeks to unpack why the Atlantis story has remained so popular and enticing despite the passing of time. What were the common receptions of the tale in the ancient past, Middle Ages/Renaissance, and in our contemporary world? How do people change the meaning of the Atlantis story in pursuit of their own narrative? From the sources we have from the fourth-century BCE to the fifth-century CE, thinkers mainly expressed their view on whether Atlantis was physically real or not or used the story as the basis for their own stories of lost islands. During the Middle Ages, there is very little evidence of the story being reflected upon, but the Renaissance experienced an outpouring of related works. During this time, the myth was used more politically, either to relocate the island or to connect one's own genealogy to the ancient Atlanteans. Within the past one-hundred years, the Nazis and pseudoscientists latched onto the story and have used it to cause harm to many minorities. This thesis argues that we must interpret myths thoughtfully to limit their potential harm and to better understand the world around us.

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Introduction – The Lure of Atlantis

What is Atlantis, and how does the modern myth of it compare to the ancient one? Where did this tale come from, and why does it remain so popular? How does a myth such as Atlantis last for thousands of years? The Atlantis story, crafted by Plato more than two thousand years ago, still inhabits the modern world, mainly in the form of conspiracy theories coming from pseudoscientists on the internet. I seek to answer one simple question: why? What makes this myth so special, so attractive to modern minds? This question, which turns out not to be so simple, has sent me through the history of the reception of Plato's myth. To understand why the public, scholars, and thinkers today remain so fascinated by Atlantis, I needed to see if it had always been this way. Is the buzz around Atlantis a new phenomenon or one that has a deeper history? The latter I found to be true, and that thinkers and writers from Plato's time onward have argued about how to interpret the myth and found in it a source of inspiration.

Today, the Atlantis myth is used in discussions of lost ancient civilizations, aliens, and underwater cities, but it was once used to justify the genocide of the Jewish people and other minorities in World War II. It became part of royal genealogies, and an excuse to legitimize the colonization of the Americas during the Age of Exploration. Before that time, the myth was used to portray an ancient past filled with courage, possibly meant to reflect a time of war such as the Persian or Peloponnesian wars that occurred in the century before Plato. What all these time periods have in common are the abundance of people who used the myth of Atlantis to push a message, for better or for worse. Though it came from an ancient Greek philosopher from the fourth-century BCE and became a part of Greek literature, as the myth circulated world-wide, the original Atlanteans were interpreted as the ancestors of the Swedes, Brits, Americans, and

Germans. The myth transcended the sphere of philosophy and politics, where it originated, and infiltrated disciplines such as geography, anthropology, and astronomy.

The main goal of this thesis is to show the evolution of the Atlantis story through the history of its reception. I begin within an ancient context: how those around Plato reacted to the Atlantis story. Did they see any physical reality in it? Or did they read it purely as fiction? This debate over the genre and purpose of the Atlantis story began almost immediately after Plato wrote it. Aristotle, Plato's student, was the first to establish an opinion (at least, according to a second-hand account from Strabo). Aristotle understood the Atlantis story as a philosophical allegory, but Crantor, another philosopher of Plato's time, felt very strongly about the story being entirely factual. Other thinkers slightly later, such as Euhemerus, did not take a position on the factuality of the story but used it as inspiration for their own writing (such as Euhemerus' lost island, Panchaia). In Chapter 1 I show that since its creation, the Atlantis myth has produced many different interpretations regarding how it relates to the wider corpus of literature, such as stories from the Pentateuch. This chapter covers the period from Plato to the sixth century Christian geographer, Cosmas Indicopleustes.

Chapter 2 begins in the Middle Ages when Christianity rose in Europe and the knowledge and teaching of the Classics decreased. Whereas in the East, the Golden Age of Islam actively explored these topics, adding the knowledge of the Classics alongside their own. I wanted to know if the Atlantis story followed this trend, in that it disappeared from Europe, but experienced a resurgence during the Islamic dynasties. The *Timaeus*, the first dialogue of Plato that introduces the Atlantis story, was a text that remained popular throughout the rise and fall of Classical culture, but whether the Atlantis story did the same is speculative. It could have been the inspiration for the "City of Brass" story about a mysterious place outside the Pillars of

Heracles, where Plato's located his. After this possible Atlantis sighting, throughout the late Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, there are more concrete sources of how the Atlantis story affected thinkers. As European explorers voyaged out from the continent and found new lands, they began to search for the legendary Atlantis. They found it in Sweden and the newly discovered Americas and began to create an ancestry dating back to the Atlanteans in order to justify the colonization occurring within these lands. This is when the Atlantis story has been used to create actual, not theoretical, harm; it is a turning point in the reception, because no longer is Atlantis about reality or fiction; now it is a narrative used to conquer, kill, and enslave.

In Chapter 3, I explore one of the darkest periods of Atlantis reception: its use by the Nazis to justify race "science." The Nazis hand-picked details from Plato's dialogue to legitimize their discrimination because they saw themselves as the descendants of the mighty Atlantean empire. Following this, I analyze how the story is used more recently in the forms of pseudoscience and popular culture such as Graham Hancock's Netflix series. Although Graham Hancock is not advocating for genocide, some of his ideas are rooted in similarly disturbing theories.

Before writing this thesis, I knew I was dealing with a sensitive topic. I had to rearrange my own thinking in how to approach a topic such as Atlantis which many have used to cause so much damage throughout its history. I have learned that although a fantastical island existing in the prehistoric past may be fun and desirable to a modern viewer, it can cause much more harm as it becomes intertwined with topics like race and political hierarchy. More than anything, I have learned that myths have power. They do not just entertain or tell us how the world has been, is, or should be, even if that is the original intent. Myths last for generations because of how people use and abuse them. Atlantis has lasted for thousands of years because it does have a

certain innate attraction in that it creates a curiosity to know more about our origins and enhances the feeling that we may have lost something about our past. The story of Atlantis causes a desire for us to connect the very complex ancient history with unified theories. Yet, Plato is not the one who made it last for so long. Instead, it was the people who reacted to it, who took in his words and scrambled them to fit their own mission. These were the people who made Atlantis worth remembering. These were the people who, likewise, destroyed it. My main goal with this thesis is to shed light onto how we got here, how the Atlantis story has changed so much and why it is so mutable to begin with, and I found that to answer these questions, I had to look at those who first showed interest in it and what they initially thought about the tale. Afterall, Atlantis is not interesting because it is real, but it is interesting because of the people who made it real.

A Brief Summary of Plato's Atlantis

Before I jump right into the reception of the Atlantis myth, it is important to have some background knowledge on what the story is about so that later receptions make more sense. Plato created Atlantis within a trio of three dialogues, the *Timaeus*, *Critias*, and *Hermocrates*, but the last one was lost and the *Critias* was unfinished.¹ Only the beginning of the *Timaeus* featured the Atlantis story (20d-26b) whereas the *Critias* focused mainly on Atlantis (108c-121c). Although these are separate dialogues, the narrative frame for each ties them together: the discussion of Atlantis first began at a festival when Socrates asks the other three men present (who the dialogues are named after) for an example of the ideal city, which many scholars understand as a reference to the ideal city described in Plato's *Republic*.²

¹ T. G. Rosenmeyer, "Plato's Atlantis Myth: 'Timaeus' or 'Critias'?" *Phoenix* 10, no. 4 (1956): 163.

² Donald Zeyl and Barbara Sattler, "Plato's *Timaeus*," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, Fall 2023 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2023).

Critias speaks up to tell about the legendary empire of Atlantis, an island that was as big as Asia and Libya combined, which existed outside the Pillars of Heracles (the Straits of Gibraltar today). The inhabitants of Atlantis had conquered and colonized most of the Mediterranean, but it had a rival: the ideal city of Ur-Athens (a precursor to Athens of Socrates' day). Atlantis and Ur-Athens existed around 9,300 years before the conversation between Critias and Socrates. Critias says that he learned the story of Atlantis from his grandfather, who received it from his father, who heard it from the great lawmaker Solon in the seventh-century BCE.³

Solon, it is said, travelled to a region of Egypt called Sais where a goddess called Neith was worshipped. Neith later became known as Athena to the Greeks. Solon's goal was to talk with the Egyptian priests to learn about ancient history, since the Greeks viewed Egypt as being much older than Greece.⁴ The Egyptian priest told Solon that the Greeks were mentally children; they knew little of what came before them. Floods and fires destroyed historical records in Greece, while these records were preserved in dry Egypt with its predictable Nile flooding. Repeatedly, Greek civilization had arisen and then fallen, whereas Egyptian civilization was more constant. Critias claims that it is from this Egyptian authority that Solon learns the greatest accomplishments of the Greeks: they won the war against Atlantis when everyone else had fled. Small, but pious Ur-Athens conquered the might empire of Atlantis, yet "modern" Greeks of Socrates' time had no recollection of this. After Ur-Athens defeated Atlantis, both civilizations were swallowed up by earth and sea and vanished. The *Critias* dialogue breaks off here, and it is not clear whether we have lost the ending, or it was left intentionally incomplete.

Within the narrative setting of these connected dialogues, the character Timaeus takes over as speaker in the *Timaeus*. Known for being one of the best astronomers, he spends the rest of the *Timaeus* discussing the origins of the Universe and man. The craftsman god called the Demiurge created order out

³ Placing Atlantis almost 10,000 years in the past on the edge of the known world and having the story orally transmitted through many generations are most likely examples of Plato distancing his reader from the story in order to make it seem more mythical.

⁴ J. Gwyn Griffiths, "Atlantis and Egypt," *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 34, no. 1 (1985): 3.

of chaos and structured a very rational cosmos. Overall, the rest of the *Timaeus* describes a cosmogony that is very scientific and metaphysical and goes beyond the discussion of Atlantis; however, the story's position within this cosmogony is a factor that attracted many later thinkers, especially those who saw a connection between the Atlantis myth and other creation stories (such as that in Genesis). Moving on, Plato's *Critias* was probably written after the *Timaeus* even though it precedes it narratively, much like a prequel. But it does not get the same treatment as the *Timaeus* and is often overlooked.⁵ However, the *Critias* contains much more detail about the continent of Atlantis and was widely read after the Middle Ages. As the majority of the *Timaeus* focused on the birth of the cosmos, most of the *Critias* is about the birth of Atlantis and the war between the two cities.

It begins with Critias first speaking of the condition of Ur-Athens: it was a prosperous and bountiful land filled with wise, talented, and perfectly moral people descended from Athena and Hephaestus. As for Atlantis, Poseidon was allotted the continent and he mated with a princess there who bore five sets of divine sons. Each son became king of a specific part of Atlantis and together they conquered much of the Mediterranean. Atlantis was a bustling and rich city defined by mining, forestry, and animal husbandry. The land was made into three concentric circles which lead to the temple of Poseidon in the center, which Critias describes in excessive detail. For centuries, the Atlanteans were a noble people, rich both in virtue and money, who followed the laws set by Poseidon. However, as the generations went on, the divinity within them diminished, having been contaminated with their increasing mortality. No longer were they just and pious, but they became lawless and wicked. Zeus gathered the gods together in order to exact a punishment for the Atlanteans and he spoke—

The *Critias* ends abruptly here, although we know the fatal ending of both Atlantis and Ur-Athens from the *Timaeus*. These are the details which later scholars and thinkers used to contribute to their own theories about Atlantis. As time passed from Plato to the present, people edited and redacted these details

⁵ Rosenmeyer, "Plato's Atlantis Myth," 163.

by relocating the island of Atlantis or giving the Atlanteans super-human abilities to fit a new political mold that in many cases changed the original narrative into something more like a weapon.

Chapter 1 – Atlantis and Its Ancient Interpretations

Before Plato, Atlantis - the empire, the continent, the flood - did not exist. There is no record of it. If it was a part of Athenian history (or indeed a part of its prehistoric past), surely one of Greece's most prominent historians before Plato would have mentioned something about the island, its glory, and its ruin. Yet, the pens of Herodotus or Thucydides do not recall of a place named "Atlantis," nor the destruction which followed it.⁶ Plato created this tale, and it has survived time in his dialogues the *Timaeus* and the *Critias* which are the sole primary sources that all later accounts rely on in their interpretations.

The Atlantis story as it is known today has suffered a terrible beating. More than ever in its history of perception has it become so corrupted by modern-day pseudoscientists, conspiracy theorists, and white supremacists. Over the millennia, people have repeatedly twisted Plato's narrative, tossing aside the written words in the *Timaeus* and *Critias*. This darkness surrounding the Atlantis story today is something I explore in much greater detail in the next two chapters, since it is more during the time periods of the Renaissance, Age of Exploration, Enlightenment, and World War II that provide the most concrete evidence of how historians, politicians, and everyday folk have changed the intent of the story to meet the reputation it has today. Yet, I begin in an ancient context to better show the foundation of the myth and what initial interpretations later theorists rely on. Have people always viewed the Atlantis myth as a source in which explorers used for the justification of colonization or

⁶ Kenneth L. Feder, *Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries: Science and Pseudoscience in Archaeology*, Eighth edition (New York: McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc, 2014), 195.

genocide of a particular people, a story used for harm? What existed of the Atlantis myth before it became muddled in modern politics and manipulation? This chapter seeks to answer these sorts of questions by staying within the ancient context of Atlantis, beginning with the receptions from Plato's own time to about one thousand years later. I overall strive to answer: reflecting on what someone would know of Atlantis today, how does this compare to an ancient audience?

Although this darkness that I mention did not exist in the same way in ancient times, there was still a strong response to the Atlantis story ever since Plato wrote it. The story is compelling and confusing, yet, and existed in a literary corpus amongst other philosophical texts, myths, and historical accounts, and thus, it was well-known amongst other thinkers of his time. Just as many modern scholars acknowledge the difficulty in assigning the story a genre and identifying its purpose, so did authors contemporary with Plato.⁷ Today, just over 50% of people in America believe that an ancient and advanced civilization like Atlantis physically existed.⁸ What would this percentage around from 300 BCE-500 CE?

Clearly, this is an unanswerable question, however, throughout my research, I found three different interpretations about Plato's Atlantis and have chosen eight major thinkers to focus on that provided input and diversity to the ancient perspective on Atlantis. They include Aristotle, Crantor, Theophrastus, Theopompus, Euhemerus, Pliny the Elder, Plutarch, and Aelian.⁹ Aristotle, one of Plato's students, began this debate, and about 800 years later, I

⁷ Christopher Gill, "The Genre of the Atlantis Story," *Classical Philology* 72, no. 4 (1977): 287–304.

⁸ "Paranormal America 2018 - Chapman University Survey of American Fears," *The Voice of Wilkinson* (blog), accessed December 14, 2023.

⁹ There are, of course, more ancient writers that I came across who were also connected with Atlantis, whether that be a direct opinion on its physical existence or whether it be a reference to Plato's story or a mere possibility of referencing it. Ramage has a very useful layout of these authors and explores them (briefly) further

chose Aelian to conclude the major components, though I discuss some other minor thinkers as well.¹⁰ The three interpretations are as follows: 1.) The story of Atlantis reflected a real, physical, and historical past. 2.) The story was a mythical creation, not intended to be read as factual. And 3.) The Atlantis story is neutral in its fact/fiction debate and instead served as an inspiration for other stories to be written in the same literary style.

The Atlantis Story as a Factual Account

Crantor of Soli, a fourth-century BCE philosopher, was the first known supporter of a physical and factual Atlantis. He was an Academic philosopher and the first-ever commentator on Plato's *Timaeus*.¹¹ As is the case for most of the ancient interpretations, the primary evidence for Crantor's beliefs toward Atlantis does not survive. Instead, we must rely on later accounts. For Crantor, this came from Proclus of Lycia, an Athenian philosopher, Neoplatonist, and other commentator of the *Timaeus* from the fifth-century CE, about 700 years after Crantor. According to Proclus, Crantor strongly believed in the actuality and historicity of Atlantis; he thought it was "straight history" and "accepted without

than I do (21-27, 1978). Stiebing also put forth a helpful list of ancient perspectives and separates them into who believed Atlantis to be a real, physical place (Crantor, Strabo, Philo Judaeus, Tertullian, and Ammianus Marcellinus) and those who believed Atlantis to be a pure myth or allegory (Origen, Amelius, Porphyry, and Longinus). He then claims that Pliny the Elder and Plutarch remained neutral (33, 1984). I do discuss many of these authors and their interpretations of Atlantis, but I want to make clear the abundance of ancient perspectives that I did not expect to find while researching. I included who I felt were most significant and gave an overall depiction of how the Atlantis story influenced the ancient world.

¹⁰ I have created a timeline that shows the people and the dates at which they were thought to write about Atlantis, so that the timelessness of the story can be better viewed. You can view this timeline of ancient authors on page 86.

¹¹ Alan Cameron, "Crantor and Posidonius on Atlantis," *The Classical Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (1983): 81.

qualification,” as Ramage states.¹² Having been an Academic philosopher, it would not have been unlikely for Crantor to validate the potential reality of his teacher’s story, since the character Critias did mention its factuality many times in the *Timaeus*.¹³

Proclus also reported that Crantor travelled to Egypt to verify Solon’s visit accounted for in both dialogues. These Egyptian officials apparently accepted the Solon’s story that Crantor relayed to them and said the destruction of Atlantis was even written in the temples of Neith at Sais, etched into the pillars.¹⁴ There is no physical evidence for this claim, yet Cameron concludes that it would have been possible for a Ptolemaic priest of Egypt to not only have known the *Timaeus* and the Atlantis story within it but, like Crantor, wish it to be true. A story such as this one, if proven to be true, could have been a prominent historical document for both Athenian and Egyptian records; if factual, then both societies would know more about their connected past and the political and religious relationships between ancient Egypt and Greece.¹⁵

The account of Crantor’s travels has only survived because of Proclus’s commentary on the *Timaeus* which is very pro-existence of Atlantis. It seems that Proclus viewed the Atlantis story in two ways, as Calvo describes: “1.) allegorical, from the cosmogony, and 2.) historical, from its veracity.”¹⁶ The war between Ur-Athens and Atlantis, in the mind of Proclus, despite being entirely true, also represented the cosmic powers at war with each other

¹² Edwin S. Ramage and J. Rufus Fears, eds., *Atlantis, Fact or Fiction?* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 23; Richard Ellis, *Imagining Atlantis*, 1st ed (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 28.

¹³ As Ramage acknowledges, Crantor accepted Atlantis as real without qualification. Plato was his role model and teacher. He accepted his story as real because Plato himself (through the character Critias) deemed it to be a physical location. This close relationship between the two men may have aided in Crantor’s strong belief in the story.

¹⁴ John Victor Luce, *The End of Atlantis: New Light on an Old Legend* (London, Thames & Hudson, 1968), 12.

¹⁵ Cameron, “Crantor and Posidonius on Atlantis,” 82.

¹⁶ Autonomous University of Madrid, Spain and José María Zamora Calvo, “Proclus on the Atlantis Story,” *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 10, no. 3 (2018): 5.

at the beginning of the universe. By this interpretation, the war is allegorically related to the “conflict between the limit and the unlimited, form and matter, rest and motion, unity and multiplicity.”¹⁷ In the *Timaeus*, the Atlantis story preludes a cosmogony. Proclus, while also having believed in the factuality of the Atlantis story like Crantor, tried to make sense why Plato would stylistically put the myth within an astronomical discussion about the birth of the universe, a decision that remains debated today.

Theophrastus, a follower and successor of Aristotle’s school from the fourth-century BCE, also wrote on Atlantis and believed in its physical reality. Similar to Crantor, his own words have not survived but are remembered by Philo, a first-century CE Jewish philosopher living in Alexandria, Egypt. He summarized Theophrastus’s views in his work, *On the Eternity of the World*.¹⁸ The question at stake in Philo’s work was whether the earth could be destroyed, or if it is eternal, which other philosophers, including Aristotle, Proclus, and many of the Stoics also wrote on.¹⁹ Within this text, some unnamed men represented the opposing side: a destructible earth. Philo, on the contrary, quoted from Theophrastus’s four proofs (which do not survive elsewhere) on why he believed the world to be eternal.²⁰ To prove their point, the unnamed men used the diminution of the sea as an example: how it seems to continuously draw back and recede, as evidenced by seashells at high elevations and islands having emerged. By their logic, if the ocean would never stop receding, the world would consist entirely of land,

¹⁷ Autonomous University of Madrid, Spain and Calvo, 5.

¹⁸ This work of Philo’s is distinct among his others in that it does not fit within his commentaries about the Septuagint but is rather one of his philosophical works.

¹⁹ Marion Durand, Simon Shogry, and Dirk Baltzly, “Stoicism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, Spring 2023 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2023); Müberra Çay, “Proclus on the Eternity of the World,” *Entelekyia Logico-Metaphysical Review* 3, no. 1 (May 1, 2019): 37.

²⁰ William W. Fortenbaugh and Roger (Basle) Harmon, “Theophrastus,” *Brill’s New Pauly*, October 1, 2006.

dry and prone to fire. The world as they knew it would then have been destroyed and was therefore destructible.

Theophrastus's, by word of Philo, provided a counterargument that confirmed how the sea, in some cases, has retreated and exposed land beneath, but in other circumstances, the sea has continuously grown, overtaken, and submerged land, like in Plato's story of Atlantis. Philo quoted Theophrastus who was quoting Plato's *Timaeus* in saying that Atlantis was a land "greater than Asia and Libya combined" but was "destroyed in a single day and night" (Pl., *Tim.* 24e, 25d). To prove a point, Theophrastus used the fate of Atlantis as evidence that the sea, although sometimes having exposed islands, has also inundated them, thus creating balance and an eternal world. Therefore, it seems that both Theophrastus and Philo, along with Crantor and Proclus, believed in the historical and physical existence of Atlantis.

The Myth/Fable of Atlantis

The first person thought to have deemed Plato's story of Atlantis as a myth or fable, far from any sort of reality, was Aristotle, the famous student of Plato. He was the apparent founder of the debate and ignited the discussion about how to interpret the Atlantis in Plato's two dialogues. Aristotle himself never wrote on the matter, yet the consistent consensus of scholars is that Aristotle viewed his teacher's story of Atlantis as purely mythical and philosophical.²¹

Because there is no direct writing of Aristotle having thought in this way, some scholars

²¹ Scholars such as Ellis, Ramage, Luce, and Ross.

today such as Franke and Bichler, insist there is not enough evidence to determine Aristotle's judgment on Atlantis whatsoever.²² In fact, many of Aristotle's works have failed the preservation process for modern minds to analyze, and so it is the work of Strabo that we need to look to instead. Strabo was a later Greek historian who ventured a guess on Aristotle's view of Atlantis, a few hundred years later after he died. For this reason, we cannot deem Strabo's mention of Aristotle's opinion on Atlantis as entirely accurate. Nonetheless, if Strabo's account is taken as reliable despite the centuries dividing the two philosophers, then it seems that Aristotle was the first to counter the physical existence of the island of Atlantis.

Unlike Plato himself, Aristotle was a scientist and philosopher who focused on the logic and qualities of the chemical and physical realms. This is most evident in his work *On Meteorology*, where he naturally discussed meteorology, but also the chemistry of the earth, the nature of the Milky Way, the ocean, storms, and natural disasters that were known to plague the earth.²³ Aristotle specialized in the natural sciences, whereas Plato's philosophy was more abstract and idealistic.²⁴ It is unknown if Aristotle ever directly spoke or wrote about Plato's Atlantis, but, in his *On Meteorology*, he did acknowledge how the water beyond the Pillars of Heracles was shallow and unnavigable due to thick mud. He did not, however, allude to a submerged island having caused this, as Plato wrote for the fate of Atlantis (*On Meteorology* 2.1.354a).²⁵ At the end of the Atlantis story, Plato wrote, "a grievous day and night came upon them, and the whole of your army sank down into the earth all at once, and in like manner the

²² Howard Frisinger, "Aristotle and His 'Meteorologica,'" 1972, 634.

²³ Frisinger, 635.

²⁴ Franco (Vicenza) Volpi, "Practical Philosophy," *Brill's New Pauly*, October 1, 2006.

²⁵ John Victor Luce, *Atlantis: New Light on an Old Legend*, Repr (London: Paladin, 1975), 28; Ramage and Fears, *Atlantis, Fact or Fiction?*, 175.

island of Atlantis plunged down into the sea (τῆς θαλάττης), obliterated, and wherefore now the sea in that place has become impassible and inscrutable, being coated excessively in clay (πηλοῦ καταβραχέος ἐμποδῶν ὄντος), which the island produced when it subsided.” (Pl. *Tim.* 25d).²⁶ Both Aristotle and Plato were aware of the difficult and shallow waters outside of the Pillars of Heracles, yet the former who was known for his knowledge of the physical earth and its waters said nothing on Atlantis as being the reason why.

Overall, according to Strabo, Aristotle denied its physical existence entirely and was the first to do so. Even though it is impossible to recover Aristotle’s thinking on this topic, it seems likely that Aristotle would be interested in this island created by his teacher but realize it to only exist in fable.

Plutarch, a Greek historian and Platonist writing around the second century CE, in his *Life of Solon* has led many scholars to think that he identified the story as more of a myth than as fact.²⁷ As the title suggests, Plutarch wrote of the many accomplishments and ventures of Solon, including his visit to Egypt. Plutarch confirmed that Solon went to Egypt and visited Egyptian priests who he could have learned the story of Atlantis from. Plutarch recalled the names of the priests as being Sonchis and Psenophis of Heliopolis. He wrote mainly of the aftermath of Solon’s trip, about how he turned the story of Atlantis into a series of poems and then later began writing a great epic to have performed for the Greeks and the rest of the Mediterranean. However, Solon died before he was able to finish this great work. According to Plato, from here, by word of mouth, generations passed down this knowledge of Atlantis

²⁶ Translated by me.

²⁷ Lieve Hoof, “Plutarch’s *Moralia*,” 2014.

until the fourth century BCE. Plutarch refers to Atlantis in the *Life of Solon* as both a λόγον and a μῦθον: a story and a fable.

Ramage concludes from the passage below that Plutarch seemed “unwilling to commit himself” to either side of the Atlantis debate.²⁸ Plutarch wrote:

Ὁ δὲ Σόλων ἀψάμενος μεγάλης τῆς περὶ τὸν Ἀτλαντικὸν λόγον ἢ μῦθον
πραγματείας, ὃν διήκουσε τῶν περὶ Σαῖν λογίων προσήκοντα τοῖς Ἀθηναίοις,
ἐξέκαμεν, οὐ δι’ ἀσχολίαν, ὥς Πλάτων φησὶν, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον ὑπὸ γήρωσ. Ὡς δὲ
χώρας καλῆς ἔδαφος ὁ Πλάτων ἔρημον, αὐτῷ δέ πως κατὰ συγγένειαν
προσῆκον, ἐξεργάσασθαι καὶ διακοσμήσαι φιλοτιμούμενος τὴν Ἀτλαντικὴν
ὑπόθεσιν, πρόθυρα μὲν μεγάλα καὶ περιβόλους καὶ αὐλὰς τῇ ἀρχῇ περιέθηκεν,
οἷα λόγος οὐδεὶς ἄλλος ἔσχεν οὐδὲ μῦθος οὐδὲ ποίησις, ὃψὲ δὲ ἀρξάμενος
προκατέλυσεν τοῦ ἔργου τὸν βίον, ὅσῳ μᾶλλον εὐφραίνει τὰ γεγραμμένα,
τοσοῦτ’ ἄλλ’ ὅσον τοῖς ἀπολειφθεῖσιν ἀνιάσας. ὥς γὰρ ἡ πόλις τῶν Ἀθηναίων τὸ
Ὀλυμπιεῖον, οὕτως ἡ Πλάτωνος σοφία τὸν Ἀτλαντικὸν ἐν πολλοῖς καλοῖς
μόνον ἔργον ἀτελὲς ἔσχηκεν.

Solon, after he began his great work which related to the Athenians, the story or myth of Atlantis, which he had heard from the Egyptian men of Saïs who were versed in stories, he became unfit, not because he was not engaged with the story, as Plato said, but rather because of old age...Plato, because he

²⁸ Ramage and Fears, *Atlantis, Fact or Fiction?* 25.

aspired to bring the subject of Atlantis to completion and adorn it, just as one does to the desolate soil of a beautiful land, the story belonging to him by his relation to Solon, bestowed great porches and enclosing walls and courtyards in the beginning of his work, of what sort no other speech, nor tale, nor creation before had, but having begun too late, he finished his life before his work, and thus, the more one enjoys what has been written, so much more is the grief in what has been left undone. For in the same way that the city of Athens holds the Olympieion²⁹ unfinished, the wisdom of Plato held Atlantis as the only one being unfinished of his many beautiful works.³⁰

Plu. *Life of Solon*. 31.96.XXXI-32.96.XXXII

Scholars such as Ellis read this quote and interpret it as Plutarch having viewed the Atlantis story more as a fantasy than a fact.³¹ To Plutarch, it seems that Plato embellished Atlantis; for he furnished it with “porches, enclosures, and courtyards,” ones that were indeed great and unique. Plutarch praised Plato for creating a wonderful literary work, but not as someone who told of the real, historic past of Athens. In other words, it was a beautiful work, but not one rooted in any sort of historical reality.

Just as Plutarch mentioned how Solon never finished his grand epic of Atlantis, centuries later, neither did Plato. It was a tale that flourished with no ending and remains so

²⁹ Th. Kyriakou, “Ministry of Culture and Sports | Olympieio,” 2012; The Olympieion is a temple of Zeus located in Athens which originally was left unfinished, however was completed after Plutarch died in the reign of the Roman Emperor Hadrian.

³⁰ Translation done by me.

³¹ Ellis, *Imagining Atlantis*, 29.

today, which is why this debate about whether it is fact or fiction exists. Along with no ending, there is no agreed genre, hence the two-thousand-year-old debate. The Atlantis story as evidenced by Plutarch has the baggage and beauty of no ending but endless interpretations. “The greater our delight in what he actually wrote, the greater is our distress in view of what he left undone.”

The Atlantis Story as Literary Inspiration: Meropis and Panchaia

The last category of interpretation is those who remained neutral in the Atlantis debate. Instead, these thinkers seemed to use the Atlantis story as a means of inspiration for their own fantastical, lost islands.

The first example is the island called Meropis, written into existence by Theopompus of Chios, a fourth-century BCE Greek historian. Amidst his political and historical works, he wrote of a mysterious island called Meropis in his *Philippiká*. Within this work, Theopompus recalled not only the history of Philip of Macedon, but also of Greece in which he elaborated most on the “deeds of the Greeks and barbarians (the people of the island).”³² The Greek sophist Claudius Aelianus of Rome, commonly known as Aelian, preserved Meropis centuries later within his *Varia Historia*. This work of Aelian’s now exists mostly in fragments but with the story of Meropis remains in its entirety.³³

According to Aelian’s account of Theopompus’s Meropis, the known islands of the

³² Mischa (Bielefeld) Meier et al., “Theopompus,” in *Brill’s New Pauly*, New Pauly Online (Brill, 2006), 14:518-521.

³³ Leonhard (Basle) Burckhardt et al., “Aelianus,” in *Brill’s New Pauly*, New Pauly Online (Brill, 2006), 1:200-201.

world were Asia, Libya, and Europe. The ocean intertwined itself around these lands, but beyond everything was *the* continent, Meropis, which held cities of great power, piety, and war. Within the *Philippiká*, the mythical Silenus told the legendary story of Meropis to King Midas of Phrygia, about the strangeness of this continent, that it had people twice the size of a typical person and who lived twice as long.³⁴ There were two cities always at odds with each other - Εὐσεβής and Μάχιμος; the city of piety and the one of battle. Εὐσεβής, literally translating to “pious,” was a city defined by just, rich, and prosperous people who mingled constantly with the gods. Μάχιμος, derived from μάχεσθαι “to make war,” exhibited the opposite characteristics.³⁵ The people on this island altogether were called μέροπες from the noun μέροψ, a word with disputed meaning, but often a synonym for ἄνθρωποι.³⁶ Theopompous thus named the continent after them: the land of Μεροπίς.

This story, translated and preserved by Aelian but originally crafted by Theopompus, is unique not only because of its details surrounding an unknown land but also because of its supposed intention. This story, unlike Atlantis, never had its genre disputed or its purpose debated. Instead, Theopompus created this continent to initiate a literary attack, something he was known to have done frequently within his works as noted by Dionysius of Halicarnassus.³⁷ The two cities at war with each other in the story of Meropis was a playful reference between Atlantis (Μάχιμος) and Ur-Athens (Εὐσεβής).³⁸ Theopompus fabricated a

³⁴ Heinz-Günther Nesselrath, “Theopomps Meropis und Platon: Nachahmung und Parodie,” *Göttinger Forum für Altertumswissenschaft*, February 23, 2021, 1.

³⁵ Bardo Maria (Kiel) Gauly, “Meropis,” in *Brill’s New Pauly*, New Pauly Online (Brill, 2006), 8:718-719.

³⁶ “Μέροπες - Ancient Greek (LSJ),” 2020.

³⁷ Nesselrath, “Theopomps Meropis und Platon,” 1.

³⁸ Gauly and Gauly, “Meropis”; Guido Bastianini, Walter Lapini, and Mauro Tulli, eds., *In the Wake of Atlantis: The Continuations of Plato’s Atlantikos Logos from Theopompos to Plutarch*, 1st ed., vol. 109, Studi e Saggi (Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2012), 235.

parody or perhaps a work to simply rival Plato. The reasoning as to why Theopompus would choose the Atlantis story specifically is unclear, but this would not have been out of character for him.³⁹ Theopompus was known for being a troublemaker, one who had a reputation for challenging the political and cultural world around him, who was very outspoken against those he disagreed with.⁴⁰ Perhaps Plato was one of these people and the story of Atlantis was too outlandish for Theopompus's comedy that he had to write something of similar nature, not to stand alongside Atlantis but to mock it.

Theopompus was not the only ancient Greek author to base a story of their own on Plato's fabricated Atlantis. Sometime during the turn of the fourth and third centuries BCE, Euhemerus of Messene wrote into existence the island Panchaia in his *Sacred History*. Although Euhemerus does not directly mention Atlantis in the available fragments, some modern scholars like Honigman and Garstad believe that Euhemerus did directly base his island on Plato's.⁴¹ Therefore, Euhemerus did not use Panchaia as Theopompus's Meropis to parody Atlantis, but instead, his work was meant to mimic the style of the Atlantis story. Euhemerus, like Plato, fit his lost island, Panchaia, into a historiographical narrative. This genre has the spokesperson of a story, such as the character Critias in the Atlantis story, insist that the narrative they are telling is factual. However, this does not equate to the whole story as being historical and matching reality. These stories were still fabrications but contained general truths about the identity and history of their society without exactly claiming the

³⁹ Nesselrath, "Theopomps Meropis und Platon," 2.

⁴⁰ Meier et al., "Theopompus."

⁴¹ Benjamin Garstad, "Euhemerus," *The Classical Review* 53, no. 2 (October 2003): 310.

islands themselves to have existed.⁴²

In other words, a story can be both historical, truthful, philosophical, and made up all at the same time. Honigman summarizes this by stating that the standards of ancient Greek literature must have been more flexible compared to those used by modern scholars.⁴³ Although this may seem contradictory to our modern ears, it seems that Atlantis was based on this structure and Euhemerus showed a similar strategy when he composed his continent of Panchaia.

Not only the literary style was similar between the two stories, but also very specific details about the islands. Each story described the measurements of the main temple on the island, its length, breadth, width, height, etc, though they used different units. Nevertheless, the writing seemed to have followed the same rhythm. It is unclear whether Euhemerus (based on Diodorus's translation) may have confidently copied Plato's writing "rhythm" from this example since both men could have coincidentally chosen similar details to describe temples. After all, there are only so many ways to describe such a building. As Honigman recalls, both writers use different measurements and units.⁴⁴ I am not as convinced as Honigman that there is extremely convincing evidence behind this point, but I do find there to be other points which better support my theory.

For instance, the descriptions of the temples also contained specific attributes, relatively within the same order: the center temple, surrounding statues of gods, and the dwellings of priests, kings, and privileged classes. Furthermore, the people of each continent descended

⁴² Sylvie Honigman, "Euhemerus of Messene and Plato's Atlantis," *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 58, no. 1 (2009): 14.

⁴³ Honigman, 11.

⁴⁴ Honigman, 17.

from gods. For Atlantis it was Poseidon; Panchaia's was Zeus. As each generation surpassed, kings would take the throne and slowly through time, both authors described the dilution of the divine bloodline by mortal blood. Next, the people on both the islands were autochthonic: "born from the earth." Both civilizations also had strong connections with the Egyptians and their talented scribes.⁴⁵ Lastly, concentric rings, elephants, and chariot warfare are all both found on the islands of Panchaia and Atlantis.⁴⁶ For these reasons it seems as though Euhemerus could have been directly impacted by Plato's Atlantis and used his story to create a similar one of his own.

Theopompus and Euhemerus were not the last authors who took inspiration from the story of Atlantis to write about a lost continent. This is a theme that kept progressing through time. Meropis and Panchaia were the first examples in a long history of reception which I continue in my second and third chapters.

Atlantis within its Ancient Literary Context

The next few ancient authors represented how the story of Atlantis seamlessly fit into the corpus of Greco-Roman and even Biblical texts and mythology which significantly began in the centuries after the turn of the millennia, after the time of Christ. The first ancient scholar in discussion is Pliny the Elder, a first-century CE historian and orator.⁴⁷ In his *Naturalis Historia*, written around 77 CE, he wrote about how the Atlantic Ocean has stolen

⁴⁵ Honigman, "Euhemerus of Messene and Plato's Atlantis," 17–23.

⁴⁶ Bastianini, Lapini, and Tulli, *In the Wake of Atlantis: The Continuations of Plato's Atlantikos Logos from Theopompus to Plutarch*, 109:240–41.

⁴⁷ Klaus (Mainz) Sallmann et al., "Plinius," in *Brill's New Pauly*, New Pauly Online (Brill, 2006), 11:383–392.

away land, “if we accept Plato’s story” (2.92.205). Pliny played around with the idea of Atlantis representing a geographical place, but never accepted the story as true. Despite this, Ellis concludes that during the first century CE, the island of Atlantis became recognized as existing out beyond the Pillars of Heracles.⁴⁸

More thinkers, alongside Pliny, began to question if they too should accept Plato’s story, since it was now more of a recognized and popular one, though it still remained on the threshold between a place which resided in a physical reality and one meant to stay within the imagination, just as it had 400 years before. Pliny’s mention of Atlantis suggested that two distinct interpretations still existed, being the historical reading of Atlantis and the philosophical narrative. Ramage notes that the story of Atlantis around this time became situated among other popular mythical destinations and peoples whose physical existences were also debated, yet they were older myths and historical retellings than Atlantis.⁴⁹ Atlantis now existed geographically alongside the mythical Isles of the Blest, the Hesperides, and Ogygia - all islands that are associated with the Titan Atlas or the Atlantic Ocean.⁵⁰ Unlike the lands to the west and south of Greece, thanks to Alexander the Great, what laid beyond the Pillars of Heracles remained unknown and uncolonized by the Greeks. This allowed authors like Plato to place islands and civilizations beyond this boundary because it was essentially a

⁴⁸ Ellis, *Imagining Atlantis*, 29.

⁴⁹ These places that I list are ones written by Hesiod or Homer, the early Greek historians. I find it significant that Plato, writing about four-three hundred years later, created a new story that can fit among those made way before him. Hesiod and Homer made these places famous by relating them to prestigious heroes. For Atlantis to relate to them elevated its authenticity, at least in the sense that it remained an influential work in the ancient world.

⁵⁰ Ramage and Fears, *Atlantis, Fact or Fiction?* 24; Lutz (Kiel) Käppel and Eckart (Stuttgart) Olshausen, “Makaron Nesoi,” in *Brill’s New Pauly*, New Pauly Online (Brill, n.d.), 8:192-193.

void – one that the Greeks could lay claim to and colonize in their imaginations.⁵¹

Diodorus Siculus, apart from having translated Euhemerus's story of Panchaia, also confirmed this mingling of the Atlantis story and other myths.⁵² In his *World History*, the Amazons, Gorgons, and the Atlanteans were all engaged in battle together. Diodorus also elaborated on the religion of the Atlanteans, specifically having focused on their views on the gods and their origins.⁵³ What Diodorus wrote about, Plato never discussed; he transgressed from Plato's narrative. Aelian, in a separate passage from his account of Meropis, also added to what Plato originally wrote of Atlantis. He imagined the strange customs of the kings and queens of Atlantis and described them as wearing headbands made from the sea ram, written in his *De Natura Animalium*. Aelian claimed people on the coast of Africa told him that the skin of these creatures showed authority and resemblance to their divine relative, Poseidon.⁵⁴

The debate surrounding the purpose, genre, and reality of Atlantis still thrived during this time, but now the story emerged into the broader corpus of both mythology and scientific literature. The Atlantis story, as myths often tend to do, adapted to the changes of the world and became a part of bigger literary traditions. The greatest moment of change during this time in the Mediterranean was the rise of Christianity, and many ancient Christians tried to find a way to fit Atlantis within a Biblical context. For instance, Origen, Numenius, and Porphyry put forth similar ideas about an allegorical approach by having suggested that the war between Athens

⁵¹ Guido Bastianini, Walter Lapini, and Mauro Tulli, eds., *In the Wake of Atlantis: The Continuator of Plato's Atlantikos Logos from Theopompos to Plutarch*, 1st ed., vol. 109, Studi e Saggi (Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2012), 235.

⁵² Diodorus Siculus wrote around 30 BCE, about a hundred years earlier than Pliny the Elder. I include them together because they share the main point of Atlantis having been incorporated within the known Greek myths during this time of the turning millennia.

⁵³ Ramage and Fears, *Atlantis, Fact or Fiction?* 24.

⁵⁴ Ellis, *Imagining Atlantis*, 29–30; Ramage and Fears, *Atlantis, Fact or Fiction?* 25.

and Atlantis had represented not actual war, but the conflict between good and evil demons or a battle between sinful souls.⁵⁵

A final ancient author who showed how Plato's Atlantis existed within a Biblical context was Cosmas Indicopleustes, a Christian geographer of the sixth century CE. In his Χριστιανική τοπογραφία, or *Christian Topography*, he wrote not only of his belief in a tabernacle-shaped Earth instead of a sphere, but also of his revised Atlantis.⁵⁶ Overall, Cosmas rejected the physical reality of Atlantis and deemed it a pagan creation. Yet, like many Greek philosophers who came before him, he used Atlantis as a launching point for his message. First, instead of having the character Critias tell the story as in Plato's *Timaeus*, it is Timaeus himself who Cosmas made recite the story and with Moses alongside him. More drastically, it was not Solon who had traveled to Egypt and gathered information on Atlantis, but instead, Solomon. And lastly, Cosmas assigned God as the one who sent the cataclysm that sunk Atlantis, compared to Zeus.⁵⁷ Cosmas put a Christian twist on the story of Atlantis and reinvented it to fit his historical context and political message, which became a theme most prominent in the later chapters.

Conclusion

From the fourth century BCE when Plato composed the *Timaeus* and the unfinished

⁵⁵ Ramage and Fears, *Atlantis, Fact or Fiction?*, 26.

⁵⁶ Vivian (London) Nutton et al., "Cosmas," in *Brill's New Pauly*, New Pauly Online (Brill, n.d.), 3:861-862.

⁵⁷ I am unsure if Cosmas makes the connection between the flood of Atlantis to the flood of Noah, but this is a point of connection I know become clear to later pseudo-scientists, though unlike Cosmas, they believe the story to be real. Nonetheless, this syncretism between two cultures is fascinating.

Critias all the way through the sixth century CE, Atlantis was at the forefront of debate based on its existence. Some such as Crantor and Proclus may have believed in the historicity and physical reality of Atlantis, whereas others such as Aristotle disagreed. Apart from the debate, the Atlantis story seemed to inspire philosophers like Euhemerus to create stories of their own. Eventually, Plato's Atlantis existed within a literary realm beside places such as the Isles of the Blest which existed beyond the Pillars of Heracles. As Christianity arose, there is evidence Christian writers integrating the Atlantis myth among Biblical stories and themes. These are the ways in which Plato's story made its mark on the ancient world, and thus, they became the foundation that later thinkers have used to interpret the meaning and existence of the Atlantis story.

Chapter 2 – Becoming a Weapon: Atlantis of the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Beyond

Atlantis may have begun with Plato 2400 years ago, but readers continued to adapt the story and interact with it through the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The story grew from Plato's narrative and scholars, geographers, and military leaders alike placed its location on maps, sought out its ancient people, and desired the empire's resources which they had deemed as treasure. In Chapter 1, ancient authors had either viewed the Atlantis story as a real, physical and mysterious place, or a mythical story with lessons to be learned, or merely a source of inspiration. Now, within the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, though there was still a debate on the historical reality of Atlantis, the focus shifted to finding Atlantis, both the geographical island and its genetic descendants. In this chapter, I explore how some of the most famous thinkers of the time read the story of Atlantis and used it in pursuit of expansion, colonization, racism, and more. Dangers unfamiliar to the ancient interpretations began to emerge from Atlantis, and that is what I am most intrigued by: how the story became a weapon.⁵⁸

In this chapter, I analyze how readers from the fifth century to the nineteenth century CE understood the story of Atlantis.⁵⁹ I begin by focusing on how the first few centuries showed little evidence of philosophers, historians, or geographers having interacted with the story of Atlantis compared to the centuries before. Though there may not have been a heated debate

⁵⁸ These dangers which I identify specifically having begun in the Middle Ages/Renaissance were less clear in an ancient context. Compared to the Middle Ages/Renaissance, the period from Chapter 1 has much less textual content relating to Atlantis. Philosophers and politicians may have used the Atlantis story as a weapon during this time, but that is not as evident in the sources we have compared to later time periods which I discuss in this chapter. Thus, I am not suggesting that Atlantis as a weapon was absent from ancient interpretations, but that it was less familiar – meaning that there is not enough evidence to be confident about this claim.

⁵⁹ I left off with Cosmas Indicopleustes in Chapter 1 who wrote around 550 CE, and for this chapter around 1880 CE I end with Ignatius Donnelly. I chose to end with Ignatius Donnelly because he marked a transition when Atlantis became a huge part in pseudoscience, one of the main topics of the last chapter. Many scholars also recognize this shift in the interpretation of Atlantis and deem Ignatius Donnelly as the “father” of pseudoscience. Therefore, I end with him to better transition into the final chapter.

which went on regarding the physical existence of Atlantis, I discovered only one source (the Islamic City of Brass story from the ninth century CE) that may have shown the influence of the Atlantis story. From this possibility, once Europe entered the Renaissance, the Atlantis story along with many other ancient mythologies and sciences emerged back into the theories and conversations in the Mediterranean world.

I found three main themes in which thinkers viewed Plato's Atlantis during this time of reception. The first was the strong attempt to connect Atlantis to events and people from the Hebrew Bible, mainly the book of Genesis. The next theme is the relocation of Atlantis. Throughout these centuries, many people relocated the lost island from just beyond the Pillars of Heracles where Plato's character Critias placed it to other regions around the globe as Europeans colonized new lands. Lastly, as Atlantis became relocated, people also began to make claims about its ancestry in order to justify colonization, conquest, and the destruction of previous civilizations and cultures. Rather than looking at each thinker in this period chronologically, I have chosen to organize this chapter by theme to better show how the Atlantis story became weaponized during this time. However, a timeline of these thinkers can be found on page (x) in order to help the reader see their relative chronology.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ As the last chapter, I found an abundance of people from this time range that put forth significant theories and interpretations toward Atlantis, all who have shaped its reception today. There were so many that I struggled to limit myself on the number of people to focus on which ended up being around ten. The best way to show off all these scholars and thinkers was to separate them into similar patterns and themes in the way that they thought of Atlantis.

Atlantis of the Middle Ages: The Great Vanishing and Islamic Golden Age

Before elaborating on these three themes, which are all relevant in the Renaissance, I want to begin by first picking up where Chapter 1 left off, the beginning of the Middle Ages. Within this first chapter, the Christian geographer Cosmas Indicopleustes represented the end of the ancient interpretations and the beginning of the Middle Ages and later Renaissance. By this point in time, the Western Roman Empire had collapsed, and Christianity in Europe had scorned Greek philosophy. Thus, many Greek religious and philosophic versions of texts, or knowledge of how to read them, were lost in Europe as they were regarded as pagan.⁶¹ This became known as the “Great Vanishing” of knowledge and education, since the Greek language was the primary language of scholarship.⁶² Instead, these works survived mostly in Latin translations as seen with Roman scholars such as Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius who still held interest in such Greek texts and translated many philosophical, medical, and scientific texts into Latin by the sixth century BCE.⁶³

Plato’s *Timaeus* was an exception within this “Great Vanishing” which occurred in Europe, since both Cicero (106 BCE - 43 BCE) and Calcidius from the middle-third century CE translated the *Timaeus* centuries before Boethius.⁶⁴ Because the *Timaeus* discussed Greek views on the creation of the cosmos and man and featured a supreme craftsman god, the Demiurge (similar to the creator God of the Abrahamic religions), it became an important text for the

⁶¹ Dimitri Gutas, “Hellenic Philosophy, Arabic and Syriac Reception Of,” in *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2023.

⁶² Peter F. McNally, “The Map of Knowledge: A Thousand-Year History of How Classical Ideas Were Lost and Found,” *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada* 59, no. 1 (2022): 2.

⁶³ John Marenbon, “Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2021 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2021).

Roman Catholic Church.⁶⁵ Although there was clearly significant interest in the *Timaeus* dialogue (as we can see partly by these two ancient translations into Latin), there do not seem to be any references to the Atlantis story outside of these translations. The textual tradition of Plato's *Critias* seemed much less familiar during the Early Middle Ages compared to the *Timaeus*.⁶⁶ The first known manuscript of the *Critias* was not produced until the 9th century CE, and so we must assume that the Romans did not have access to this text compared to Plato's *Timaeus*, however, later groups in the east most likely did have knowledge of the *Critias*. This difference in tradition between the *Timaeus* and *Critias* dialogues may have been due to the possibility that Plato had not actually written the *Critias*.⁶⁷ Although a possibility, this is not something that I will consider in detail. In summary, Roman scholars, even though having experienced the "Great Vanishing" of Greek language and culture, had access to Plato's *Timaeus* since Cicero's translation into Latin, whereas the *Critias* remained untranslated until the 9th century CE.

To the lands east of Greece in the Middle Ages, another era of translating Greek texts occurred during what many call the "Islamic Golden Age".⁶⁸ First was Greek into Syriac and then later into Arabic. Since Alexander the Great's military campaign which stretched as far as modern-day India, and through the process of Hellenization, people eastward learned the Greek language, religion, and culture. And, just as in Rome, Christians in Syria such as Sergius of

⁶⁵ Aileen R. Das, *Galen and the Arabic Reception of Plato's Timaeus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 2.

⁶⁶ Gijsbert Jonkers, *The Textual Tradition of Plato's Timaeus and Critias* (Boston, United States: BRILL, 2016), 383.

⁶⁷ Marwan Rashed and Thomas Auffret, "On the Inauthenticity of the 'Critias,'" *Phronesis* 62, no. 3 (2017): 237–54.

⁶⁸ Linda S. George, *The Golden Age of Islam* (New York: Benchmark Books, 1998), 6.

Resh‘aynā (536 CE), took a large interest in Greek and Roman history.⁶⁹ Slowly, Syrian Christians and then later Arab Muslims syncretized Greek knowledge with their own. Sergius specifically translated many works into Syriac from antiquity with the goal of making Greek philosophy, medicine, ethics, logic, alchemy, astronomy, and the stories of the legendary Alexander the Great more available to his own community. Into the seventh-century CE, during the Umayyad Caliphate, the first caliph Mu‘āwiya ordered the translation of Greek and Coptic texts on alchemy into Arabic so he could read them, as Ibn al-Nadīm recorded in Book VII of his *Kitāb al-fihrist* (“Book of the Catalogue”).⁷⁰ Next, during the ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate, the caliph al-Manṣūr made further progress. With him, scribes translated works from all over the world into Arabic including Greek texts such as Ptolemy’s *Almagest* and Euclid’s *Elements* as well as texts from India such as the animal fable, *Kalīla wa-Dimna* and the mathematical and astronomical work, the *Sindhind*.⁷¹ Under these caliphs, the Islamic Empire became incredibly diverse as people exchanged stories across cultures. Was Plato’s Atlantis one of these stories?

Just as with the Roman Catholics, many Islamic leaders had an interest in Plato’s *Timaeus* because it presented a scientific-sounding origin story and creator-like, craftsman “god”, the Demiurge. It was a dialogue that had already been compared to the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible, so Islamic leaders could have also seen connections between the *Timaeus* and their own creation account in the Quran, although being different than Genesis.⁷² Yaḥyā b. al-

⁶⁹ Cristina D’Ancona, “Greek Sources into Arabic and Islamic Philosophy,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, Encyclopaedia of Islam (Brill, 2022).

⁷⁰ Devin Stewart, “The Structure of the Fihrist: Ibn al-Nadīm as Historian of Islamic Legal and Theological Schools,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, no. 3 (2007): 369.

⁷¹ Cristina D’Ancona, “Greek Sources into Arabic and Islamic Philosophy.”

⁷² Teuku Muhammad Hary Ramadhan et al., “The Creation and Destruction of The Universe: Comparison of The Perspectives in Science and The Qur’an,” *Elkawnie: Journal of Islamic Science and Technology* 9, no. 2 (December 30, 2023): 140.

Biṭrīq translated the *Timaeus* into Arabic for the first time in the ninth-century CE, the original of which does not survive today.⁷³ However, we know that it had existed because of other Islamic sources such as the library of the famous polymath and philosopher al-Kindi, the “father of Arab philosophy.”⁷⁴ Beyond this translation of the *Timaeus*, little has been found in terms of commentary or discussion to show how thinkers interpreted the relevant *Timaeus* passages. There are no surviving debates on the island’s historical physicality or its genre or moral meaning, as there was in my first chapter, but there does survive a story called “The City of Brass” which may have resulted from this cultural exchange of the Islamic Golden Age.

The City of Brass: An Islamic Atlantis?

In 891 CE, Ibn Habib, an Andalusian historian, wrote of the Arab governor Mūsá bin Nuṣayr (hereafter referred to as Musa) and his conquering of Spain and Portugal a few centuries earlier.⁷⁵ Ibn Habib described that while Musa traveled through these lands, he came across a large brass statue holding a bow and arrow and many brass jars. The statue then turned its bow to Musa’s army and began shooting at them before the statue itself fell. A demon emerged from a brass jar and claimed that King Solomon had locked him in there.⁷⁶ After these strange events, Musa and his army came across two different cities which were apparently connected under one empire. Both cities were walled, and while Musa’s men were scouting, each city, which were

⁷³ D. M. Dunlop, “The Translations of Al-Biṭrīq and Yaḥyā (Yuhannā) b. Al-Biṭrīq,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, no. 3/4 (1959): 144.

⁷⁴ Peter Adamson, “Neoplatonism,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE* (Brill, 2020); Gerhard Endreß, “Building The Library Of Arabic Philosophy. Platonism And Aristotelianism in The Sources Of Al-Kindi?” in *The Libraries of the Neoplatonists* (Brill, 2007), 332.

⁷⁵ R. Brunschwig et al., “Tunisia,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* (Brill, 2012).

⁷⁶ Salah Salim Ali, “Arabic Reference to Plato’s Lost Atlantis,” *Islamic Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (January 1, 1999): 260.

also run by demons, took some of the scouts captive (although the first city gave the captives back unarmed). His men who had escaped recounted that the city was filled with wonders, many, including the grand walls of the castle, made of brass.⁷⁷ Altogether, this is the first recorded account of the City of Brass.

Other Islamic accounts of a mysterious city somewhere between Western Africa and Southern Spain continued for the next four hundred years. Within almost all the accounts, there is a clear motif of this city being made of brass, hence it becomes formally known as the “City of Brass.” Just like the legendary continent-island of Atlantis, later Medieval Islamic geographers asked the question of whether a city like this could have existed. It is very likely that Musa came across ancient Phoenician, Greek, or Roman ruins in this geographical area, yet, on the other hand, it is unlikely that they would have contained as much brass as was discussed by Ibn Habib.⁷⁸ The metals that make up brass (copper and zinc) were abundant around the Mediterranean and people such as the Phoenicians used them heavily, however, as many stories do, Ibn Habib most likely exaggerated the amount of brass having been used to adorn and build the cities, much like Plato when he described the size of the Atlantean empire.

Modern scholars such as Salah Salim Ali reflect on The City of Brass and are reminded by another similarly described city: Atlantis. As it turns out, there do seem to be many similarities between the two stories, suggesting that, since Atlantis was the older story and Plato’s *Timaeus* was heavily known in the Arab world, when writing The City of Brass, Ibn Habib could have been inspired by Plato’s myth. For instance, the writers of both The City of Brass and Atlantis placed the cities near the Straits of Gibraltar, and both made mention of parts

⁷⁷ Ali, 261.

⁷⁸ Ali, 268.

of their city being made of brass. In Plato's *Critias*, when describing the structure of the main capital of Atlantis, the spokesperson Critias explained how the outermost wall was coated in brass (*Critias*, 116b), very similarly to what Musa and his men are said to have seen. One of the main issues with making this claim is that unlike the *Timaeus*, the *Critias* has no evidence of being a popular text throughout its transmission. There are no surviving manuscripts until the ninth-century CE, and these are in Greek, not Arabic. This does not necessarily mean that Ibn Habib had not been familiar with this second account of the Atlantis story, but there is no other evidence that suggests he was. Altogether, within the Islamic Golden Age, The City of Brass is the only source which might have shown the impact of the Atlantis story. Islamic geographers and historians may have used the Atlantis story as a source of inspiration, especially as scribes translated the *Timaeus* into Arabic.

To summarize thus far, Roman Catholic, Syrian Christians, and Arab Muslims had all translated Plato's *Timaeus* into their respective languages during the Middle Ages. First was the transmission from Greek to Latin, and then later into Syriac and Arabic. This text was of special importance because it competed among other creation stories circulating at the time such as Genesis. We know that translations of the *Timaeus* were available, but we do not have any evidence of a discussion about Atlantis outside of these translations. The closest possibility is that the City of Brass story drew inspiration from details of Plato's *Critias*, but this is speculative.

We see much more interaction with Plato's Atlantis story in the European Renaissance. Skipping forward about six hundred years from the City of Brass, the Italian Renaissance flourished, and from this period of time, there are three elements that shaped the way the Atlantis story was interpreted: the biblical connections, its repeated relocation around the globe, and how

it allowed people to use ancestry as a weapon. In contrast to the Middle Ages in Europe, during the Renaissance from 1400 CE to 1600 CE, Greek learning was once again re-acquainted into society and popularized within academia, art, language, and science.⁷⁹ The Renaissance showed a re-emergence of pagan works, which artists and philosophers now embraced, and thus, it was also a re-emergence of the Atlantis story within Europe.⁸⁰

Atlantis and Biblical Themes

As Renaissance scholars and artists became more aware of Plato's work through translation, they attempted to synthesize Plato's ideas with the Genesis creation account they were already familiar with.⁸¹ Marsilio Ficino, a 15th century philosopher from Florence, revived many works of Plato during the Renaissance. He translated them once again from Greek into Latin and commented on the *Timaeus* along with many other of Plato's dialogues between the 1460s and 1490s. He advocated for their philosophical importance within a Christian world.⁸² While the previous Latin translation of the *Timaeus* done by Calcidius only contained about half of the dialogue, Ficino provided a lengthy one that covered Plato's entire work, which he also

⁷⁹ 1400-1600 CE are the main dates of the Renaissance, though there are debates on where the Renaissance begins and ends. The year 1600 CE is about the year the Baroque period begins. For this chapter, I am combining all of the themes under the title of Renaissance, since it was the Renaissance that really prompted these scholars to view Atlantis in this way. In other words, I am just broadly speaking of the Renaissance in this chapter and not getting too specific about the different periods outside of it, as this is not the main point of the chapter.

⁸⁰ Andreas Tönnemann, "Renaissance," in *Brill's New Pauly* (Brill, 2006).

⁸¹ This is quite similar to what Plato himself was doing back around 400 BCE. He was syncretizing Greek knowledge with Egyptian knowledge and combining the different cultures' stories and their gods, just as later scholars will merge the God of the Bible with that of Zeus.

I should also note that Christianity adopting and assimilating pagan ideas and stories was not something that just occurred in the Renaissance, but instead occurred much early within the Roman empire. If we think back to Cosmas, we can see that this is most evident. The main point here is that the popularity and discussion around Atlantis declined in the Middle Ages but re-emerged in the Renaissance and the combination of Christian and Greek culture, language, and literature was brought back.

⁸² James Snyder, "Ficino, Marsilio | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy," accessed July 25, 2023.

did with others of Plato such as the *Symposium*, *Philebus*, *Phaedrus*, *Timaeus*, *Parmenides*, *Sophist*, and Book VIII of the *Republic*.⁸³

Ficino was one of the first Renaissance thinkers who believed in the physical reality of Atlantis and tried to connect it with the Genesis narrative.⁸⁴ As one of the most famous translators of Plato, people most likely looked to him to explain why the Atlantis story was not included in the Bible. To do this, he needed to combine the Greek creation story that Plato wrote in the *Timaeus* with that of the familiar one in Genesis for people to believe that Atlantis was indeed a real physical place, one that existed under the same god.⁸⁵ In order for Ficino to justify the Atlantis story, he needed to put Plato under the God of Christianity, not under pagan ones. Ficino made this clear in his writing, specifically in his *Platonic Theology* published in 1482 and his *Compendium on the Timaeus* in 1496.⁸⁶ An example can be found before Ficino's interpretation of the Atlantis story in Chapter 3 of the latter source; he wrote: "After the arrangement and concluding speech about the divine Republic in the world of men, Plato moves in the *Timaeus* to the celestial Republic, which is the model for the earthly one and is composed by God Himself. Then he proceeds to the antiquity of the world and of the human race, and to the wondrous deeds that were energetically accomplished by the ancients."⁸⁷ Here, Ficino implied that Plato was writing his "celestial Republic" (the ideal city of Ur-Athens) within a world that was created by God himself – the Christian god. As for the story of Atlantis, Ficino

⁸³ Snyder.

⁸⁴ Burchard Brentjes, "Atlantis in Utopian Literature," in *The Brill Dictionary of Religion* (Brill, 2006); Arthur Farndell and Arthur Farndell, *All Things Natural: Ficino on Plato's Timaeus* (London, United States: Shephard-Walwyn, 2010), 5.

⁸⁵ Greg Jenner, Stephen Kershaw, and Sophie Duker, "You're Dead To Me, Atlantis," March 31, 2023.

⁸⁶ Farndell, *All Things Natural*; Snyder, "Ficino, Marsilio | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy."

⁸⁷ Farndell, *All Things Natural*, 5.

recognized its acceptance by other Christians such as Cosmas and Origen, and he concluded that “the tale that follows indeed is amazing, but totally true.”⁸⁸

Marsilio Ficino was not the only one to connect the Atlantis story with the Bible. Perhaps most famously, in 1627, Sir Francis Bacon, the English statesman, scientist, and philosopher, wrote his *New Atlantis*, a text that modernized the ancient myth and turned it into a science fiction story.⁸⁹ Though it is unlikely that Bacon believed in the historical reality of Atlantis like Ficino, he definitely understood the political and social power that the Atlantis story had, hence why he chose it to frame his own story. Bacon introduced his reader to an island called Bensalem in the South Pacific where a group of people called the “New Atlanteans” who practice the Christian religion lived.⁹⁰ The “Old Atlanteans,” as Bacon named them, were the “uncivilized” people of the Americas and the indigenous Mexicans.⁹¹ Bacon wrote how the Atlanteans who survived the flood sent by Zeus in Plato’s *Timaeus* forgot the knowledge granted to them by Poseidon and thus they became savage people with their divine blood lost.⁹² The narrator contrasted these two people groups to the advantage of the Christians, since these were the people who knew about the scientific world in abundance, showed piety, and held knowledge about humanity. Yet, exactly how Francis Bacon felt about the Christian religion is debated among scholars. It seems clear that from the way he described the New Atlanteans, he viewed Christians highly. However, at the same time, some scholars such as Laurence Lampert read his *New Atlantis* as a critique of religion and more in favor of science. Much like the Atlantis story

⁸⁸ Farndell, 5.

⁸⁹ Brentjes, “Atlantis in Utopian Literature”; Ellis, *Imagining Atlantis*, 30.

⁹⁰ Anna-Maria Hartmann, “The Strange Antiquity of Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis*,” *Renaissance Studies* 29, no. 3 (2015): 375.

⁹¹ Jenner, Kershaw, and Duker, “You’re Dead To Me, Atlantis.”

⁹² Hartmann, “The Strange Antiquity of Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis*,” 377.

itself, there is a debate present with Bacon's *New Atlantis* in its reason for being written, its moral to us, and its genre.⁹³

My point is that despite there being a debate, it is without a doubt that Bacon built his utopia from the Atlantis story. During Bacon's lifetime there was clear religious turmoil in Europe as many people sailed to America for religious freedom. The Atlantic slave trade and European colonization were also at a high, both in which Bacon was a part of.⁹⁴ Bacon sprinkled bits of these historical events into his story, essentially "Christianizing" Atlantis. I must note that, much like Plato, Bacon did not write himself as the narrator. What is written in his *New Atlantis* is not necessarily what he himself believed.⁹⁵ Instead, what remains significant here, is that in order to push a narrative, whether that be pro-religion or not, Bacon connected the themes from Atlantis and modernized them to fit within a Christian world.

Other Renaissance scholars that connected the Atlantis story to the Bible include Jean de Serres, or Johannes Serranus, a 16th century French historian, lover of both Plato and Protestantism, and translator of Plato's *Timaeus*.⁹⁶ Just as Cosmas in Chapter 1, Serres interpreted the Atlantis story within the Mosaic Law, having replaced the Greek philosophers that Plato used as characters with those more familiar from the Old Testament.⁹⁷ Frederick Baer followed a similar line of interpretation in 1762 as he reimagined Atlantis as Judaea, the ten kingdoms of Atlantis as the twelve tribes of Israel, the Atlantic Ocean as the Red Sea, and the

⁹³ Suzanne Smith, "The New Atlantis: Francis Bacon's Political and Theological Utopia?," *Harvard Theological Review* 101, no. 1 (January 2008): 98–99.

⁹⁴ Samuel Garrett Zeitlin, "Francis Bacon on Imperial and Colonial Warfare," *The Review of Politics* 83, no. 2 (May 2021): 196.

⁹⁵ Tobin L. Craig, "On the Significance of the Literary Character of Francis Bacon's 'New Atlantis' for an Understanding of His Political Thought," *The Review of Politics* 72, no. 2 (2010): 216.

⁹⁶ Heninger, "Sidney and Serranus' Plato," 1983, 152.

⁹⁷ Ramage and Fears, *Atlantis, Fact or Fiction?* 30.

lineage from Atlas into that of the Israelites.⁹⁸ Moreover, William Blake, a deeply religious English poet, viewed the Atlanteans in the same way. He insisted that instead of being a mythical Greek people, they were the ancient Hebrews.⁹⁹ Blake used Atlantis, just as Bacon, to send a political message to the world around him. Through his poetry, specifically the poems *America* and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, he used the Atlantis myth to present his overall theme: “the fallen condition of the human soul and its potential for redemption.”¹⁰⁰ He connected this theme together with the Atlantis myth, the American Revolution, and the Bible, and ultimately showed how the story of Atlantis became part of a much bigger motive than before. To Blake, America was the underdog against the British empire, like Ur-Athens under Atlantis. And similarly, his poems also made Ur-Athens like that of ancient Israel, having been oppressed under empires such as the Babylonians, Greeks, and Romans. This new biblical connection that emerged from the Renaissance showed how people adapted the Atlantis story to tell a new story that related to the religion at the time.

The Multiple Relocations of Atlantis

Plato’s Critias placed the island of Atlantis outside the mouth of the Pillars of Heracles, better known today as the Strait of Gibraltar, which lay to the west of Spain and Northern Africa (Plato, *Timaeus* 25c; Figure 1). At the end of the 15th century, Atlantis was not the only mythical land that had been placed in this area of the world. Other mythical geographies included Avalon

⁹⁸ Ramage and Fears, 31.

⁹⁹ William L. McClelland, “Blake, William,” in *Religion Past and Present* (Brill, 2011).

¹⁰⁰ Michael Holley, “Blake’s Atlantis,” *Colby Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (June 1, 1994): 109.

(the resting place of King Arthur), the Isles of the Blest, and other far-off paradises.¹⁰¹ The Atlantic Ocean held great mysteries for explorers of the Renaissance, Atlantis having been at the forefront. They wanted to find these lands, prove their existences, find their treasures, and gain power from their discoveries. Thus, when land *was* discovered westward which had people there as well - when Christopher Columbus came across the Americas in 1492 - many believed that, at last, Atlantis had been found.

In fact, Europeans found many islands at this time in this same region. A new theory called the Debris Theory hypothesized that islands such as the Canaries, the Maderias, the Azores, and even Ireland were the leftovers from the destruction of Atlantis.¹⁰² In other words, instead of a massive continent existing like shown in Figure 1, only bits and pieces of Atlantis remained. The Debris Theory was just one way that scholars of the time “found” Atlantis and located it in newly discovered places. No longer had the Atlantis story only existed in the Atlantic Ocean, but instead, people moved it all over the world to fit their own manipulative needs. As I will show, this was very common in the Renaissance. Historians, scientists, writers, and geologists molded the Atlantis story to fit their own agendas, and if the island did not exist where they needed it to, then they just moved the whole island, empire, and story to better accommodate them.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Ramage and Fears, *Atlantis, Fact or Fiction?*, 28.

¹⁰² Ramage and Fears, 29–30.

¹⁰³ Phil Edwards, “How the Imaginary Island of Atlantis Was Mapped,” Vox, April 30, 2015.

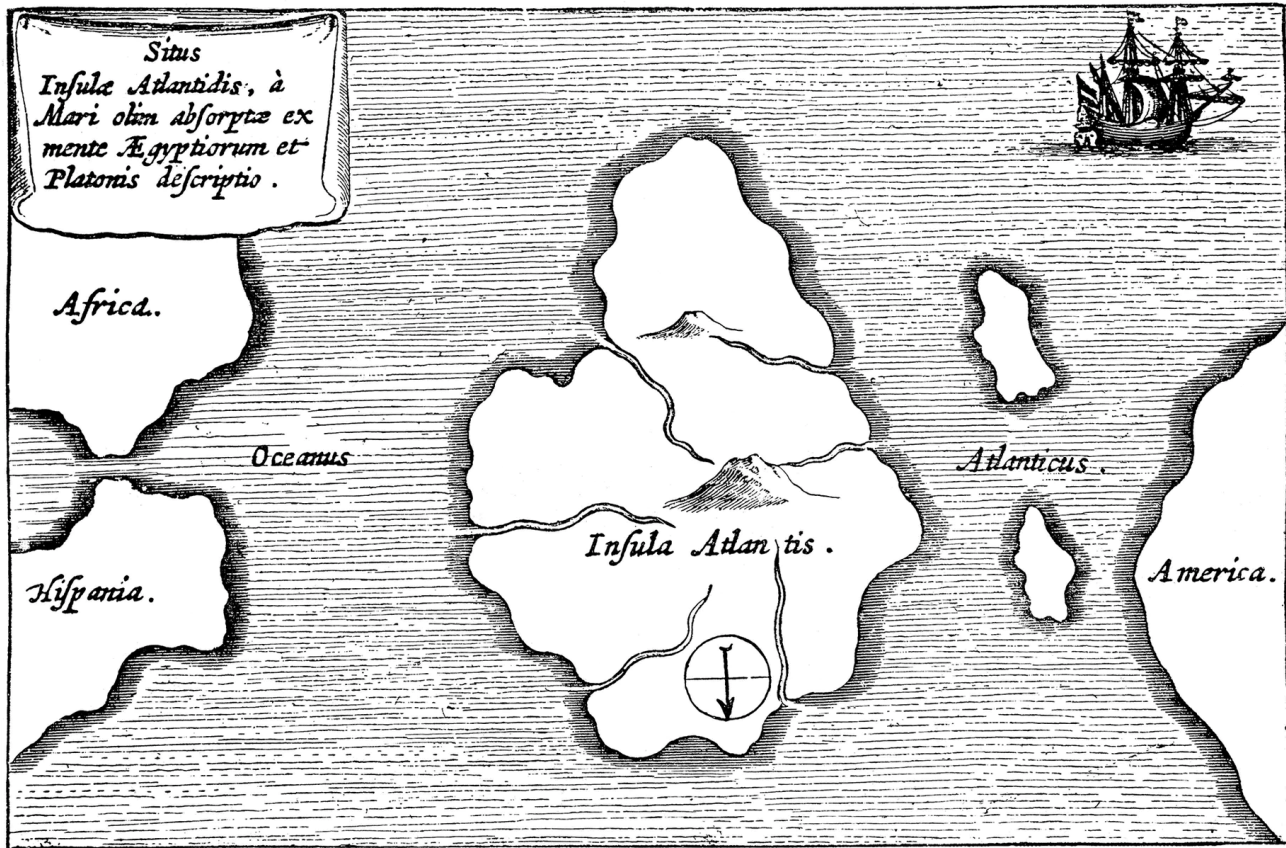


Figure 1. The island of Atlantis and its corresponding islands depicted on a map by Athanasius Kircher in his *Mundus Subterraneus* in 1665.

America was one of the first places of repositioning for Atlantis, out of many during this period of exploration and sailing in Europe. However, Sir Francis Bacon was not the first to connect the Americas with Atlantis. In fact, it was Francisco Lopez de Gomara, a Spanish historian, who put forth the Atlantis-in-America theory in 1553.¹⁰⁴ While studying the Aztecs, Gomara noticed that the prefix “atl-” played a prominent role in their language. So, of course, in his thinking, it must have been a reference to Atlantis; their languages must have merged somehow in antiquity, and in (his) reality, the Aztecs must have been the descendants of the

¹⁰⁴ Ramage and Fears, *Atlantis, Fact or Fiction?*, 30.

Atlanteans, and correspondingly, their land the same location as the island.¹⁰⁵ In a similar way, Charles-Étienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, a major Mesoamerican scholar from the 19th century, also placed Plato's Atlantis in the Yucatan. De Bourbourg deciphered many Mayan texts to come to this conclusion, such as the K'iche' epic of the *Popol Vuh*, the dance drama *Rabinal Achí*, the Yucatec pictographic manuscript the *Codex Madrid*, and Diego de Landa's *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*.¹⁰⁶ De Bourbourg, as well as Augustus Le Plongeon, also put forth the theory of an entire lost continent called the Land of Mu that existed in the Pacific ocean and he related this island to Atlantis as being an origin place for the Mayan civilization.¹⁰⁷ Centuries later, James Churchward expanded on this same theory in his book *The Lost Continent of Mu: The Motherland of Man* in 1926. Like the City of Brass a thousand years before, the island of Atlantis continued to inspire new lands, and encouraged the hunt for them.

The British repositioned Atlantis into the Americas as well. John Dee, a man who had many titles such as humanist, mathematician, geographer, antiquarian, and astrologer to Queen Elizabeth I, claimed that the true location of Atlantis was in North America due to a theory known as the Welsh Indian's heritage theory. This theory stated that the legendary Welsh prince, Madoc, traveled across the Atlantic Ocean in 1170 CE and after having colonized the surrounding areas, he introduced the Welsh language and culture to the indigenous people there.¹⁰⁸ Dee was inspired by Humphery Llwyd's version of the Madoc story and wrote his own version titled *Unto your Majesties Tytle Royall to these Forene Regions & Ilandes* in 1580. Within his work, he named the four regions that Madoc apparently made contact with: Iaaquaza

¹⁰⁵ Jenner, Kershaw, and Duker, "You're Dead To Me, Atlantis."

¹⁰⁶ Alessia Frassani, "The Manuscript Hunter: Brasseur de Bourbourg's Travels Through Central America and Mexico, 1854–1859 by Charles Étienne Brasseur de Bourbourg (Review)," *The Americas* 75, no. 4 (2018): 788.

¹⁰⁷ Jenner, Kershaw, and Duker, "You're Dead To Me, Atlantis."

¹⁰⁸ Jenner, Kershaw, and Duker.

(Florida), Apalchen, Mocosa, and Norombega, each of which Dee claimed were significant parts of Atlantis.¹⁰⁹ Thus, not only was John Dee claiming that Atlantis was situated in America, but he also put Welsh colonization centuries before the Spanish.¹¹⁰ By doing this, he essentially claimed this land for the Welsh which was already conquered by the British. Around this same time, John Dee coined the term “British Empire” and made Madoc a direct ancestor of Queen Elizabeth I.¹¹¹ Again, all of this is significant and a common practice when people began to relocate Atlantis to different areas of the world. It became a conversation related to colonization and the claiming of land and people. Atlantis became a weapon in the colonial arsenal – a theme I will return to.

Sweden was another destination that Renaissance scholars like Olaus Rudbeck claimed Atlantis to be. Rudbeck was a Swedish polymath born in 1630 that believed in the historical reality of Atlantis but disagreed with Plato on its location.¹¹² In his 1679 book *Atlantica*, he came to an epiphany that many of the ancient Greek and Roman myths and legends did not refer to places around the Mediterranean, but instead, they all referenced Sweden. Atlantis, therefore, was not outside the Pillars of Heracles, but instead, in Uppsala, a city near Stockholm.¹¹³ And as Uppsala became known as the true Atlantis, Rudbeck thereby deemed all of Scandinavia as the origin of all people from Europe and Asia and as the “source of all their primitive ideas and

¹⁰⁹ Wallace (Tongva) Cleaves, “From Monmouth to Madoc to Māori: The Myth of Medieval Colonization and an Indigenous Alternative,” *English Language Notes* 58, no. 2 (2020): 27.

¹¹⁰ György E. Szönyi, “Dee, John,” in *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism* (Brill, 2008).

¹¹¹ Nicholas Canny, Alaine Low, and Wm Roger Louis, *Volume I: The Origins of Empire: British Overseas Enterprise to the Close of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford, UNITED KINGDOM: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 1998), 62; Jenner, Kershaw, and Duker, “You’re Dead To Me, Atlantis.”

¹¹² Charlotta Forss, “Mapping Atlantis: Olof Rudbeck and The Use of Maps in Early Modern Scholarship,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 84, no. 2 (April 2023): 207.

¹¹³ O. Larsell, review of *Review of Atlantica*, by Olaus Rudbeck, *Isis* 33, no. 1 (1941): 71.

traditions.”¹¹⁴ His proof was based on the history of maps and the making of his own maps.

Because of his maps and his history as a medical professional, Rudbeck was highly respected in his community, which allowed him to make such claims about the legendary Atlantis and have people believe him about Sweden’s glorious, unknown past.¹¹⁵

Eastward from Sweden, in the late 1770’s CE, the French astronomer and polymath, Jean Sylvain Bailly, relocated Atlantis in the Arctic circle, in North Eurasia.¹¹⁶ He laid out his claims in both his 1777 *Lettres sur l’origine des sciences* and the 1779 *Lettres sur l’Atlantide*, and argued that the people of Atlantis were the origin of humankind and essentially created civilization.¹¹⁷ All of the arts, culture, sciences, and philosophies of the ancient Chinese, Indians, and Egyptians, Bailly suggested, were the work of the Atlanteans and not these later cultures. The Atlanteans “civilized” these cultures, Bailly believed. He also wrote that the Brahmans, the Hindu priests that made up India’s highest caste, who had strengthened and shaped Indian religion and culture were really just Sanskrit-speaking Atlanteans.¹¹⁸ Similarly to how the Egyptian priest in the *Timaeus* told Solon that the reason the Greeks had never heard of the Atlantis story before was because of the constant resetting of civilization due to climate and floods, Bailly theorized that over time this land mass froze over and locked Atlantis and the knowledge its people had underneath the ice.¹¹⁹ Instead of tidal waves, fire, and earthquakes, Bailly’s Atlanteans were buried by ice. Bailly’s views reduced the achievements of non-western

¹¹⁴ Ramage and Fears, *Atlantis, Fact or Fiction?* 31.

¹¹⁵ Forss, “Mapping Atlantis,” 210.

¹¹⁶ Reinhold (Innsbruck RWG) Bichler, “Atlantis,” in *Brill’s New Pauly, Antiquity Volumes*, October 1, 2006.

¹¹⁷ Dan Edelstein, “Hyperborean Atlantis- Jean-Sylvain Bailly, Madame Blavatsky, and the Nazis,” 2006, 271.

¹¹⁸ David Allen Harvey, “The Lost Caucasian Civilization: Jean-Sylvain Bailly and the Roots of the Aryan Myth,” *Modern Intellectual History* 11, no. 2 (August 2014): 279.

¹¹⁹ Harvey, 279.

cultures by presenting them as derivative. Bailly's presentation of Atlantis as an origin point for civilization provided a common talking point for later influential thinkers such as Ignatius Donnelly.

Atlantis and its Descendants: Using Ancestry as a Weapon

This last theme is the most dangerous of the three. The scholars who relocated Atlantis often appear to have ulterior motives beyond accurate mapping; by associating their homelands with Atlantis often supported political and colonial power over new areas of exploration. Associating themselves with a great empire thereby made *them* a great empire, more justified in their minds for committing horrible crimes. For example, John Dee, Queen Elizabeth I's right-hand astrologer, not only coined the term "British Empire," but he genetically connected Queen Elizabeth directly to the apparent Welsh Indians, making them the same, in a sense. Since John Dee also placed Atlantis in America, the land and people which Madoc colonized and interbred with, he subsequently made Queen Elizabeth a descendant of Atlantis. The Welsh, through Madoc and then Queen Elizabeth, *owned* American soil based on their accompanying myth, and since they were now connected genetically to the great empire of Atlantis, there seemed to be no harm in taking control over America. In this way, myths like Atlantis and Madoc clearly served as justification for colonization and genocide.

A similar dynamic seems to be at play in Bacon's *New Atlantis*. The so-called "New Atlanteans" were Christians, while the "Old Atlanteans" were the people of Indigenous Mexico and the descendants of Plato's Atlantis after the flood. They were the survivors of the cataclysm, and for Bacon, since they were almost destroyed, much knowledge and power that they once had

diminished and made them uncivilized and vulnerable to colonization.¹²⁰ Once again, the Atlantis myth served to justify colonization in the Americas by dehumanizing indigenous populations. Like John Dee, Bacon was in close contact with Queen Elizabeth I, as he was her legal advisor and a very key role in the establishment of the trans-Atlantic colonies.¹²¹ He believed in the imperial power of Britain - as seen in his essays “Of Plantations” and “Of Empire” - and in order to legitimize colonization and the destruction of indigenous culture, religion, and land, he used the familiarity of Plato’s words but twisted the Atlantis myth to fit the British narrative of justified conquest.¹²² Both John Dee and Sir Francis Bacon had access to great power and destruction through the British Empire, and in order to share their views to a wider audience, and to give their views even more “authority,” they took a well-known story from the ancient past, written by one of the most famous Greek philosophers, and utilized it for their own purpose.

Around the year 1530 CE, the Italian physician and astronomer, Fracastoro Girolamo used the Atlantis myth in a different way than Bacon and Dee. In his most famous work, *Syphilis*, he claimed that the titular disease did not originate with the Native Americans, as many believed during this time.¹²³ The Native Americans provided the Europeans with the remedy for syphilis, Girolamo wrote. His overall goal in this section of his work was to shed a more positive light on the Native Americans and to criticize colonization, since many European perspectives de-humanized them and depicted them as inferior.¹²⁴ To help him do this, Girolamo shared that the Native Americans were the descendants of the illustrious, powerful, and intelligent

¹²⁰ Jenner, Kershaw, and Duker, “You’re Dead To Me, Atlantis.”

¹²¹ Zeitlin, “Francis Bacon on Imperial and Colonial Warfare,” 196.

¹²² Zeitlin, 198.

¹²³ Jenner, Kershaw, and Duker, “You’re Dead To Me, Atlantis”; William Henry Spates, “Mythopoeia and Medicine: Decoding Fracastoro’s Syphilis Sive Morbus Gallicus,” *DQR Studies in Literature* 47 (2011): 245.

¹²⁴ Spates, “Mythopoeia and Medicine,” 246.

Atlanteans. Instead of using the Atlantis story to justify horrible deeds, he used it to assert prestige on the oppressed. Although he may have had good intentions, Girolamo's use of the Atlantis myth still had negative and harmful consequences because it assumed that the Native Americans were not powerful and intelligent in his time, but they had been in the past, and this reading attributed their accomplishment to their distant ancestors (identified as Atlanteans) rather than themselves.

In the early 1800s, Antoine Fabre d'Olivet, a French theosophist, published his *Lettres a Sophie sur l'histoire*, a series of letters dedicated to his sister Sophie that described ancient history, or at least his view of it.¹²⁵ His use of myth and ancient stories played a great part in how he undermined the French government, yet he envisioned the Atlantis story similarly to other scholars. He, too, placed Atlantis at the beginning of human civilization, and placed it geographically near the Arctic, using the cooling of the earth to explain how such a civilization could have existed there, just like Jean Sylvain Bailly.¹²⁶ These two men were within the many scholars at the time who specifically made the Atlanteans white. This detail would become significant in later understandings of the Atlantis myth, particularly under the Nazis.¹²⁷

With the effort of all these scholars combined, the Atlantis story became an origin story, a civilization that brought about all other cultures and took away their monuments, achievements, and inventions. People used this myth to swallow up other origin stories and steal credit from indigenous peoples. The theme of ancestry came to a climax in the late 1800s with two scholars: Madame Helene Blavatsky and Ignatius Donnelly. The former was an occultist and

¹²⁵ Arthur McCalla, "Fabre d'Olivet, Antoine," in *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism* (Brill, 2008).

¹²⁶ David Allen Harvey, "Beyond Enlightenment: Occultism, Politics, and Culture in France from the Old Regime to the Fin-de-Siècle," *The Historian* 65, no. 3 (2003): 677.

¹²⁷ Jenner, Kershaw, and Duker, "You're Dead To Me, Atlantis."

an elite member of Russian society who then moved to America. Her most famous book was *The Secret Doctrine* published in 1888.¹²⁸ Contrary to Darwin's theory of evolution that circulated in the nineteenth century, Blavatsky put forth a theory of her own that centered around seven different "root-races" which throughout time rose and fell, in which Atlantis was the fourth and her contemporary age was the fifth. Blavatsky placed the fourth race of Atlantis onto a continent of its own although as Plato wrote, it had been destroyed. Nonetheless, she situated the island not outside the Pillars of Heracles, but instead, at the North Pole just as Bailly and d'Olivet did about a century before.¹²⁹

In fact, Blavatsky would elaborate and support many of Bailly's opinions of Atlantis. Blavatsky wrote that from the Atlantean race came the Aryan race who, after the fall of Atlantis, transferred all their knowledge to the rest of the world. To Blavatsky, the Aryan race was essentially the chosen race that the Atlanteans deemed worthy of civilizing the world with their knowledge of science, history, art, and magic. Her Atlanteans had flying cars and superhuman abilities. They were massive beings with magical third eyes, psychic powers, and the ability to wield electricity.¹³⁰ From the Aryans, another race evolved, one that Blavatsky did little to hide her resentment of: the Semites. To Blavatsky, the Semitic people were the first "man," the race that was no longer divine or good like the Aryans and earlier Atlanteans. Contrasting the two races, she wrote: "With the ancient Aryans the hidden meaning was grandiose, sublime, and poetical...With the Semite, that stooping man meant the fall of Spirit into matter, and that fall, and degradation were apotheosized by him with the result of dragging Deity down to the level of

¹²⁸ Edelstein, "Hyperborean Atlantis- Jean-Sylvain Bailly, Madame Blavatsky, and the Nazis," 275.

¹²⁹ Edelstein, 274.

¹³⁰ Jenner 37:55, 2023

man” (*Secret Doctrine*, 2:469-70). As a part of her Atlantis theory, she also blasphemed Judaism and claimed it was a religion obsessed with lust and hate, compared to the Aryan religious thought which was spiritual and metaphysical. Blavatsky emphasized this divide between religions and races and made it a cosmological and evolutionary one.¹³¹ She used the story to tell an origin story about a superior race and to undermine another one. Her work would go on to support Nazi initiatives and genocides.

Working at the same time as Blavatsky, most infamously, was American Congressman Ignatius Donnelly.¹³² He was a politician well-liked by the public, one who openly supported black and indigenous peoples’ rights in a time when most politicians were against them.¹³³ His main work on race at the time, called *Doctor Huguet*, for example, stressed the fact that all people regardless of skin color are God’s children. However, Donnelly also made this comment during a speech to Congress in 1866: “God grant them (the blacks) prosperity and the fullest development of which they are capable...not that I would rate them above or even equal to our own proud, illustrious, and dominant race...but these men are our human kindred—poor, patient, helpless, and unhappy—appealing by their miseries to our mercy, by their manhood to our sense of justice.”¹³⁴ He seems to think that everyone should be equal within politics, however, the white race remains superior.

His work concerning the lost island of Atlantis also has undertones of inequality. In his main book, *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*, published in 1882, he believed in the historical

¹³¹ Edelstein 275, 2006

¹³² I say “most infamously” because throughout my research Ignatius Donnelly has shown up in every *single* source written on the receptions of Atlantis in modern day. There is no denying that Donnelly impacted the Atlantis story and participated in the weaponization of it as an origin story.

¹³³ John Richard Bovee, “Doctor Huguet, Donnelly on Being Black.,” 1969, 289.

¹³⁴ Bovee, 291.

reality of the continent and empire of Atlantis. Moreover, he fanatically agreed with others such as the earlier Charles-Étienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, Augustus Le Plongeon, and Blavatsky, in that Atlantis was a global empire, one that transferred its knowledge to others all around the world. The theory that all technology was developed by a single people group or civilization and then spread to others is called hyper-diffusionism. This theory denies what archaeologists know to be true: that diverse civilizations can and did independently make similar discoveries.

More specifically, on pages 1-2 of Donnelly's *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*, he listed the points he aimed to make clear to his reader regarding Atlantis. I list them in order here verbatim.

1. That there once existed in the Atlantis Ocean, opposite the mouth of the Mediterranean Sea, a large island, which was remnant of an Atlantic continent,¹³⁵ and known to the ancient world as Atlantis (Figure 2).
2. That the description of this island given by Plato is not, as has been long supposed, fable, but veritable history.
3. That Atlantis was the region where man first rose from a state of barbarism to civilization.
4. That it became, in the course of ages, a populous and mighty nation, from who's overflowing the shores of the Gulf of Mexico, the Mississippi River, the Amazon, the Pacific coast of South America, the Mediterranean, the west coast of Europe and Africa, the Baltic, the Black Sea, and the Caspian were populated by civilized nations.

¹³⁵ As Blavatsky proposed.

5. That it was the true Antediluvian world; the Garden of Eden; the Gardens of the Hesperides; the Elysian Fields; the Gardens of Alcinous; the Mesomphalos; the Olympos; the Asgard of the traditions of the ancient nations; representing a universal memory of a great land, where early mankind dwelt for ages in peace and happiness.
6. That the gods and goddesses of the ancient Greeks, the Phoenicians, the Hindus, and the Scandinavians were simply the kings, queens, and heroes of Atlantis; and the acts attributed to them in mythology are a confused recollection of real historical events.
7. That the mythology of Egypt and Peru represented the original religion of Atlantis, which was sun-worship.
8. That the oldest colony formed by the Atlanteans was probably in Egypt, whose civilization was a reproduction of that of the Atlantic Island.
9. That the implements of the “Bronze Age” of Europe were derived from Atlantis. The Atlanteans were also the first manufacturers of iron.
10. That the Phoenician alphabet, parent of all the European alphabets, was derived from an Atlantis alphabet, which was also conveyed from Atlantis to the Mayas of Central America.
11. That Atlantis was the original seat of the Aryan or Indo-European family of nations, as well as of the Semitic peoples, and possibly also of the Turanian races.
12. That Atlantis perished in a terrible convulsion of nature, in which the whole island sunk into the ocean, with nearly all its inhabitants.

13. That a few persons escaped in ships and on rafts and carried to the nations east and west the tidings of the appalling catastrophe, which has survived to our own time in the Flood and Deluge legends of the different nations of the old and new worlds.

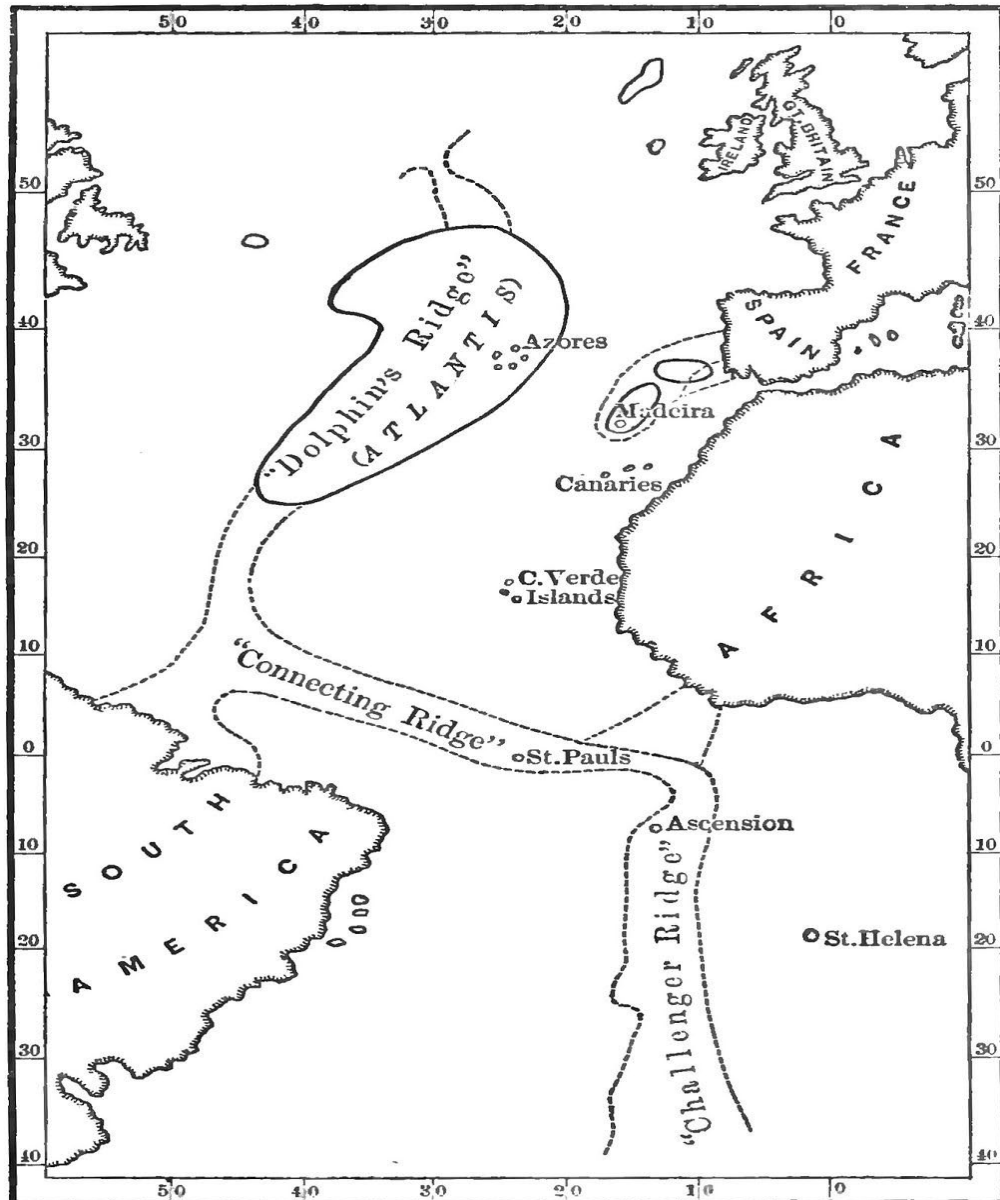


Figure 2. Donnelly's map from his *Atlantis: the Antediluvian World*, of Atlantis showed the proposed location of Atlantis outside the Pillars of Heracles. Combined with deep-sea soundings data, he placed Atlantis along these ridges (p. 47, 1882).

These claims held by Donnelly belong to the realms of pseudoarcheology and science fiction, which many of his contemporaries understood his work to have been. In the same year that Donnelly published his *Antediluvian World*, the journal *The American Naturalist* published an anonymous review of the work which shared the opinion that many still have today: Ignatius Donnelly produced a work of fantasy based on no reality that matches the physical world; his words are not to be trusted, and his claims not to be relied on as fact. The review mainly focused on the geological research that Donnelly based his claim from that an Atlantean continent once existed in the Atlantic Ocean. Donnelly used data from the Challenger Expedition, the first survey of the Atlantic floor between the years 1872 and 1876, to create the map in Figure 2. The anonymous reviewer used the same data to show that Donnelly's interpretation was incorrect and there was no evidence of a continent from the Challenger expedition, and thus also concluded that "in the light of modern anthropology and philology, the positions soberly advocated by our well-meaning author, are simply absurdities."¹³⁶ Later reviews of Donnelly's work still criticize Donnelly's arguments for the same reason as this reviewer does, despite centuries having past. This early review is important because it shows us today how outlandish Donnelly's theories were from their creation. Donnelly's work was pseudoscientific in 1883 and remains so in 2024. The review concluded by pointing the reader in a direction of fact rather than fantasy to read Tylor's *Anthropology*, Dawkin's *Early Man in Britain*, and the late Mr. L. H. Morgan's writings on the North American Indians for better sources of anthropology and human history.

Although Donnelly was a politician, his work put him in dialogue with anthropologists, geologists and sociologists of the time. Many of these experts viewed Donnelly's work as pure

¹³⁶ *The American Naturalist* 1882, 730

rubbish, a “garbled muddle of misunderstood geology, anthropology, mythology, and linguistics,” as the author Ellis described it a century later. But there were also some thinkers who embraced Donnelly’s version of “history.”¹³⁷ His work became the origin of a new branch of study called Atlantology, which combined aspects of science, history, mythology, and fantasy in one enterprise.¹³⁸

After *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*, Donnelly wrote the sequel a year later: *Ragnarok: The Age of Fire and Gravel*. In this book, he gave further information about the antediluvian Atlantis, its beginning and its destruction. From this, we learn that the city of Atlantis was founded immediately after a comet struck the earth about 30,000 years ago, and since then, up until about 10,000 years ago, Atlantis was a thriving.¹³⁹ Donnelly claimed that these two events (Atlantis’ foundation and destruction) were the origin of all creation and flood narratives. Once again, book reviews from a year later disagreed with Donnelly about his narrative of history. The best one had to say about it was: “Mr. Donnelly’s book possesses two great merits: it’s original and entertaining.”¹⁴⁰ Donnelly would go on to write more controversial books like these two, and over the next two and a half centuries he would acquire an empire of his own, made up of those who developed his work further and took the myth of Atlantis further away from its Platonic origins.

¹³⁷ Ellis, *Imagining Atlantis*, 43.

¹³⁸ Thomas Laqueur, “Why the Margins Matter: Occultism and the Making of Modernity,” *Modern Intellectual History* 3, no. 1 (April 2006): 127.

¹³⁹ Stuart K Culver, “Waiting for the End of the World: Catastrophe and the Populist Myth of History,” *Configurations* 3, no. 3 (1995): 391–413.

¹⁴⁰ “Ragnarok: The Age of Fire and Gravel,” *Notes and Queries* s6-VII, no. 171 (April 7, 1883): 280.

Allegorical Approaches to Atlantis

Donnelly's work is the culmination of a series of Atlantis readings that understood the story as based on historical fact, but this was not the only way to read the story. There were others who understood it as an allegory rather than a kernel of historical truth that allowed for conquest and colonization.

For instance, Giuseppe Bartoli, an 18th century Italian teacher and literary scholar published one of the main theories surrounding Atlantis that did not seek to locate it in his *Essay on the historical explanation that Plato gave of his Republic and his Atlantis* in 1779.¹⁴¹ Instead, Bartoli connected Plato's war between Atlantis and Athens to that of Persia and Athens the 5th century BCE just one hundred years before Plato's time.¹⁴² Many scholars today still accept this view. Unlike before, Bartoli did not connect the Atlantis story to the Bible, nor relocate it to a newly discovered continent, nor use it as the basis for current civilizations.

Along the same lines was the Professor of Ancient Literature, historian, and French philosopher, Thomas Henri Martin, who in 1841 published his commentary: *Studies on Plato's Timaeus*.¹⁴³ In this work, he established his views in seven points to suggest a more allegorical approach to the story.

The points are as follows, verbatim:

1. Plato's story is for all intents and purposes pure fiction.
2. It has an Egyptian, not a Greek origin.

¹⁴¹ *Essai sur l'explication historique que Platon a donnée de sa République et de son Atlantide.*

¹⁴² Chantal Foucier, "5. L'Atlantide entre histoire naturelle et histoire sacrée," in *Le mythe littéraire de l'Atlantide (1800-1939) : L'origine et la fin*, Ateliers de l'imaginaire (Grenoble: UGA Éditions, 2019), 189–225.

¹⁴³ *Études sur le Timée de Platon*

3. The priests made up this story involving the Greeks for their own political advantage.
4. If Atlantis did exist, it was in the Atlantic just outside the Strait of Gibraltar, thus making it impossible to put it in Africa, the seas to the north, America, or Palestine.
5. It is impossible to believe that the sudden disappearance of an island as large as Atlantis would not have affected geography, and yet “the fable of Atlantis” presupposes that Europe, Asia, and Africa were as they are today when the island was in existence.
6. There was no continent running along the edge of Oceanus over which the Atlanteans could have extended their power, and there are no shallows where the island used to be.
7. We had best stop looking for Atlantis; it is truly Utopia (“Noplace”).¹⁴⁴

At the end of the 19th century, Henri Martin represented the small group of disbelievers in a real, physical Atlantis. These ideas supporting a physical Atlantis, such as the theory that the story was really about ancient Hebrews (rather than Greeks or Egyptians), or that it was actually the Garden of Eden, or that it existed in the Arctic or America, or that its descendants were a part of the British royal line, or that civilization began with Atlantis and every culture stemmed from it, were thrilling and attractive ideas, especially during a period where global exploration, imperial power, and theories of evolution thrived. At the same time, although the interest in

¹⁴⁴ Ramage and Fears, *Atlantis, Fact or Fiction?* 32.

Atlantis showed an eagerness to connect the present with the ancient past, the story of Atlantis also became a potent weapon, used to promote superiority, rights to land, justification for genocide, racism, and global power. In this way, myths and stories can be dangerous - a common theme, made ever clearer as time passes from Plato and his own intent with Atlantis, which, of course, can never really be known. However, the farther along in time from Plato's writing of the *Timaeus* and *Critias*, the more the story is taken out of context and turned into a weapon. This trend of using the story of Atlantis to further nefarious ends relating to race, identity, and ancestry became most apparent in the 20th and 21st centuries during the Nazi regime and modern-day pseudoscientific communities.

Chapter 3 – The Power of a Good Story: The Nazi Myth, Pseudoscience, and Popular Culture

As the past two chapters demonstrate, there is power behind stories and the way they are deployed by story tellers and interpreters. Stories are malleable and they can be used to share information about cultures, reveal political tensions, persuade readers of a certain message, and change our understanding of past events. This is precisely what the Atlantis story has done throughout all this time. Plato himself may have done some of these things such as sharing information about a particular culture like that of Athens and Egypt; through the voice of Critias, in both the *Timaeus* and the *Critias*, and his discussion of the ideal state in the *Republic*, he may have alluded to tensions from the Peloponnesian War and Greco-Persian war; and he may have tried to persuade his readers of a certain message that related to citizenship or morality depending on which interpretation one chooses to believe. Yet, in relation to the last purpose of stories – to change the understanding of past events - I believe that has been done more by scholars after Plato than by Plato himself.

The three thinkers who had the most impact in attempting to use the Atlantis story to change the understanding of historic events were Jean Sylvain Bailly, Madame Helene Blavatsky, and Ignatius Donnelly. From these people and their ideas about diffusionism, Aryanism, and antisemitism, the Atlantis story became extremely dangerous in the twentieth century as the Nazis took hold of it and used it for justifying genocide and their warped view of the world. Since then, with influence from the same thinkers, modern-day pseudoscientists have continued to form theories about the lost island and its place in history, and with the use of the internet and popular culture, this false knowledge has spread all around the world. The Atlantis story has always been part of a debate, its story has always been manipulated to meet certain

needs of the storyteller. It has become a weapon, but now within this chapter, I aim to show just how dangerous and impactful that weapon has been in the past one-hundred years, and why it is so important to bring the dark history behind myths like Atlantis to light.

The Nazi Myth¹⁴⁵

“Mythical power is the power of the dream, of the projection of an image with which one identifies,” Lacoue-Labarthe in his *Le Mythe nazi* wrote regarding the lack of cohesive group identity in Germany since the mid-1700s.¹⁴⁶ Unlike much of Europe during this time, Germany exemplified no strong imitation of the ancient cultures. Instead, there seemed to be the lack of a unified German language and cohesive culture.¹⁴⁷ For a country, this provided no power, no unity. From this emptiness arose a German nationalism rooted in Greek mythology and of an Aryan Atlantis called Nazism. The Nazi theorist Alfred Rosenberg drew the connection between Atlantis and German identity in his *Myth of the Twentieth Century* in 1930.¹⁴⁸

Rosenberg proclaimed that “there has never been a truly German state,” nothing that made up a German identity, and for an identity to be true, the dream must become a reality,

¹⁴⁵ Edelstein, “Hyperborean Atlantis- Jean-Sylvain Bailly, Madame Blavatshy, and the Nazis,” 268; This term, the “Nazi Myth” was coined by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe in his *Le Mythe nazi* in 1990.

¹⁴⁶ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Nazi Myth,” *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 2 (Winter 1990): 305.

¹⁴⁷ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 299.

¹⁴⁸ Anson Rabinbach and Sander L. Gilman, *The Third Reich Sourcebook* (Berkeley, UNITED STATES: University of California Press, 2013), 192; Interestingly enough, Lacoue-Labarthe called Rosenberg’s *Myth of the Twentieth Century* and Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* as texts that consist of “often confused pile-ups of the obvious, a tireless repetition of certitudes. They hammer at an idea, supporting it with whatever might seem to fit, without any analysis, without any discussion of objections, without any references. There is neither knowledge to establish, nor thought to overcome” (1990: 304). When reading this, I cannot help but think of Ignatius Donnelly’s *Antediluvian World* and those who reviewed his work in the same way, as consisting of half-truths and no analysis. It seems, at least in these two cases, that the texts that have the most influence are often those with the least amount of validity in what is written, and thus, produce the most dangerous outcomes.

something fully believed by the believer (*M.* pg. 284).¹⁴⁹ To Rosenberg, “race is the outward image of a determined soul;” to him, race seemed to be at the forefront of the German dream - a theme that is also found heavily in Hitler’s work.¹⁵⁰ Because of this definition of a myth essentially being a dream identity based on race, the Nazi party promoted antisemitism at its roots and made it part of their identity and what they stood for. Race to them now dealt with blood and soil (*blut und boden*) instead of a language or culture, since this was no longer a problem in Germany in the twentieth century.¹⁵¹ Rosenberg wrote of this blood, made it Aryan, and connected it back to Plato’s Atlantis.

As I laid out in the last chapter, this theme of political powers connecting their countries’ ancestry back to Plato’s Atlanteans is quite common. To connect oneself back to a great nation therefore makes that current nation a great one. Both Jean Sylvain Bailly and Madame Helene Blavatsky had great influence over Rosenberg. The Aryan myth alongside the Nazi myth stemmed from these two precursors. Like that of ancient Meropis and Panchaia, Bailly made a continent of his own called Hyperborea and equated this to Atlantis, which he oriented in the north, just as other scholars have done. With the help of Blavatsky and Ignatius Donnelly, the idea of radical diffusionism (that all modern cultures trace back to one culture) became a very key element to the Hyperborean-Atlantis. During this time, many scholars such as Voltaire believed that civilization began in India rather than Egypt. Bailly formed his own theory where the originators of civilization living in India were not actually from India, but rather a separate race descended from Atlantis of “European stock” who resided in the Arctic.¹⁵² Since these

¹⁴⁹ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, “The Nazi Myth,” 304.

¹⁵⁰ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 306.

¹⁵¹ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 308.

¹⁵² Edelstein, “Hyperborean Atlantis- Jean-Sylvain Bailly, Madame Blavatsky, and the Nazis,” 273.

people were from the Arctic where the sun appears and disappears drastically through the year, they were worshippers of the sun. The Nazis developed this idea further by creating the solar myth that sought to prove a Nordic origin of Atlantis, in which the main symbol was the ancient Eurasian symbol, the swastika.¹⁵³

According to this Nazi myth, the Aryans descended from the Atlanteans and existed alongside other races like the Jews but were viewed as far more superior. The Aryans were the only “civilized” group; they were the founders of civilization par excellence, the creators of culture itself. Because the Nazis connected Bailly’s and Blavatsky’s Hyperborean Atlanteans with the Aryans and identified this group as the origin of all cultural and scientific accomplishments, the Atlanteans now became white.¹⁵⁴ The Nazis have stolen the accomplishments of the minority and then placed the burden of all the world’s evil onto them.¹⁵⁵ It is easy to see how this way of thinking, this way of manipulating an ancient myth and changing the way history is understood, has fueled the genocide of millions of Jewish people and more.

Bailly and Blavatsky directly inspired other Nazi supporters beyond Rosenberg who also believed in a Hyperborean-Atlantis-Aryan race from which the Germans came. For instance, Jorg Lanz von Liebenfels, a Cistercian monk who believed that eugenic selection and genocide

¹⁵³ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, “The Nazi Myth,” 308–9.

¹⁵⁴ During this time, I should note, there was a very clear disagreement on how Bailly and Blavatsky’s theories should be taken. Not everyone was as convinced as Rosenberg. Instead, some agreed with Bailly and praised his ideas of a European stock origin civilization, but Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon instead placed them in Tartary, not Atlantis. Jean-Baptiste Delisle de Sales noted the historical and physical existence of Atlantis but disagreed with its location being in the North. And lastly, author Jules Verne made fun of their theories in his *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. Despite those that found faults in Bailly and Blavatsky’s Hyperborean-Atlantis, what matters more is those who took it as fact and used it to fabricate a history best suited for themselves (Edelstein 2006: 274).

¹⁵⁵ Edelstein, “Hyperborean Atlantis- Jean-Sylvain Bailly, Madame Blavatsky, and the Nazis,” 273.

could make the Aryans gods again.¹⁵⁶ He was the founder of the term “Arisophy” (the wisdom of the Aryans which suggested the return of the lost, divine Aryan civilization) and had a similar island to Hyperborea called Arktogää.¹⁵⁷ Herman Wirth called it “Thule,” while Hanns Horbiger stuck to the original name of Atlantis in his World Ice Theory. Blavatsky influenced the occultist Guido von List, the arisoph Karl Georg Zschaetzsch, and Lanz von Liebenfels, who all espoused a racial distinction which led to violence between the Aryans and the Semitic races and an ongoing belief that the Aryans had supernatural and magical powers.¹⁵⁸

These antisemitic targeting ideas were well received after the first World War and fueled the assassination of Jewish political leaders. They were an integral part of the founding ideas for the Nazi party which Baron Rudolf von Sebottendorff first put together through the establishment of the “Thule society” in Munich in 1933.¹⁵⁹ Within this society was the German Workers Party whose leader was Adolf Hitler. Others within this society included Rudolf Hess, Alfred Rosenberg, Dieter Eckart, Hans Frank, Anton Drexler, and Friedrich Krohn who repurposed the emblem of the black swastika.

The head of the Schutzstaffel and the Gestapo police, Heinrich Himmler, also played a major role in the Nazi manipulation of the Atlantis myth. Like the thinkers from the Renaissance and Age of Exploration, Himmler and other members of the Ahnenerbe (Ancestral Heritage) unit carried out expeditions to find the lost island of Atlantis, where they thought the Aryans once had lived. Their destination was in Tibet, based on the logic from the scholar of ancient religion

¹⁵⁶ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, “Lanz von Liebenfels, Jörg,” in *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism* (Brill, 2008).

¹⁵⁷ Paul Ratner, “Why the Nazis Were Obsessed with Finding the Lost City of Atlantis,” *Big Think* (blog), November 26, 2018.

¹⁵⁸ Edelstein, “Hyperborean Atlantis- Jean-Sylvain Bailly, Madame Blavatsky, and the Nazis,” 275–76.

¹⁵⁹ Reginald H. Phelps, “‘Before Hitler Came’: Thule Society and Germanen Orden,” *The Journal of Modern History* 35, no. 3 (1963): 245.

and symbols, Herman Wirth, that if a flood had sunk Atlantis, the Atlanteans would have fled inland as far as they could, leading them to the Himalayas (Figure 3).



Figure 3. The members of the Tibet expedition share a meal with locals under SS pedants and swastika banner. Pictured from left to right: Bruno Beger, Chang Wei-pei Geer, Tsarong Dzasa, Ernst Schäfer; Karl Wienert, Möndro (Möndo). Photo taken by Ernst Krause, 1939.

Once in Tibet, Hitler began to measure people's heads to determine which race they were.¹⁶⁰ They found that these people did indeed descend from Aryans, but that they

¹⁶⁰ "When Nazis Tried to Trace Aryan Race Myth in Tibet," September 14, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-58466528>.

were the product of thousands of years of intermixing and dilution of Aryan blood. Hitler wrote about this in his *Mein Kampf*.

“The Aryan gave up the purity of his blood, and, therefore, lost his sojourn in the paradise which he had made for himself. He became submerged in the racial mixture, and gradually, more and more, lost his cultural capacity, until at last, not only mentally but also physically, he began to resemble the subjected aborigines more than his own ancestors (...) Blood mixture and the resultant drop in the racial level is the sole cause of the dying out of old cultures.”¹⁶¹

“Der Arier gab die Reinheit seines Blutes auf und verlor dafür den Aufenthalt im Paradiese, das er sich selbst geschaffen hatte. Er sank unter in der Rassenvermischung, verlor allmählich immer mehr seine kulturelle Fähigkeit, bis er endlich nicht nur geistig, sondern auch körperlich den Unterworfenen und Ureinwohnern mehr zu gleichen begann als seinen Vorfahren (...) Die Blutsvermischung und das dadurch bedingte Senken des Rassenniveaus ist die alleinige Ursache des Absterbens aller Kulturen”¹⁶²

This concept of the dilution of blood can be traced back to Plato’s *Critias*, particularly when the character Critias described the decline of Atlantis. Their divine blood was fading as the generations continued, their divinity intermixing with their mortality (Pl. *Critias*. 121a). In the same way, Himmler and others believed this dilution of Aryan blood is what led to its ancient

¹⁶¹ Rabinbach and Gilman, *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, 201. Translated by Ralph Manheim, 1943.

¹⁶² Hitler, Adolf, 1943. *Mein Kampf*, 324.

downfall as a race. The intermixing with other races threatened the greatness of the Aryan race from which the Germans came, and thus, it was necessary and justified for the diluted portions to be wiped away.¹⁶³

The Nazi myth and the Atlantis myth converged together at a time when Germany struggled to gain a cohesive group identity. Plato's island had what the growing Nazi party wanted: divinity, power, and control. To Nazis such as Heinrich Himmler, Herman Wirth, and Adolf Hitler, the Atlantis myth fit what they wanted Germany to be. It was their dream, their identity, and thus, became their reality. To many in the Nazi party, Plato represented the paradigm of Greek philosophy; he represented Greek tradition best.¹⁶⁴ Therefore, to obtain as much authority as possible, the Nazis had to find themselves in the *Timaeus* and *Critias* and fit the mold of the great philosopher, so they too could be great. The way in which the Nazis changed our understanding of history has caused some of the most horrific events in human history and has by no means been forgotten.

Atlantis in Modern Day Pseudoscience and Pseudohistory

The lack of any sort of physical evidence that the Nazis failed to include throughout their ruthless and unforgivable theories is the same that pseudoscientists fall victim to. Yet, pseudoscience is defined as more than just a theory that lacks any evidence. Pseudoscience, like Myth can be, is another manipulation tactic meant to target a non-academic audience like the

¹⁶³ "When Nazis Tried to Trace Aryan Race Myth in Tibet."

¹⁶⁴ Mauro Bonazzi, "Towards Nazism: On the Invention of Plato's Political Philosophy," *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 12, no. 3 (September 1, 2020): 13.

public.¹⁶⁵ It is very rarely meant for scholars of a given subject, since they are trained to detect such false information. It is also very different from the theories speculated upon within academic communities. Although these theories, such as string theory within physics, continental drift in geology, or several ancient DNA studies in anthropology, are not labeled as entirely factual, they are extensively studied by those in academics and are thus labeled as unproven.¹⁶⁶ Pseudoscientific ideas are usually too outlandish to be studied and often attract the public eye instead of a scholarly one.¹⁶⁷ This is why it is occultists and esoterics from the past few centuries have done the majority of work regarding a physical and historical compared to actual professors at universities or other research institutions.

Instead, for pseudoscience to spread, it must be given and performed to people who know little about the subject, who need little evidence to believe in it. Why does it have such a hold over the public? Because it is written to capture their eye, invoke suspicion, and to entertain. Pseudoscience also appeals to the ego of the non-specialist, creating a false confidence that they know something that academics do not. Moreover, when something about the past is unclear and nuanced, pseudoscience tends to fill in the gaps. Humans have an innate desire for concrete answers and when this is not possible, especially for subjects like ancient history, people will create theories no matter how preposterous just so that they have an answer to hold on to. The

¹⁶⁵ Garrett G. Fagan, ed., *Archaeological Fantasies: How Pseudoarchaeology Misrepresents the Past and Misleads the Public* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 49.

¹⁶⁶ Fagan, 50.

¹⁶⁷ This is not to condemn the public in any way. It is merely to say that if one does not intensely study a certain subject like scholars do, they are more likely to fall victim to pseudoscientific theories relating to it. It is not their fault, but rather, the unfortunate result of the spread of false information. Before writing this thesis on Atlantis, I, like the other 56% of Americans, had hope in a lost civilization like Atlantis. Who was I to say that one like it could not exist? I was not a researcher, scholar, or expert about Plato or Atlantis, and the moment that I became one, I realized how much fiction is being spread about it and how much danger pseudoscience really has over a population. The public is not to be blamed, but the pseudoscientists. One would only need to look back two pages to see how pseudoscience can persuade a population for the worst.

late Garrett Fagan, having taught courses on pseudoarcheology at Penn State, was a great inspiration to me throughout my research on this topic. He created the table in Figure 4 to help distinguish between information which is biased and that which is not.¹⁶⁸ Pseudoscientists, instead of following the structure and language of List 2 like scholars do, craft their narratives based on the first list which is why their theories are often more readable and attractive to the eye and imagination. They form what they call “fact” as a mystical-sounding piece of work to draw people into believing what science tells us is untrue.

<i>List one</i>	<i>List two</i>
Political manifesto	Train timetable
Classical novel	Cooking recipe
Science fiction	Machinery assembly instructions
Poetry	Scientific textbook
Popular love song	Safety drill instructions
Religious sermon	Road map
Joke	Identity documents
Philosophical argument	Mathematical tables
Autobiography	Chemical formula
Art criticism	Dials and instruments on a machine
Theatrical play	Telephone directory
Advertising slogan	Training manuals
Fairy stories	Dates of major events
Advice from a friend	Two-language dictionary
Journalistic feature	Patent register
Detective thriller	Police forensic record

Figure 4. Fagan’s “Contrasting logical classes of information.”

One of the most popular pseudoscientists today, one who strongly influenced my decision to write on Atlantis and its bizarre receptions, is Graham Hancock. Graham Hancock is a British

¹⁶⁸ Fagan, *Archaeological Fantasies*, 53.

journalist now in his mid-70s best known for his many books and “research” into a lost civilization. Some of his books have suggestive titles such as: *The Sign and the Seal: The Quest for the Lost Ark of the Covenant* (1992), *Fingerprints of the Gods: The Evidence of Earth’s Lost Civilization* (1995), *Magicians of the Gods: The Forgotten Wisdom of Earth’s Lost Civilization* (2015), and *America Before: The Key to Earth’s Lost Civilization* (2019). Hancock has also appeared on many documentaries before starring in his own Netflix documentary in 2022 titled *Ancient Apocalypse* (Figure 5).¹⁶⁹ Although Hancock addresses his knowledge of many different branches of science in his work such as geology and astronomy, it is his false perspective of history that I would like to point out. Pseudoscience and pseudohistory, as the scholar of science education Douglas Allchin notes, have “fragmentary accounts of real historical events that omit context which can mislead, even while purporting to show how science works.”¹⁷⁰ Hancock, just as Ignatius Donnelly before, illustrates these fragmentary accounts in his books and other media platforms where he presents an elaborate and questionable form of an alternate history. In fact, Hancock built his career by recycling Donnelly’s ideas about prehistoric Atlantis.

Both Donnelly and Hancock have worked with information that was well-known to both the general public and to academics, such as the history of civilizations. Yet, these two infamous men both twisted history into something that is beyond reality, romanticized, and simply untrue. Because of their platforms (Donnelly, politics; Hancock, the media), they can get away with such atrocities and gain followers.

¹⁶⁹ “Netflix Series *Ancient Apocalypse*: All You Need to Know about Presenter Graham Hancock,” *The Economic Times*, November 12, 2022.

¹⁷⁰ Douglas Allchin, “Pseudoscience and Pseudohistory,” *Science and Education*, May 12, 2008, 186.

Much like Donnelly, Hancock's main claims, as laid out by Kenneth Feder who reviewed his book *Fingerprints of the Gods: The Evidence of Earth's Lost Civilization*, relate to a prehistoric technologically advanced civilization having existed around 15,000 years ago. This was a civilization equipped with special knowledge of architecture, engineering, mathematics, astronomy, and agriculture and spread this information all over the globe to the indigenous people from Egypt, India, Mexico, and Peru. This prehistoric civilization, which Hancock claims were the Atlanteans, are the gods that we read about in the creation stories and mythologies of the ancient world.

However, at the end of the last ice age, around 12,000 years ago, a catastrophic event instantaneously destroyed the civilization by floods and fire, and this explains why there is no concrete evidence of them to study today.

Hancock places the home of the Atlanteans in Antarctica while also having an extreme global presence. Many of the wonders associated with the ancient world such as the pyramids in Egypt and Mesoamerica, the Mayan calendar, or the invention of agriculture and writing, are all thanks to this prehistoric civilization which bestowed these gifts to later people. And lastly, Hancock envisions this ancient civilization and the gods they became as being white, such as the case was for the Aztec deity Quetzalcoatl.¹⁷¹ From Bailly and Blavatsky, Donnelly and the Nazis, to now Hancock, this theme of white supremacy continues alongside the Atlantis myth in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

¹⁷¹ "Fingerprints of the Gods - Graham Hancock Official Website," accessed March 16, 2024, <https://grahamhancock.com/fingerprints/>; Kenneth L. Feder, "Fingerprints of the Gods: The Evidence of Earth's Lost Civilization. Graham Hancock. 1995. Three Rivers Press, New York. 592 Pp. \$19.95 (Paperback), ISBN: 978-0-517-88729-5.," *American Antiquity* 80, no. 3 (July 2015): 618.

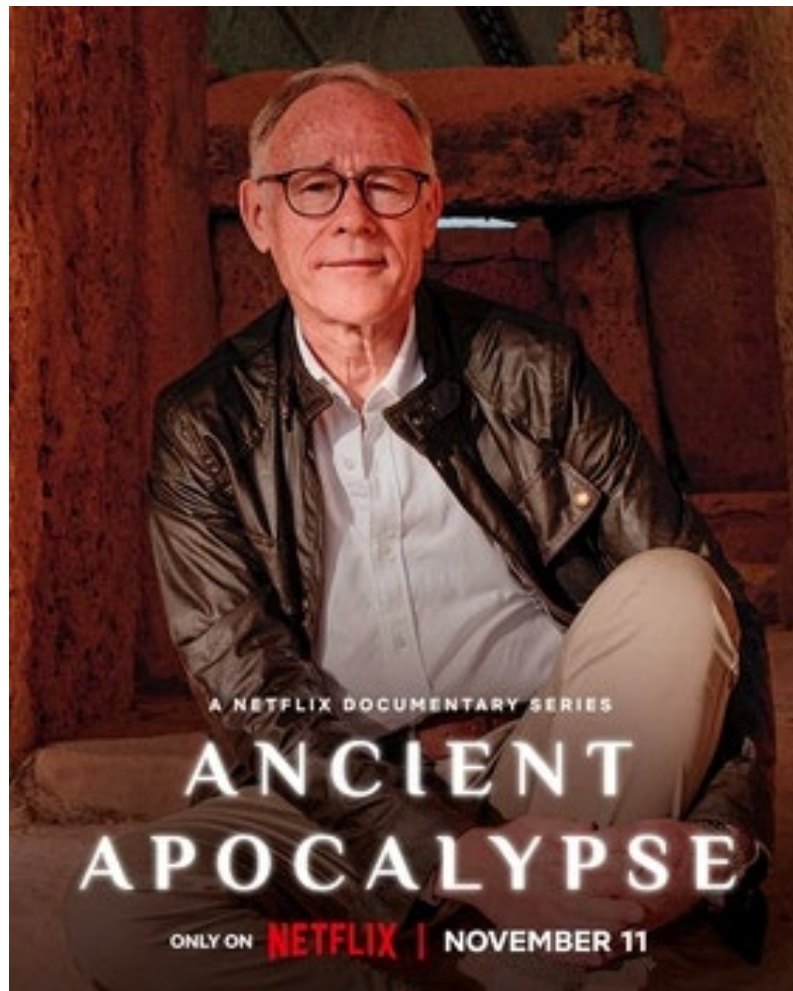


Figure 5. A promotional poster of Hancock's new Netflix show.

Theories like Hancock's are coated in glamor and may seem like a harmless view of history. Hancock lays out answers to many of history's mysteries which may act as a sort of comfort to the public compared to the complex and often open-ended truth. Alongside comfort, his theories may also be a source of pride. They give the audience a feeling that they understand something that most academics do not. Hancock's theories are indeed alluring, yet also pose a threat. In their nature, Hancock's views devalue indigenous heritage and steal away

achievements from non-white civilizations.¹⁷² Racism is at the core of such theories. For example, on page 162 of his *Fingerprints of the Gods*, Hancock writes in relation to the Mayan calendar, “there was precious little else that these jungle-dwelling Indians did which suggested they might have had the capacity (or the need) to conceive of really long periods of time.”¹⁷³ Having no sort of credentials in archaeology or anthropology, Hancock has no right to make disturbing statements such as these, yet since these people were “jungle-dwelling Indians,” they must not have had the capacity to have come up with an intellectual calendar system. Thus, Hancock takes the invention of their calendar away from them and places it into the hands of his prehistoric, white Atlanteans.

The other harm that Hancock causes is to the archeological and scholarly community. Hancock and other pseudo historians often brag about how untrusted they are by the academic community. Hancock often views himself as the victim of mainstream archeology, claiming that he is “enemy number one” to traditional archaeologists.¹⁷⁴ The effect of this rhetoric is to position Hancock as someone who needs to be sympathized for in the eyes of the audience. This creates a divide that is evident to anyone who reads a book of Hancock’s or watches his new documentary series. There is a dichotomy between Hancock and those who think outside of the box versus traditional academia and scholars who have devoted their careers to conducting actual, peer-reviewed, scientifically-backed-up research. He has been actively pushing people away from the “so-called experts,” as he puts, saying that they are hiding things from the public. For anyone who finds this theory of Hancock’s attractive (56% of Americans

¹⁷² Marlaina Martin, “The Dangers of Ancient Apocalypse’s Pseudoscience,” *Sapiens*, December 6, 2022.

¹⁷³ Feder, “Fingerprints of the Gods,” 618.

¹⁷⁴ *Ancient Apocalypse* 2022: Episode 1, 2:56

according to the *Survey of American Fears*), they are also learning to dismiss known science compared to performance pieces on the ancient past which are selective in evidence and mostly unscientific.¹⁷⁵

However, as I myself once thought, the way in which Hancock presents his theories is fascinating and against the grain. They are untraditional and challenge the things that are accepted in our society. This can feel quite freeing to the human mind: that what we have always known as true may in fact be the opposite. History may be a whole lot simpler than we thought. Yet, since there is no way to physically transport ourselves back into the past to see with our own eyes how things were, there will be biases present in our interpretations and retellings of it. For example, if Hancock claims that the most powerful people to ever exist, the ones that created culture and passed it forth to other people, were white, then his theory may be more attractive for white people. If a theory benefits a certain group of people, it will be harder for them to take a step back and realize the harm that theory is doing. That is the case with Hancock's position on the prehistoric world and his use of Atlantis. Most people who support it may not know how his views correlate with that of the Nazis, Donnelly, and the true amount of danger that has arisen from pseudoscience.

Archeology, being a science, is built from the scientific method and able to change its conclusions when enough contrary evidence becomes available. Pseudoarchaeology ignores the scientific method completely, never leaving the hypothesis stage, forever remaining in the realm of conspiracy. Marlaina Martin concludes in her article on the harmful effects of Hancock's ideas, "Netflix labels *Ancient Apocalypse* a docuseries. IMDB calls it a documentary. It's

¹⁷⁵ Lizzie Wade, "Believe in Atlantis? These Archaeologists Want to Win You Back to Science," *Science*, April 9, 2019.

neither. It's an eight-part conspiracy theory that weaponizes dramatic rhetoric against scholars."¹⁷⁶

Atlantis in Popular Culture

Authors have always been inspired by the Atlantis story since ancient times. After all, it is an entertaining story despite how people have interpreted and used it for harm. In fact, the Atlantis myth helped to introduce a new genre in literature and film: science fiction, a genre that grew during the 19th century. "To the novelists, Atlantis has been a gift of the gods, and recently, the lost continent has become, like the other planets and the remote future, a standing setting for stories of the science-fiction genre," the American author L. Sprague de Camp wrote.¹⁷⁷ Jules Verne, known as the "father of science-fiction" was one of the first to develop the sunken Atlantis myth into his own modern story - *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, published in 1870 (Figure 6). Within this story, we follow Professor Pierre Aronnax and master harpooner Ned Land on a deep-sea expedition to find a mysterious, giant sea monster. The men come to realize that what they supposed was a sea monster was actually a submarine. We meet Captain Nemo and his crew here and learn that Nemo has escaped the threat of an imperial power. Eventually, after weaving their way through sea monsters and volcanos, the men come across the ruins of Atlantis, identified by its name etched into a nearby stone.

¹⁷⁶ Martin, "The Dangers of Ancient Apocalypse's Pseudoscience."

¹⁷⁷ L. Sprague De Camp, *Lost Continents: The Atlantis Theme in History, Science, and Literature* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), 266.

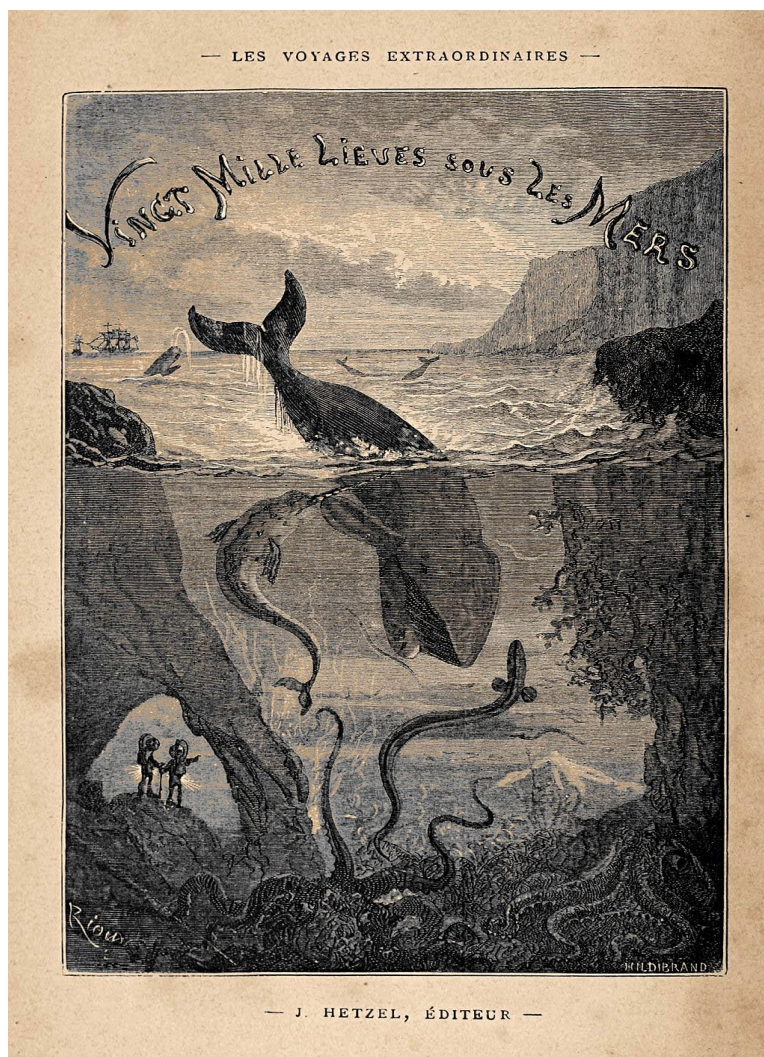


Figure 6. An illustration by J. Hetzel in 1871, found in the Houghton Library, Harvard University

With this re-discovery, Aronnax reveals his astonishment at what the three of them have just found buried underneath the sea and tells Captain Nemo what he knows about what now lays before them. He exclaims:

“Atlantis the ancient Meropis of Theopompus, the Atlantis of Plato, that continent denied by Origen Porphyry, Jamblichus, D’Anville, Malte-Brun,

and Humbolt, who placed its disappearance amongst the legendary tales admitted by Posidonius, Pliny, Ammaianus, Marcellinus, Tertullian, Engel, Shere, Tounefort, Buffon, and D'Aveac. I had it there before my eyes, bearing upon it the unexceptionable testimony of its catastrophe. The region thus engulfed was beyond Europe, Asia, and Libya, beyond the Columns of Hercules, where those powerful people, the Atlantides, lived, against whom the first wars of ancient Greece were waged.”¹⁷⁸

Aronnax is very familiar with Atlantis and its story found in Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias*. He is also well-versed in its historical reception, as he mentions figures from Chapter 1 such as Theopompus, Origen, Posidonius, Pliny, and Ammaianus. Later, he also tells Nemo how Jean Sylvain Bailly located the island in the Arctic and was thus wrong in his placement. It also seems that Verne was familiar with the Debris Theory referenced in Chapter 2, since his character Aronnax says, “...a single night and day were enough to obliterate this Atlantis, whose highest peaks (Madeira, the Azores, the Canaries, the Cape Verde Islands) still emerge above the waves.”¹⁷⁹ In these ways, Jules Verne used Atlantis to help create an underwater adventure for his characters. He placed the island within the same sphere as giant squids and advanced maritime technology. More than its setting, Verne may have also used Atlantis in order to tell another story about an underdog and imperial nation, such as that of Ur-Athens and Atlantis. It is known that when Verne first drafted his novel, he made Captain Nemo a Polish man whose

¹⁷⁸ Jules Verne and Emanuel J. Mickel, *The Complete Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea: A New Translation of Jules Verne's Science Fiction Classic*, Visions (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 305.

¹⁷⁹ Verne and Mickel, 306.

family was killed, and home destroyed by the Russian tyranny. It was a move meant to reference the Polish January Uprising of 1863; however, his publisher discouraged him from doing so.¹⁸⁰ Perhaps his inclusion of Atlantis was still meant to remind us how great imperial powers will someday be destroyed.

The creator of the Sherlock Holmes franchise, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle also wrote a very similar story to Verne's in 1929 called *The Maracot Deep* which featured the narrator and researcher Cyrus Headley, Professor Maracot, and his crew journeying to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean to find the lost city of Atlantis waiting for them. Maracot was on a mission to explore one of the deepest trenches in Atlantis when a giant lobster violently sent their submarine to the bottom of the trench where the Atlanteans rescued them. The professor learns of how the Atlanteans adapted to life under the water. For instance, they wear plastic suits which allow them to breathe underwater and use atomic energy to help them keep a functioning city. Doyle's Atlanteans also had technology that allowed them to read each other's minds to communicate and show the crew images of what their civilization was like 8,000 years ago.¹⁸¹ Headley was shown the moments during the flood that swallowed up Atlantis. A demon called Baal-Seepa (most likely correlated with the Phoenician god, Baal) caused this massive destruction, yet the Noah-figure, Warda, built a submarine that would carry the surviving Atlanteans to their new home under the water. At the end of the novel, Baal-Seepa returns, and the spirit of Warda possesses Professor Maracot, rupturing into an epic battle of good and evil. Maracot/Warda defeats the demon and the story has a happy ending.

¹⁸⁰ Margaret Drabble, "Submarine Dreams: Jules Verne's Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas," *New Statesman* (blog), May 8, 2014.

¹⁸¹ Everett Franklin Bleiler, *Science-Fiction, the Early Years: A Full Description of More Than 3,000 Science-Fiction Stories from Earliest Times to the Appearance of the Genre Magazines in 1930: With Author, Title, and Motif Indexes* (Kent State University Press, 1990), 206–7.

The Maracot Deep was not one of Doyle's best works, de Camp believed. He claimed it was a piece of spiritual propaganda, and likewise, American editor and scholar Everett Bleiler called it a work that combined supernaturalism with science fiction.¹⁸² Doyle experimented with an underwater, technological city of Atlantis mixed with references of good and evil from Genesis. He also experimented with the boundaries of the science-fiction genre. Doyle intertwined a mythical, made-up place with an initial scientific mission. He portrays the Atlanteans as splitting atoms. In both examples, he put recent scientific discoveries within the same story of a controversial ancient civilization and gigantic sea monsters. Often science-fiction novels have a sort of didactic motive behind them.¹⁸³ Perhaps part of Doyle's teaching through this novel is to stress that the ocean is a very unknown part of science; anything could be down in the deepest trench. From this, he created a science-fiction adventure novel, that unfortunately could not outshine his detective Holmes. Aside from novels, Atlantis was also popular in films. The first movie about Atlantis was a silent film made in 1921 based on an earlier novel by Pierre Benoit, both called *L'Atlantide*. In this movie, the main character falls in love with the queen of Atlantis. This same movie was translated into both German and English and was retitled *The Siren of Atlantis* in English.¹⁸⁴ In 1936, the twelve-part series, *Undersea Kingdom*, featured an evil warlord and high priest of Atlantis, along with the gods and insane weapons of destruction (Figure 7).¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² Bleiler, 206; De Camp, *Lost Continents*, 284.

¹⁸³ Paul Chapman and Mark Jones, "Doings of Doyle," 2022.

¹⁸⁴ Ellis, *Imagining Atlantis*, 214–15.

¹⁸⁵ Ellis, 218.

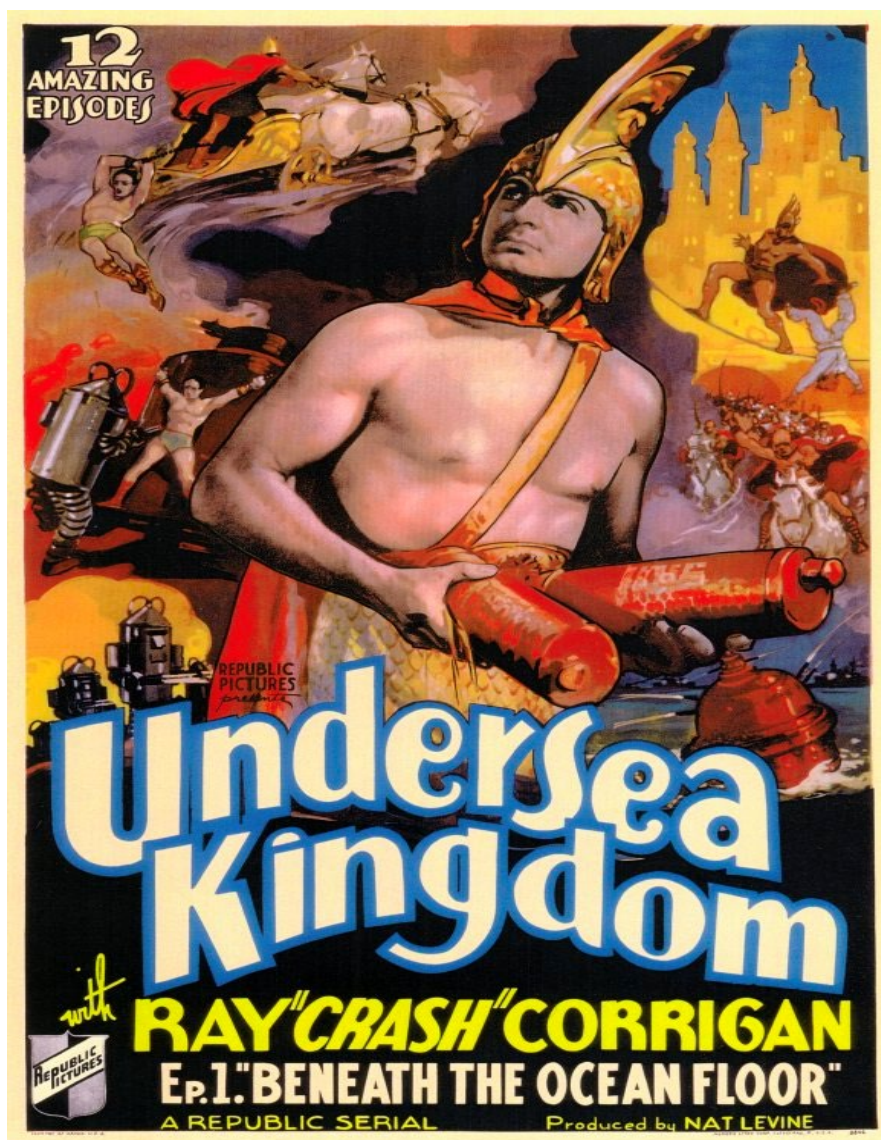


Figure 7. The original poster for *Undersea Kingdom*.

Atlantis in film continued all the way into present day and is represented in Disney, DC Comics, and Marvel. In 1941, DC Comics introduced Aquaman in the comic *King of the Seven Seas*. Aquaman himself is a descendant of the ancient Atlantis and ruler of the “modern” Atlantis with people who can breathe underwater, communicate with sea creatures, and who have

constructed a lively city underneath the waves. In 2018, Warner Brothers and DC created a movie named after the hero, along with *Aquaman: King of Atlantis* (2021) and *Aquaman and the Lost City* (2023).¹⁸⁶ Around the same time as Aquaman in the comics, Marvel introduced Namor in the *Submariner*, and like Aquaman, Namor is the ruler of Atlantis (Figure 8).

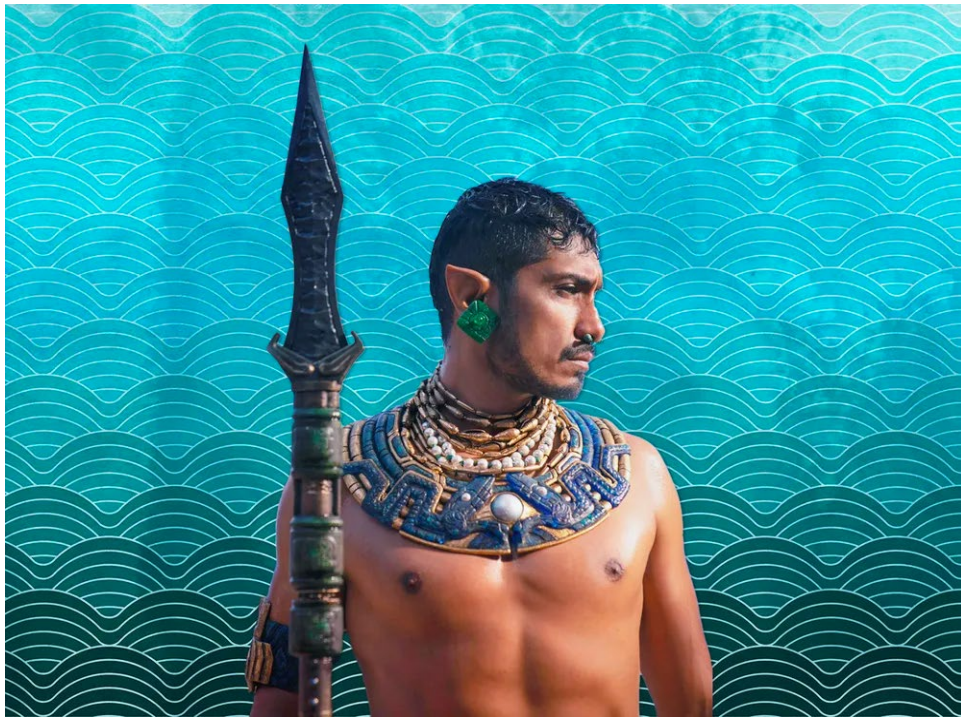


Figure 8. Marvel's depiction of Namor in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*.

In the comics, Namor was the offspring of an Atlantean princess and a human. However, in the 2022 Marvel movie *Wakanda Forever*, Namor is the ruler of an underwater kingdom named Talokan, not Atlantis. The similarities between the two kingdoms are obvious, but the writers of this new film wanted to draw not from an ancient Greek source, but a Mesoamerican

¹⁸⁶ David S. Anderson, "Aquaman's Atlantis - Truth, Fiction, Or Something In Between?," *Forbes*, 2018.

one instead, incorporating many details from both Mayan and Aztec culture. Mesoamerican archaeologist and historian Kurly Tlapoyawa and director Ryan Coogler were aware of the link between Atlantis and white supremacy (how assumingly white Atlanteans gave knowledge to Mesoamerican cultures), and they wanted to frame this movie in a different light and tell a different story, one where the main hero was non-white and as powerful as any Atlantean.¹⁸⁷

Disney also imagined an Atlantis of their own in the 2001 movie *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*, which is colloquial *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* in an animated film. Much of Disney's inspiration seemed to have come from Jules Verne's and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's novels with their depictions of sea monsters and technological people underneath the deep sea. Disney's *The Little Mermaid* was also written with Atlantis in mind - its underwater city of mermaids was named Atlantica after it, but the story itself does not suggest other similarities beyond this.¹⁸⁸

Atlantis in literature and film played an important part in the development of science fiction; it brought about great adventures and heroes of the cinematic universe. Because of science fiction (and the similar way that pseudoscience is made into a science fiction), Plato's Atlantis has become widely known to a general audience. Children watch *The Little Mermaid*, adults, *Wakanda Forever*, and the older generations probably have memories of the comedic underwater adventures of the *Undersea Kingdom*. Movies themselves have kept the Atlantis story alive in each generation. Does this cultural continuation of the story represent a danger, similar to that of the Nazis and pseudoscience? Does it marvel at Atlantis or mock it? My

¹⁸⁷ Nili Blanck, "The Mesoamerican Influences Behind Namor From 'Black Panther: Wakanda Forever,'" Smithsonian Magazine, 2022.

¹⁸⁸ Roger Ebert, "Atlantis: The Lost Empire Movie Review (2001).

response favors both sides. There is an obvious motive of manipulation and destruction that both Nazis and pseudoscientists had when they used the Atlantis story. Movies and literature, though, like Plato thousands of years ago, above all, seek entertainment, laughter, adventure, and wonder. There is no immediate sense of danger or harm because they are written in different genres and used for different purposes compared with that of the Nazis and pseudoscience. This is not to say that these novels and films do not attempt to persuade their audiences of some message. Art most often tries to tell us something, however, the main message in this case does not seem to exhibit intentional harm. However, since they do romanticize Atlantis the same way pseudoscience does, in such a way that 56% of Americans believe in something like Atlantis having existed, one can argue that literature and movies do add to the growing belief in the harmful mechanism of pseudoscience, although the role that movies played in this percentage is unknown.¹⁸⁹

All these science-fiction stories and movies show us the enduring power of Plato's original myth, but they also show us how elastic and malleable the myth is. It can entertain, it can cause suspicion and wonder, it can kill. People have used Atlantis to do all these things, bending Plato's words, adding onto his original story of a lost island. The Nazis latched onto this story because they saw in it ideas that could be adapted to their own ideology, and this is one of the causes of the tragic events of the holocaust that cannot be undone, not because of Plato's Atlantis, but because of the Nazi's Atlantis: how they interpreted and used the myth. It is important for people to recognize how lasting and authoritative myths can be so that when they encounter myths, they can learn to think critically about them. There is power in Myth because

¹⁸⁹ Wade, "Believe in Atlantis?"

they can be co-opted for various purposes, some which can be dangerous and manipulative. Pseudoscience plagues the media today because it presents science fiction but claims it to be fact with no sort of evidence to back up that claim. It discounts scholarly work and encourages the public to distrust actual science. Pseudoscientists like Graham Hancock feature their “science” on podcasts and Netflix shows instead of peer-reviewed books and papers since their main audience is not other scientists, but those who are not as familiar with such topics, so they are easier to win over. Often, such science promotes racism that the reader is unaware of because of the glitz and glam on top. Learning how to identify pseudoscience is the first step to counteract that initial attraction to it. And lastly, the literature and movies depicting Atlantis, though possibly igniting curiosity about a real, physical Atlantis, can also show just how fantastical Plato’s story is, and encourage them to read more of what Plato wrote. These stories can be a gateway into the even more fantastic universe of ancient literature.

Conclusion – The Lore of Atlantis

Since Plato’s creation of Atlantis in the fourth-century BCE, there has not been a consensus on how to interpret the story. Is the story fact or fiction? Does it speak of an advanced

ancient past whose ancestral line still remains or did the Atlanteans die at the abrupt end of the *Critias*? What is Atlantis? I have come to learn that the answers to these questions are not what really matter. Instead, these queries represent the lore of Atlantis, and will forever be debated, since legitimate science has not shown any physical evidence for what Plato wrote about Atlantis, despite what the pseudoscientists say. The island of Atlantis only exists in modern conspiracy theories and ancient philosophy dialogues. What does matter is how ancient and modern readers have interpreted this myth and have learned to manipulate others with it. Myths hold power, and we must think carefully about how we want to use this power.

Although not as explored within an ancient context, ever since the rise of colonization, people have used the Atlantis myth in a particularly harmful way as Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 have shown. During these times, the abusers twisted Plato's words and used them to enforce ideas such as racism which have caused irreversible events like genocide and colonization and the spread of false information. *That* is how powerful the Atlantis story is when put in the wrong hands. My question now becomes: how can we get Atlantis back; how can we do better with it?

I think the first step in thinking how to use myths more thoughtfully is to acknowledge how they have been used destructively in the past and to analyze how one's own thinking relates to the darker side of myths. In my own case, before writing this thesis I really saw no harm in the popular, pseudoscientific understanding of the story of Atlantis, mainly because I did not know how to do proper research to understand it. I was only reading the story from a pseudoscientific point of view because that was widely available over social media and what was accessible to me. Once I did begin to read the Atlantis story directly from its sources, I was able to separate what Plato wrote and what others had added later. I found that it was not the myth itself that was problematic, but the way that people used it. This revelation took months for me to figure out,

since I had always been more familiar with what was online about Atlantis than what was written by Plato himself. I even took the time to read some of the original Greek, to really make sure that Plato himself was not referencing alien-technology or the first ever civilization in the world that would go on to create all the others. This is what people have come to believe, but not because of Plato. Instead, these details later added on the myth in order to make it better suited for their needs and pursuits. All Plato did was create the story and provide the authority behind it. From then on, people have shaped it for their own ends. Once we are aware of the evil add-ons to the myth, the next step is to separate ourselves from pseudoscientific sources and to rely mainly on primary sources and scholarly tools.

Throughout the thousands of years of Atlantis's reception, almost all the people who latched on to the myth and used it for themselves had one thing in common: they connected themselves or imagined themselves as similar to the Atlantean empire. After reading Plato's dialogue on the story, this has surprised me, since Atlantis is not the hero of the story. Yes, it was a powerful city, but it was one that became corrupt overtime. It was not the model for an ideal city (such as the one that Socrates discussed in the *Republic*). Instead, the hero was Ur-Athens, the city *opposing* Atlantis, that represented the ideal city because it was a just and courageous city, though small. And most significantly, when no one else could, as an underdog, small Athens went to war with Atlantis and won, before catastrophe ruined them both. Why then have people focused mainly on Atlantis? Why connect themselves to Atlantis instead of early Athens? Did the power and initial glory of Atlantis override its villainy? Indeed, many people today know more about Atlantis as a hidden underwater city than they do about Atlantis, loser to ancient Athens. They know more about what pseudoscientists have written than Plato himself, and this is an issue.

For me, it was not until college that I fully learned the harm that discreditable sources can cause. Especially because the internet and social media are accessible to every single college student, there are many ways that false information can spread. This is where the importance of a liberal arts education became very clear to me. If I had not had direct access to Plato or a broader knowledge of how myth works, I would still be susceptible to the conspiracy theorists on YouTube. If I had not known how to dissect an ancient work and examine its potential meanings as I do now, I would have understood the Atlantis myth as fact rather than a political allegory, like many do indeed do. By working on this thesis, not only have I learned so much about Atlantis and how it has been received in the past two thousand years, but more importantly, I have learned how beneficial it is to speculate upon a myth, to analyze how it has power, and to reveal how it can be used to create unimaginable dangers, all thanks to the liberal arts education that has helped me to ask the right questions.

Another way to rescue the Atlantis myth from its dangerous reception is to harness its power for a different message, one that is rooted in what Plato actually wrote and stays within the historical context of the story. Many academics see a link between Plato's ideas and the political climate of the fifth century BCE, and it is possible that the Atlantis myth is a way of discussing the Greco-Persian wars. Other scholars understand the myth as a way of discussing Mycenaean culture overtaking Minoan culture; it is also possible that the cataclysm at the end of the myth references the Thera eruption toward the end of the Late Bronze Age. Or perhaps Plato's message within the fall of Atlantis and rise of Athens is more relatable to us than an ancient war and sinking of an island. The Atlantis myth has lasted so long not only because of its historical reception, but also because it contains themes that relate to each generation, such as the longing for a better past compared to what we have now.

The idea that things were better in the past is rooted within Plato's dialogues. That is the precise reason why the character Critias tells this story that he once heard from his grandfather: to tell of an ideal city that was formerly a reality. There once was a golden age that no longer exists, but one we long to return to, so how can we regain prosperity as it once was? This mindset is still intact today. One example of this is the current political slogan, "Make America Great Again." This presents the idea that America was once great but is not anymore, yet it can return to greatness by electing a certain candidate or enacting certain legislation. This same way of thinking about the current world as worse than the previous one has been used repeatedly throughout history to create a vision of utopia, a better, more perfect world that existed in the past. Studying the Atlantis story can lead to more research on how ancient myths are used to create these utopias, and how this process is not always just and ethical.

Plato's tale of Atlantis is packed into two entertaining dialogues and reveals his political and philosophical ideas. He told of a lost past that later people continuously held onto. His story has remained vivid and interesting to generations of thinkers despite being over two-thousand years old. And I believe that it will continue to teach us about the everlasting influence the power of Myth has.

Appendix A

The Timeline of the Reception of Atlantis

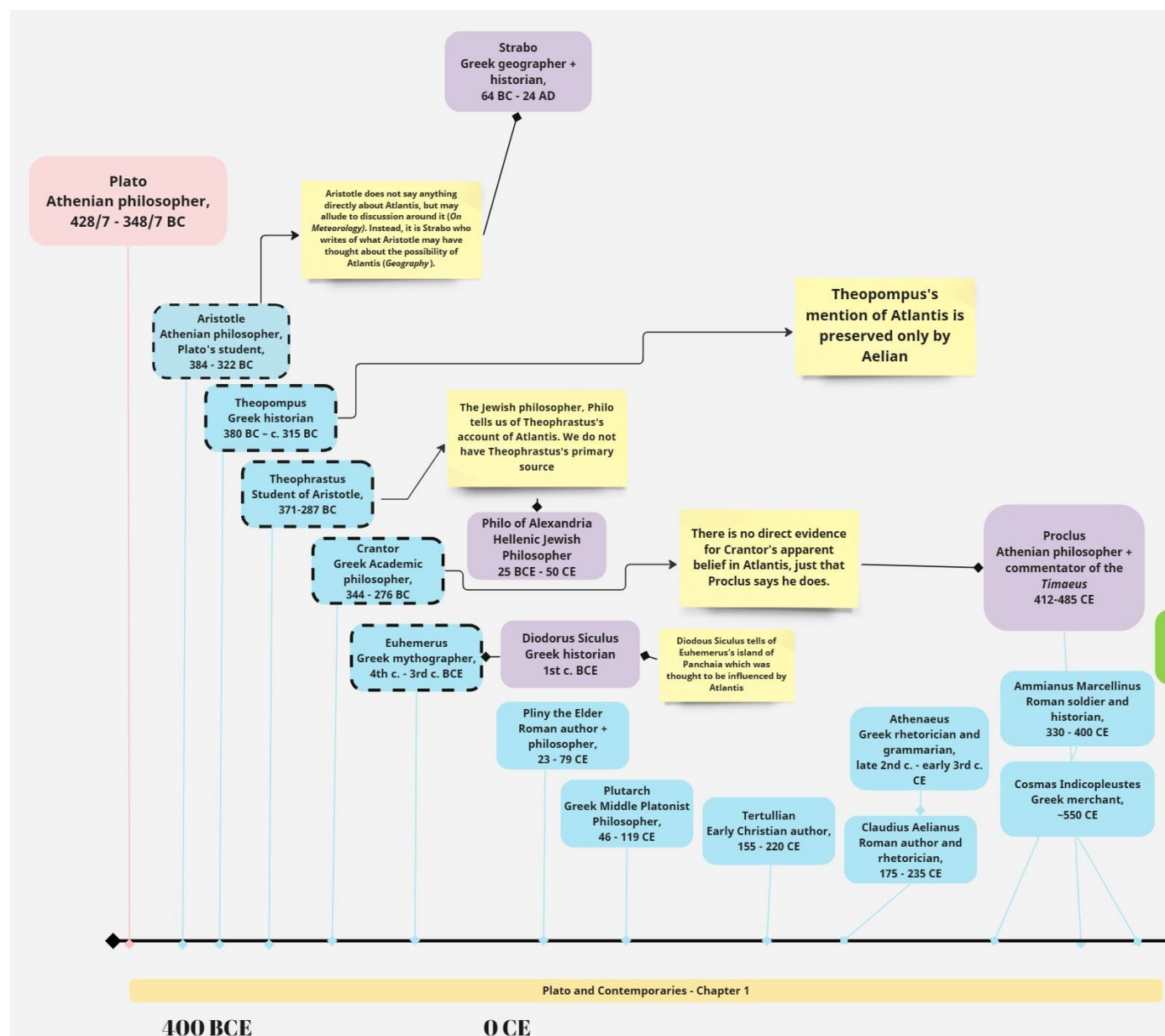


Figure 9. Ancient authors from Chapter 1 starting directly after Plato until Cosmas Indicopleustes.

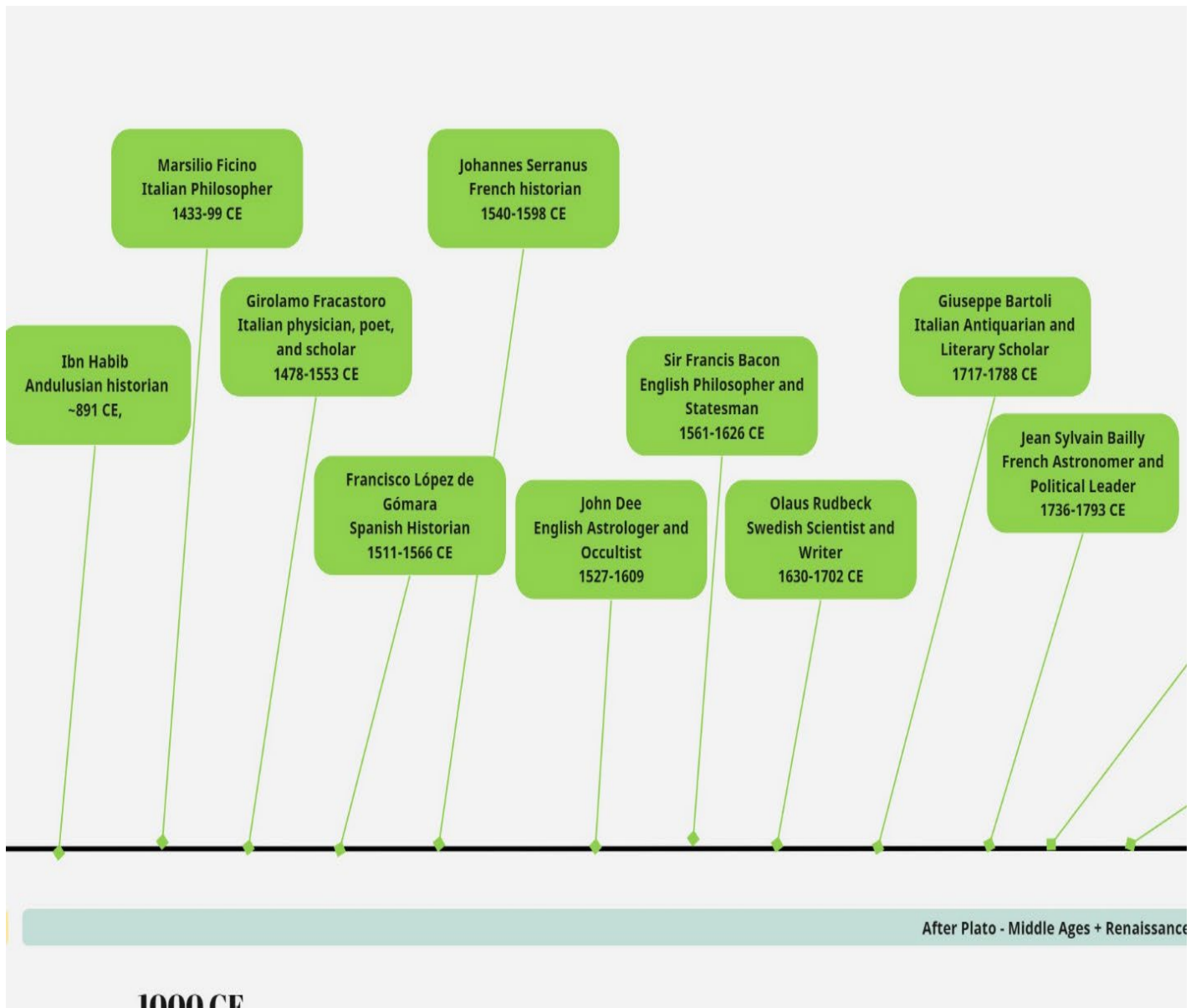


Figure 10. The first half of the authors of the Middle Ages/Renaissance in Chapter 2.

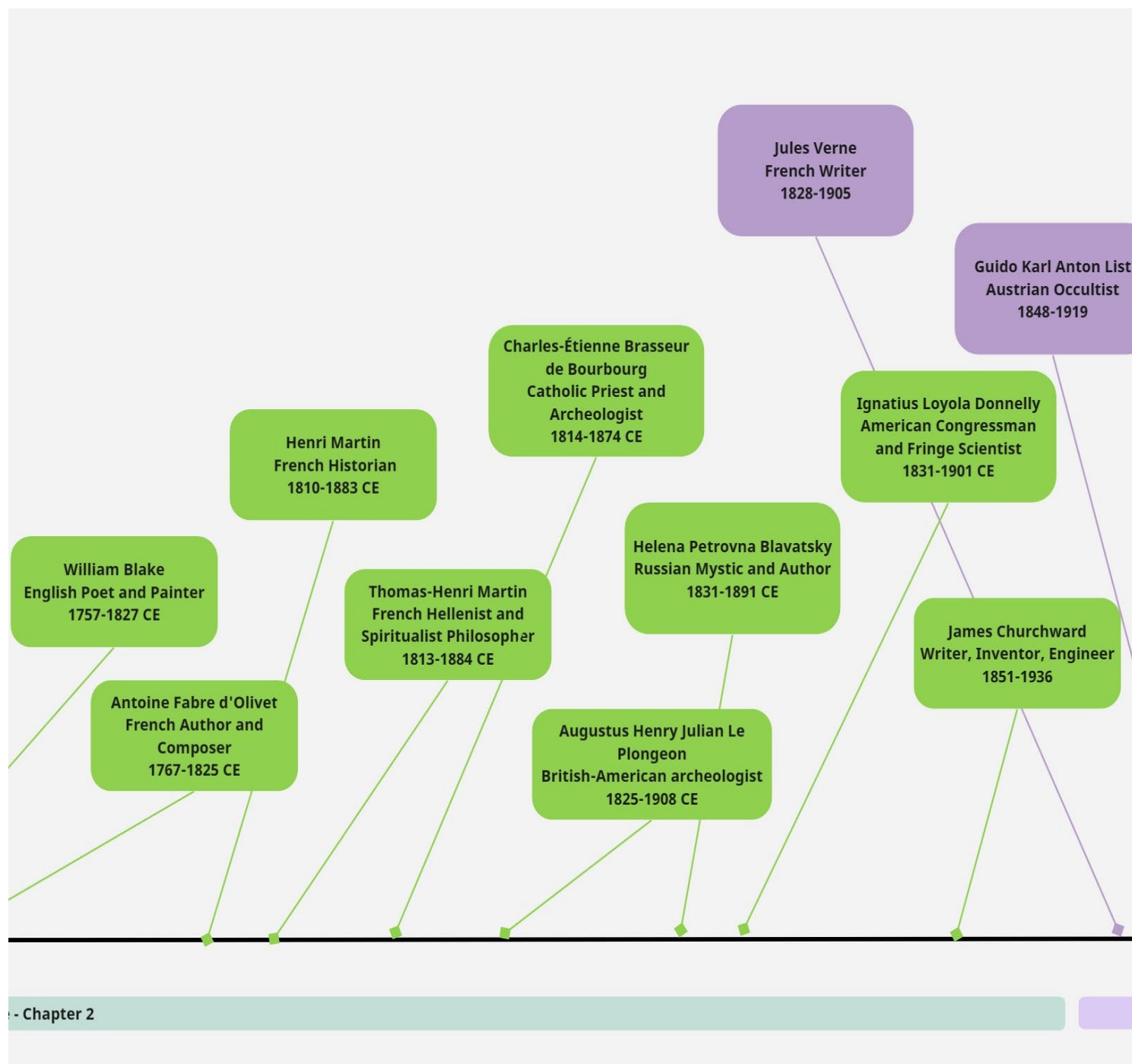


Figure 11. The second half of authors from the Renaissance up to the late 1800s from Chapter 2.

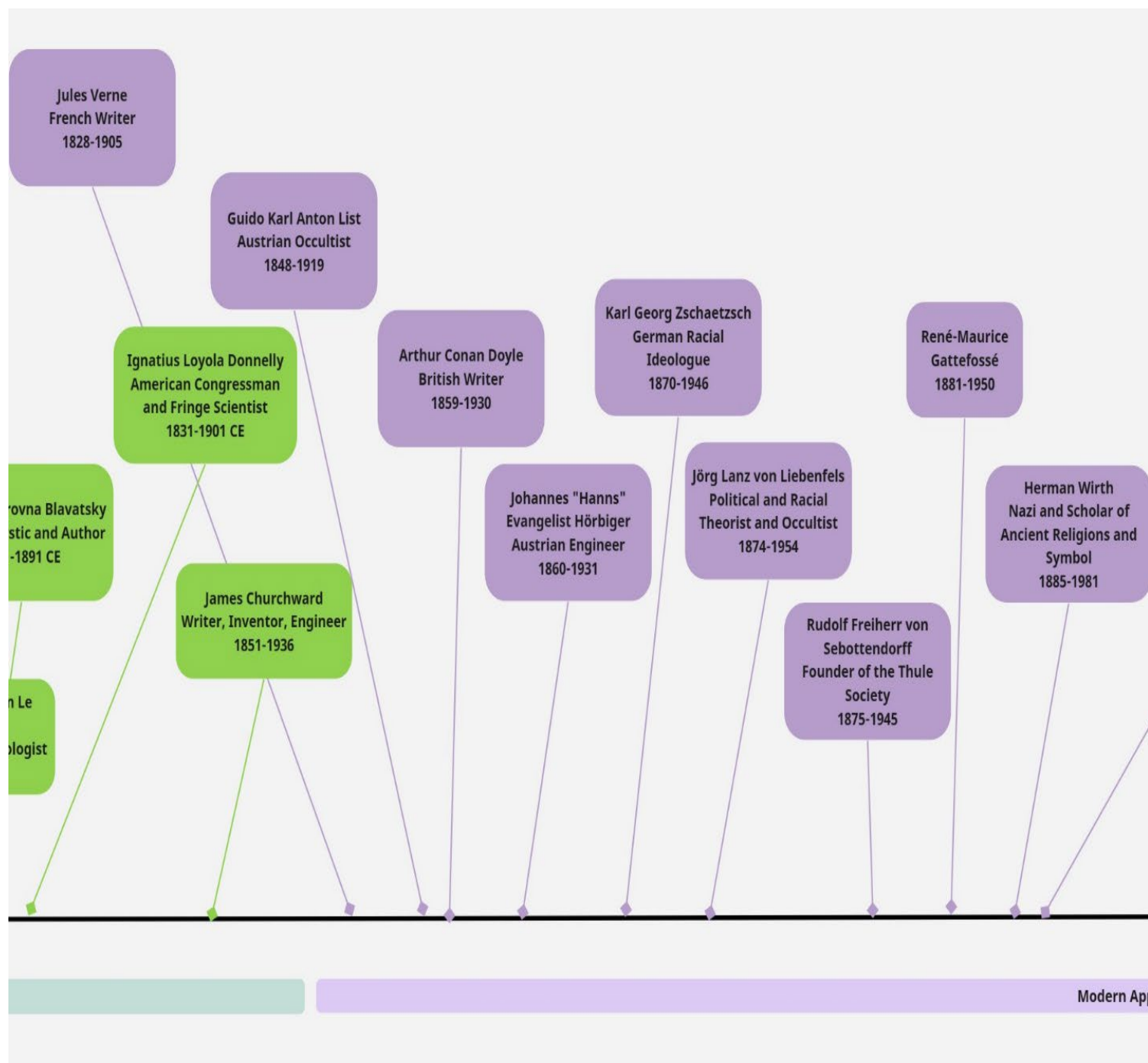


Figure 12. The first half of modern authors from Chapter 3.

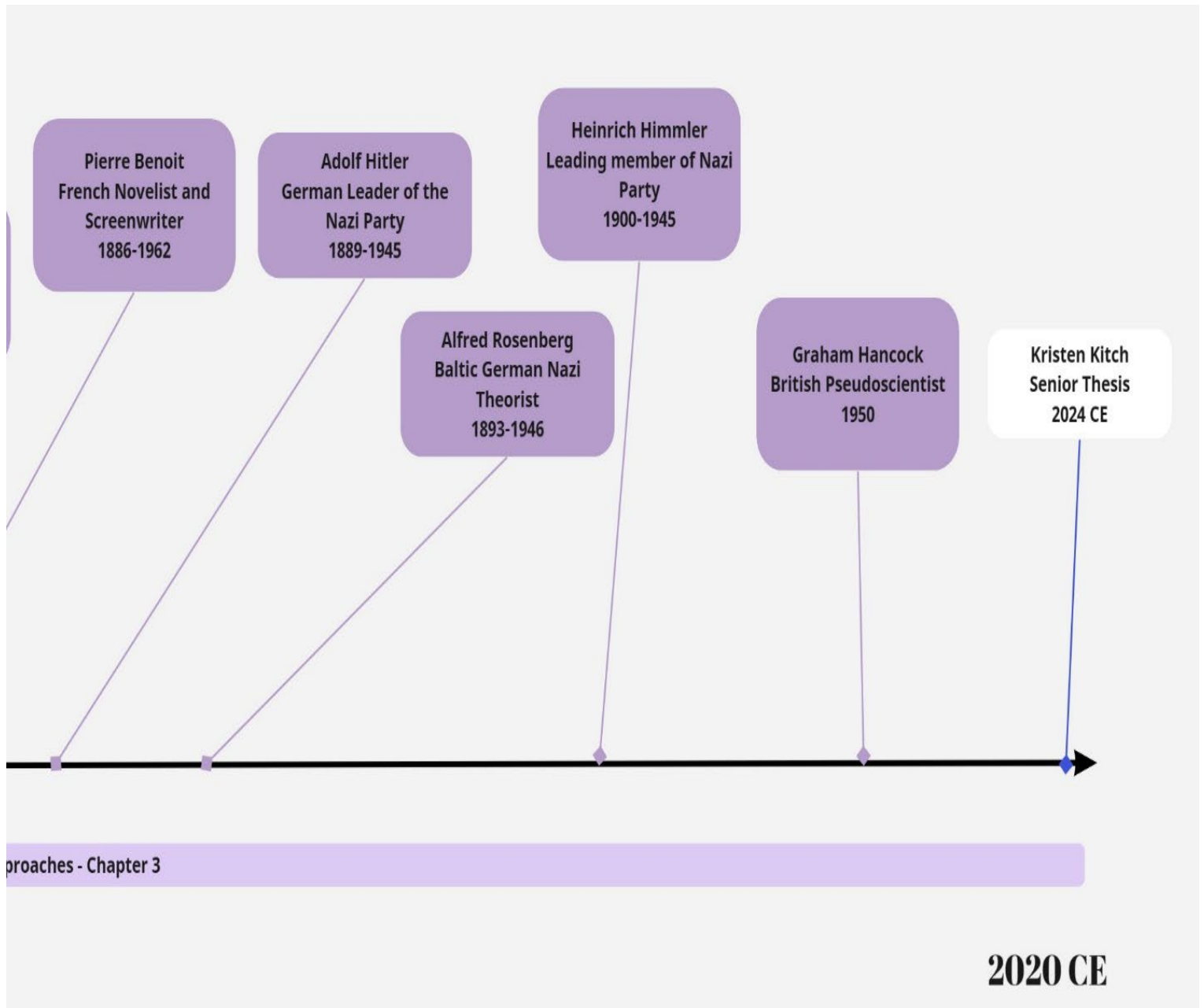


Figure 13. The last receptions of the modern period from Chapter 3.

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