

## [Transcript] The Rest Is History / 314. Atlantis: The Legend

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Near the end of the last Ice Age, 12,800 years ago, a giant comet that had entered the solar system from deep space thousands of years earlier broke into multiple fragments.

Some of these struck the Earth, causing a global cataclysm on a scale unseen since the extinction of the dinosaurs, and causing the global deluge that is remembered in myths all around the world.

A second series of impacts, equally devastating, causing further cataclysmic flooding, occurred 11,600 years ago, the exact date that Plato gives for the destruction and submergence of Atlantis.

The evidence shows, beyond reasonable doubt, that an advanced civilization that flourished during the Ice Age was destroyed in these global cataclysms.

But, there were survivors, known to later cultures as the sages, the magicians, the shining ones, and the mystery teachers of heaven.

They travelled the world in their great ships, doing all in their power to keep the spark of civilization burning.

They settled at key locations, Gobekli Tepe in Turkey, Balbek in the Lebanon, Giza in Egypt, Ancient Sumer, Mexico, Peru, and across the Pacific, where a huge pyramid has recently been discovered in Indonesia.

Everywhere they went, these magicians of the gods brought with them the memory of a time when mankind had fallen out of harmony with the universe and paid a heavy price.

So that, Tom Holland, is the synopsis of the book *Magicians of the Gods*, from the website of the renowned historian Graham Hancock, and it's also the premise for his Netflix series, *Ancient Apocalypse*, of which I believe you are an enormous fan.

Well, I've watched all 10 episodes. Whether that equates to fandom, or whether I was doing it as research for the episode dominate that we're doing, actually two episodes on Atlantis, where does the story come from?

Is it true? Was there really an ancient apocalypse that wiped an ancient civilization out? These are the hefty questions that we'll be exploring over the next two episodes.

Well, people love these questions, Tom. That's why *Ancient Apocalypse* is so popular. Of course, it's not an entirely uncontroversial series, or an uncontroversial thesis.

But even as a boy, I remember these sort of books of mysteries, historical mysteries, there was Bourn books, and Atlantis was always huge in those.

I remember when *Doctor Who* went to Atlantis twice, Professor Zaroff was using Atlantis as an underwater base.

Did you ever see *Warlords of Atlantis*?

Don't think so. It was Doug McClure, who was always, he was always kind of going off on boats and ending up in lands that time forgot, or kind of things like that.

And *Warlords of Atlantis*, he discovers that Atlantis is true. And it's an underwater kind of realm.

So there was a brilliant series that the BBC repeated in the 80s called *Undersea Kingdom*. It was from the 1930s, American. The star was supposedly Crash Corrigan, who was a sort of flash-cord rip-off.

And they went to Atlantis. And Atlantis was amazing. They had tanks. They had tanks called Juggernauts. It was very exciting.

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Because all that ultimately comes from Jules Verne. And they go around, you know, in Captain Nemo in his submarine going around.

But also, Tom, it's the story of the New Rings of Power series, because that's about the fall of Númenor.

Yes, it is. Yes. Tolkien was obsessed by the story. Yeah.

So in Númenor, it's hubris, challenging the gods, all of that stuff that brings... This is a spoiler for people who are intending to watch all 27 series of the Rings of Power when they finally make them. I mean, that's part of the fascination, isn't it? It's not just an undersea kingdom. It is the fact that it is the ultimate punishment for human arrogance.

Well, the idea that it is an undersea kingdom, I mean, it begins with Jules Verne. There's no hint of that.

A kingdom plunges into the sea, which is what the story says. Everyone drowns. I mean, it's not like people survive.

Not in the versions I've seen, Tom.

Patrick Duffy. He was the man from Atlantis, all that kind of stuff.

So I think that's much more a thing that's, you know, TV series and dramas and things like that, science fiction.

As Graham Hancock said in his introduction, the evidence that Atlantis or a version of Atlantis actually existed, he says has been proved beyond reasonable doubt.

Yes.

So that is a claim that I think deserves some stress testing. And it kind of begs the question, well, where does the whole idea of Atlantis come from?

And you know the answer, don't you?

I do know the answer.

Brilliant.

Fortunately.

That's great news. The podcast will be continuing beyond the five minutes that has been running.

So the thing about Atlantis, unlike, say, the Trojan War or the story of Exodus or King Arthur, is that we can pinpoint very precisely where the story begins.

Right.

You know, Geoffrey Monmouth writing about King Arthur, there's a whole kind of tradition before him, Exodus or the Iliad, scholars have been able to trace the kind of, you know, the fact that this isn't the first version of it, that it's a recycling of earlier versions.

But with Atlantis, we know exactly who is the first person to discuss it.

And it is the great philosopher Plato, who in two of his dialogues writes about, hey, Atlantis in Nessos, kind of the island of Atlantis, but it also could mean the island of Atlas.

He's the first king of this great island.

And see the fellow who had the world and not different Atlas.

No, so that's Atlas Mountains.

The idea that Atlas is a Titan who is holding up the cosmos on his shoulders.

Now, this is a different Atlas who is supposedly the son of Poseidon, who is the god of the sea and of earthquakes.

So we'd obviously play an outside role in the disaster that ultimately overwhelms Atlantis.

And the basic story is that there was an island beyond the pillars of Hercules, the Straits of

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Gibraltar, out in the Atlantic.

It's very, very successful.

And then it gets plunged under the waters of the ocean.

But I think that before we go into the detail of exactly what Plato says about it, it would be worth looking at Plato himself.

Do you think what he says is very much a reflection of his own background and interests and his own political predilections?

Is that a big spoiler?

Well, I think that since we know that there is no evidence of the story having existed before Plato, there's not a hint of it.

No one mentions Atlantis before Plato.

No one even kind of alludes to a story that might be kind of mistaken for Atlantis before Plato.

Therefore, it's worth looking at his life to see if the story is true, how might he have come by it?

If the story isn't true, how come he's writing about it?

And actually, I think that people might be tempted to think that Atlantis is just a bit of fun, it's kind of fluff, it's kind of a mad story.

But actually, I think it holds a really, really fascinating mirror up not just to Plato, who is a titanic figure,

but also the history of Athens and of Greece in this period, which is one of the most kind of dramatic periods of classical history.

So Plato, as I said, absolute titanic figure, the quote that is always said about him was something said by A. N. Whitehead,

a British philosopher who said that, I think, something to the effect that the whole of Western philosophy is merely a series of footnotes to Plato.

He was Athenian. There are some who say that he was born on Iegano, which is an island kind of just off Attica, but whatever.

He is an Athenian citizen. He's born in the 420s and he dies around either 348 or 347.

His name, Plato, that's a nickname. It kind of means broad, broad-shouldered, broad-chested.

The story goes that he's given this nickname by his wrestling tutor.

There are worse nicknames to have.

It's brilliant, isn't it? A wrestling tutor.

It's probable that his actual name was Aristocles, but again, can't be certain.

I mean, it won't surprise you to know that there are lots of details about Plato's life. We don't know that.

It's lucky that he was nicknamed Plato because had he been called Aristocles,

I mean, imagine students coping with him and Aristotle.

It would be awful, wouldn't it? It would be terribly confusing.

Yes. Plato is from an aristocratic family that can trace their line of descent back to the kings of Athens,

who ruled way back in the mists of time and ultimately all the way back to Poseidon, actually, because it happens.

The god of the sea. That's nice. They're a very politically active family,

and they are active in a way that because they're aristocratic,

but they are also politically active in Athens, which has become a democracy,

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they, as a family, kind of straddle the ambivalences and the complexities that are thrown up by the fact that

Athens is a society that has an aristocracy but is also very radically democratic.

Right. So there are all kinds of tensions there.

Yeah. And he's born into a city that is one of the two great cities of Greece.

So there is Sparta, which is a kind of military state.

We did an episode on Sparta, very much a kind of warrior city, military, the whole citizenship are devoted to training, military training and all that kind of stuff.

Athens is a much more cosmopolitan place,

but the Athenians too value the kind of the courage and the bravery that is shown by the infantrymen.

And the great, decisive, kind of glorious epic memory that Athenians in when Plato is born is the battle of Marathon.

When a Persian army in 490 BC crosses the sea, lands on the plain of Marathon about 25 miles from Athens,

and the Persians have never been beaten by a Greek army,

those in Athens who can afford armor, so it's a self-selecting group,

they are basically a kind of an elite.

They go out and they charge the Persians and they defeat them.

And this is the memory that particularly people who are aristocratic,

people who are not from the lower classes, they really, really cherish it.

But there is another great victory that is won basically by everyone.

And so is the victory that is the toast of the lower classes,

which is a naval battle that is fought 10 years later at Salamis.

And again, we did an episode on this.

And the salient thing about that is that whereas to fight in phalanx, you need armor,

to row in a boat, you don't need a big income.

So everyone can do it.

And the Athenians have built up this huge fleet between Marathon and Salamis in the kind of decade long period.

They've developed a huge great port, Piraeus, which is ringing with the sound of both trade and of kind of the naval dockyards.

And almost certainly as a result of the sense that it's the whole mass of the Athenian people, the Emos that have won Salamis, the democracy becomes ever kind of more radical.

The sense that, of course, the aristocracy can continue to play a part.

And indeed, the most famous Athenian democratic leader, Pericles,

is himself impeccably aristocratic background.

But the idea is that political power in Athens is wielded not just by those who are the traditional elites,

but by the entire mass of the people.

They write the way down to the poorest person who can pull an oar from the slums of Piraeus.

And that sets up a kind of inherent tension within the mind of Plato.

And indeed, many other people.

Because it gets him wondering, what is the best form of government?

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There have been all these different kinds of government.

Is monarchy better? Athens used to be a monarchy.

Is aristocracy better?

Or is democracy better?

And these are questions that are focused by the fact that

Athens in alliance with Sparta has defeated the Persians in 490 and then in 480.

But a bit like the Soviet Union in America after the defeat of Hitler,

the two great powers who've won this kind of heroic victory,

they start to fall out.

And in due course, they come to fight a war that the Athenians call the Peloponnesian War.

The Spartans probably called the Athenian War.

And this is the world that Plato is born into.

A world in which the memory of Athenian greatness at Marathon and at Salamis is politically charged.

And a world in which Athens is in a kind of terrible death struggle with Sparta.

A struggle it's going to lose, ultimately.

Yes. So Plato is growing up as a kind of series of catastrophic events happen.

Basically, the Athenians become hubristic that comes from the Greek word hubris, which is this idea of a sense that you are overconfident,

that you push your sense of greatness too far and the gods then punish you.

And the great hubristic adventure that the Athenians launch is a naval expedition to go and conquer Syracuse in Sicily.

And is that Alcibiades who's in charge of that?

Yes. So he's the kind of the glamorous playboy, the great, you know, the idol of the Athenian people.

And he pushes this scheme, but it all goes horribly wrong.

The Athenian fleet, the Athenian army is wiped out.

And Athens from having been, you know, the great hegemon of Greece is now in a desperate struggle.

It's really, really on the back foot.

And in the years that follow, it loses fleet after fleet after fleet until in 404.

It has no choice but to surrender to the Spartans.

And the Spartans decide not to destroy Athens.

Right.

You know, they might have done, but they decide not to because they,

there's a certain residual sense of gratitude for what Athens had done in the Persian Wars, but also the Spartans don't want to remove a potential counterbalance to other cities.

So what they do is they abolish the democracy and they install what comes to be remembered as ruled by 30 tyrants.

So these are oligarchs, aristocrats, two of whom come from Plato's immediate circle.

Right.

So one of them is his uncle, a man called Charmedes, and the other is the cousin of Plato's mother.

Oh.

And he is a man called Critias.

Yeah.

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And Critias is probably, I mean, he seems to be in a way the kind of the motor behind the 30 tyrants.

He's the most charismatic, he's the most dangerous of them.

Critias gives his name to one of the sources in which Plato talks about Atlantis.

Have I got that right?

You have.

Oh, great.

That's setting that up.

Right.

So Critias and Charmedes seem to have asked Plato if he would join in and Plato steps back because he sees their regime as unjust, as unconstitutional.

And in due course, this proves to be a very shrewd act of recognition because the 30 tyrants get expelled, they're defeated in battle, the democracy gets reestablished, and in the battle that overthrows the 30 tyrants, Critias is killed and Charmedes.

Right.

So Plato is, you know, he's avoided being dragged into that.

But at the same time, he is also very hostile to the restored democracy because in 399, the restored democracy, which has been going after people who are to a degree associated with the topple regime of the 30 tyrants, they execute the man who has been Plato's great inspiration, his great teacher, the man whom he regards as the greatest man in Athens, a philosopher who I'm sure all our listeners will have heard of, not least because he appears in Bill and Ted.

Yeah.

He's called Socrates, but Socrates is also in Assassin's Creed Odyssey, Tom.

Is he?

Yeah, but maybe one day.

As is Alcibiades, how I know about it, it's obviously not through reading any books.

So Socrates is put to death officially for having refused to honour the gods, honoured by the Athenian state, for having introduced new gods and for having corrupted the youth of Athens.

And Plato regards this basically as an act of kind of judicial murder.

And so he despises the democracy as he's also despised the aristocratic regime of his uncle.

And Plato at that point is in his mid-twenties, he's born in the four-twenties, and that's 399.

So yeah.

Yeah.

And he leaves Athens, Athens is not a good place for him to be at this point.

So he goes to Sicily, where there are lots of kind of tyrants.

He specifically goes to Syracuse, where he starts to develop the idea that perhaps if you can get a tyrant or a kind of a leader and school him in philosophy, train him, then perhaps you'll have a great leader.

And he he tries to put this to the test, it doesn't work out brilliantly.

There are stories that he ends up actually being sold into slavery and has to be redeemed

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from slavery.

Anyway, so it all, it doesn't go well.

And he comes back to Athens and he founds a philosophical school.

And he does this in a grove that is sacred to a rather obscure hero called Akademis.

And so after Akademis, this obscure hero, Plato's school comes to be called the Academy.

So hence academics, academia, all that kind of thing.

And he becomes a great teacher, very celebrated teacher, but also a great writer.

And one thing to say about Plato is that he's not only a great philosopher, he is also one of the greatest writers of all time.

I mean, he is a great, great literary craftsman.

And I mentioned earlier that he wrote dialogue.

So he very rarely writes just kind of straight chunks of prose.

He will introduce Socrates.

So Socrates is invariably a figure within his kind of like little dramas, and he'll introduce various other characters.

Socrates will talk about ethics or the immortality of the soul, or the nature of reality and whether the true reality exists in a kind of ideal form, questions about how we can know what truth is, how we can know what reality is, the nature of the cosmos, all of these things he will kind of put into dialogues, kind of dramatic discourses in which Socrates is invariably the kind of the leader.

And all these topics, among them is the topic of what would make an ideal state, what would make an ideal policy, policy is a kind of city state.

So Athens is a policy, Sparta is a policy, what is the best way to organize a state?

And the most famous text that Plato writes about this question is called the Republic.

I mean, that's the English name for it.

And Socrates in this dialogue basically goes through, he looks at all the various forms of government, say, monarchy, oligarchy, democracy, puts them all to the test, finds them all wanting, and he then starts to formulate his idea of what a perfect system of government would be.

And he basically argues that a state can only be redeemed from the kind of, you know, from misgovernment, from injustice, if a state is guided by a certain class of person.

What do you think that class of person is?

It's a people not unlike himself, Tom, funny how that often works out.

So it's basically rule.

It's ruled by philosophers, philosopher kings, right?

So yeah, so basically Plato is saying everything would be brilliant if it was ruled by people like him.

Well, as we know from social media, academics are always the best judges and politics.

Absolutely.

Yes.

So this is a very ancient tradition, going all the way back to that grove, a sacred to the hero, Akademis.

And so this is Plato's ideal of a calipolis, as he calls it, a kind of, you know, a perfect city, an ideal state.

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So the Republic is basically kind of, it's about the philosophy of it.

It's a kind of great sweeping philosophical discussion, but he can't leave the theme alone and he pursues it in two other ways.

So one of them is a book called The Laws, which is a very kind of, compared to his other works, kind of very arid.

And it's essentially what it says on the tin.

It's a list of laws about how a state could be governed.

And then there are two other dialogues.

And these are called the Timaeus and the Critias.

And Timaeus and Critias are both of them participants in a dialogue that Socrates is conducting.

And the first of these is the Timaeus and the Timaeus is set in Athens during a festival.

It's autumn, probably in 49.

We can almost be precise about the date.

And it seems to be set a day after the discussion that is dramatized in the Republic, but it's also not because certain things have changed.

So the beginning of the Timaeus is a kind of recap of how Socrates and his pals had decided what the ideal state was.

And actually, the philosopher kings have gone from this.

And instead, what you get is you get a class of guardians who are a kind of cohesive group of the leading men in the state who have no private property, no individual family life.

And it's their job, essentially, to kind of fashion everybody else into a kind of...

I mean, those really are academics, Tom.

No private property and no...

Well, I mean, yes, I mean, imagine the most virtuous people you can on Twitter running your life.

And that's...

Who wouldn't want that?

That's basically what Plato is proposing.

So there are four people in this dialogue.

The Socrates himself, there's Hermocrates, who is a general of some Syracuse.

There's Timaeus, who is a man from Italy, a city called Locris.

And there is this guy, Critias, who, as you said, is not only related to Plato, but will go on to lead the 30 tyrants.

So it's not an entirely neutral figure.

So they're talking about what an ideal state should be.

These four guys, Socrates, Timaeus, Critias.

And Socrates says that he wants to see an ideal state actually in action.

So essentially, he wants to see how this operates within history, within time, rather than just as a kind of ideal abstraction.

And so Critias then turns around and he says to Socrates, he has just the thing, then listen to me, Socrates, he says, I have a story that is simultaneously completely barking, completely fantastical, and yet, at the same time, completely true.

Oh, Tom, is that the story of Atlantis?

So mad and true.



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Brilliant.

What a cliffhanger.

A topos, very odd, kind of out of place, weird.

And that, as we will find out in part two, is the story of Atlantis.

Greiky, so join us after the break for the truth about Atlantis.

Welcome back to the Restless History.

We ended the first half of today's podcast on something of a cliffhanger because Critias is about to unfold to Socrates a story that's both utterly fabulous and completely true.

And Tom, is this going to be the story of Atlantis?

Do you tell?

It is.

So Critias reveals that this story is actually about Athens.

So the ideal state is Athens.

And the reason that nobody in Athens remembers it is because the story has been obliterated by time and by the repeated cycles of destruction that have afflicted mankind.

Right.

So that's very graham-hankled.

That's the global cataclysm we heard about in the instruction.

Yes.

So you may wonder, well, in that case, how does Critias know about it?

And he gives us a very precise explanation.

So he says that when he was 10, he heard it from his grandfather, who heard it from his father, who heard it from a man called Solon, who was a law giver, Athenian law giver, who had given kind of laws to Athens and then gone off on his travels.

And he'd gone to Egypt.

And in Egypt, he had heard it from the priests of Egypt.

That sounds like an unimpeachable chain of sources, Tom.

Absolutely.

Beyond reasonable doubt, as Graham Hancock would no doubt say.

And when he's in Egypt, the priests basically laugh at him because Solon can't remember anything.

And they come out with this kind of famous line, oh, Solon, Solon, you Greeks are always children.

There are no old men in Greece.

And the reason the priests can say this, Egyptian priests, is because Egypt uniquely has been proof against all these various natural disasters that have overwhelmed humanity because they have the Nile.

And Solon is intrigued and says, well, what kind of natural disasters are you talking about?

So let's give us an example.

The story of Phaeton, who in the Greek myth is the son of Helios, the sun god, who ends up driving the chariot, can't control it.

And the chariot of the sun sweeps down and half burns the earth and then sweep goes right up into the heights and freezes it.

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And the Egyptian priests reveal that this wasn't actually true, that this story is a myth explaining what had actually happened, which was that a comet had hit the earth. So again, intriguing, because that's what Graham Hancock is writing about in that passage that you introduced it.

The Egyptian priests claim that their records go back 8,000 years.

And they say that this story that they're going to tell was 1,000 years before that.

So that's 9,000 years in total.

So that's how Graham Hancock came to his calculation.

He was talking about 11,600 years ago.

This is when Plato was setting the story of Atlantis.

That's how he gets his date.

So what happens 9,000 years before this dialogue, before Critias, the story that Critias is giving?

Well, Critias explains, he says that Atlantis exists out in the ocean beyond the Straits of Gibraltar, the Pillars of Hercules, that it was an island that was bigger than Africa and Asia put together.

And in light of the series that we were doing on Columbus Dominic, fascinating, he says it was possible for travelers to go onwards from Atlantis to further islands and from these islands onwards to the continent opposite us, which surrounds the entire ocean.

So, yeah, I mean, kind of very, very intriguing.

And he says that Atlantis was a mighty power.

It invaded Europe, it invaded Asia, and its aim was to conquer the whole world because it was full of hubris.

And the only power that stood against this imperial onslaught was the ancient city of Athens, and Critias says of Athens then, you know, 9,000 years ago, her courage and her military prowess were an example.

Sometimes she stood at the head of the Greeks, sometimes when abandoned by everyone else, she fought alone.

She braved every danger.

She defeated the invaders and raised a monument to her victory.

She saved those who had not yet been enslaved from losing their freedom, and she ungrudgingly liberated all those who lived inside the Pillars of Hercules.

This great victory is one, the Athenians save Europe and Asia from the Atlantean invasion, and then suddenly, terrible earthquakes, terrible floods, the Athenian army is wiped out.

So that's why the, you know, Athens comes to forget the very memory of this glorious victory.

And Atlantis sinks beneath the waves.

And all that is left of Atlantis is a great sea of mud in the ocean beyond the Pillars of Hercules.

Okay.

A sea of mud.

A sea of mud in the Atlantis, is there?

Well, this is what Pateius is saying.

And you may well want to reflect because as Socrates points out when he's heard this story, the salient thing about it is that it actually happened and isn't just kind of some magic that someone's made up.

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I slightly paraphrase there, but that's essentially the drift of what Socrates is saying. So what Pateius is hammering home there is the idea that this is true. This actually happened. This isn't a fantasy. This is actual history. Well, I've been educated. Okay. Rather unfortunately for fans of Atlantis, Timaeus then starts spiraling off and he starts talking about cosmology and stuff. Whereas obviously, all everyone wants is a bit more about Atlantis. But fortunately, we then move on to the second dialogue, which is actually called Cretias, where we get back to it and we go back to both to Athens and Atlantis as it existed 9,000 years before the time that Cretias is giving this dialogue. So Athens, Athens doesn't entirely sound like the Athens of Plato's time. So the guardians of the city are basically the warrior class. They live in shared messes. Not philosophers. No. By now they're guardians. They're kind of warrior elite. Okay. They live in shared messes. They have no gold or silver. Athens itself has a much larger territory. It seems to have been built inland, or at least its site is surrounded by a lot more land than it's come to have. It has 20,000 warriors, so it's a great city of infantry. There is no mention whatsoever of a fleet. So that is Plato's portrait of Athens as an ideal state. So that sounds a bit like Sparta. Well, you may think that. We will come to that in due course when we're wondering what exactly Plato is doing with all this. Then you have Atlantis. So Athens is obviously the city of Athena. In Greek, its name is Athena. And Poseidon had wanted to have Athens, but loses that competition. So he gets Atlantis. He predictably he found a line of kings by raping a girl. Long line of kings. And the characteristics of these kings is that they are fabulously wealthy. I mean, wealthy beyond the dreams of any previous royal dynasty. They rule lands that are full of elephants. Their lands are teeming with spices of all kinds.

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They build the most splendid palace that has ever been built.  
The palace, Atlantis itself, is threaded with great canals.  
The capital city is surrounded by circular walls, each of different colors.  
It's a bit like Minas Tirith.  
There's a lovely illustration of this in Graham Hancock's series.  
There's a sort of CGI.  
I remember the circular walls and the canals and the terrific palace.  
It looks a great place, Tom.  
And the king himself is guarded by elite troops who are called spear carriers.  
There are RSC spear carriers who don't have any lines.  
No, no, they're an elite squad of crack-picked men.  
Right.  
Okay.  
Very good.  
And also Atlantis, unlike Athens, is absolutely heaving with harbors and dockyards.  
Right.  
Expand that in an island, to be fair.  
Plato writes a description of it, that the largest harbor was full of ships and merchants arriving from everywhere, and it echoed to the din of their shouting, and the hubbub and the clattering never ceased, but went on all day and night.  
It also has mines.  
So all this gold and silver.  
So what is going on here?  
Well, I mean, Socrates said it was true.  
Graham Hancock says it's true.  
Who might disagree?  
There is an alternative theory, which is that Plato completely made it up.  
And I'm going to pin my colors to the mast and say that I think that that is absolutely what happened.  
You astound me, Tom.  
And I think that there are two things that Plato is drawing on here.  
The first and the least interesting is that Greece lives in quite a geologically unstable part of the world.  
So earthquakes, tsunamis are, Plato has lived through them.  
So 426, around the time that Plato is being born, there's an earthquake that forces the Spartans who are invading Attica at the time to retreat.  
And a tsunami drowns an entire city.  
And there is also a fort that is partially destroyed by a tsunami of Sennethinian fort, and it's near an island that is called Adalante.  
Ooh, it's tantalizing.  
So this is recorded in that the history of the Peloponnesian War by an Athenian general called Thucydides, which Plato would undoubtedly have read.  
So he would know that.  
And 373, when Plato is what kind of late 40s, a city called Helici is completely drowned

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by a tsunami after an earthquake.

And this earthquake, again, is attributed to the anger of the gods and specifically to Poseidon.

So there is that sense.

Tom, what about the theory that I always read, which is that the Greeks would have had some sort of ancestral folk memory of the explosion, the eruption of Thera, Santorini in 1600 BC, the one that had great consequences for Crete and the Minoan civilization and so on.

People always claim that Atlantis is inspired by memories of that.

Is that, are you not buying that argument when you think about Plato and all his history of earthquakes?

Well, a massive spoiler, no.

Right.

But in our next episode, we can look at the various theories, and that's definitely one of the theories.

Right.

I mean, if anyone was familiar with this story, there's no evidence for it in any Greek myth or any Greek story beforehand.

So it would imply that Plato uniquely has come across it.

And I suppose what you're saying is that Plato doesn't need to be interested in earthquakes and tsunamis.

No.

He doesn't need to be reaching back thousands of years.

No.

He's got them in his own lifetime or in the lifetime of people around him.

Absolutely.

But also, the specifics of the story, I think, I have a theory.

Okay.

And my theory is that, I said Plato is a great literary craftsman, and I think that what he is constructing with the story of Atlantis is, in a way, the first parody of history, the first reworking of history as a kind of fiction, because Plato is born and lives at a time when the very discipline of history is emerging.

So I mentioned Thucydides, this kind of very bleak writer describing the war between Athens and Sparta, kind of pitiless analyst of how power functions.

But Thucydides is himself.

He's not the first great historian, a title that goes to Herodotus, who you know I...

You left Herodotus, Tom?

Yeah.

Much cherished.

I've translated him and everything.

And Herodotus tells the story of the Persian invasions of Greece.

And I think that essentially what Plato is doing with the story of Atlantis and its war against an Athens, that as you pointed out, sounds very like Sparta, is that he is taking elements from Herodotus, and he's taking elements from Thucydides, and he's blurring and blending them, essentially to construct a kind of parodic riff on how the Athenians see their immediate

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past.

Because if you think about the story of a great imperial empire, that Plato has listed the attributes of Atlantis, that it has elephants, it has spices.

This is what the Persians command.

They command the elephants and the spices of distant India.

It's one of the wonders of their great empire.

The most splendid palace ever built, the Persian kings are famous for their palaces.

Right, Persepolis or whatever.

Yeah.

Persepolis, Sousa.

We mentioned that the city with the circular walls, in Herodotus' account of Ekpatana, which is the capital of Medea, which is the Medes and the Persians are kind of closely associated peoples, Ekpatana likewise is described by Herodotus as having circular walls made of different colors.

So there seems to be a kind of clear echo of that.

The canals, the land that is famous for canals is Mesopotamia, Babylonia.

It's famous for its size and vastness of its walls as Babylon was.

The elite troops that carry the spears, these are the immortals.

The immortals, when they march, they carry their spears upside down on their shoulders.

This is what they're called.

So the echoes of the Persian kings and the vast empire that they rule is very, very evident in the description of Atlantis.

Okay.

That surprises me.

And by the way, I find that very convincing.

I love all that.

That Atlantis is a parody of Persia.

I had thought you were going to say that Atlantis was a parody of Athens.

Well, so it is as well.

And this is the genius of it, because of course, Atlantis has harbours and dociards.

It has a Demos that makes endless din, endless chaos, and it has mines.

And it was the discovery of the silver mine a few years before the Battle of Salamis that enabled the Athenians first to build a fleet.

Right.

So it's a blending of Persia and Athens.

Right.

Yes.

And the implication of that is that the Athenian democracy and the Persian monarchy in Athens have become interfused.

So everything that had enabled Athens to stand firm against Persia, they have now become, in a sense, kind of an equip.

The democracy had become a parody of the Persian monarchy.

So Atlantis has a Persianized Athens, basically.

Yeah.

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It's a kind of democratized Persia.

But there's a further kind of, a further complication of this, which is, again, as you pointed out, that Athens, this ideal state that has no dociards back in the kind of the palmy days of its ancient greatness, it sounds like Sparta.

You're absolutely right.

These are elite bands of warriors who live in shared messes, the Spartans notoriously had no gold or silver.

Their currency were great iron ingots.

Right.

And the contrast is, Plato is describing Atlantis as a city that is a great mecca of trade.

The whole point of ancient Athens, as seen by Plato, this ideal city is that it doesn't have trade, it doesn't have ships, it doesn't have fleets, it just has this kind of warrior elite who live in messes and who, in a sense, are a kind of idealized version of Sparta.

So in other words, this is a political literary conceit in which Atlantis stands in for a sort of decadent maritime Persianized Athens or Athonized Persia.

And Athens in a Verticom is a kind of version of Sparta with all those virtues that he's attributing to.

But that seems an odd thing for Plato to be sort of, because the implication is quite pro-Spartan.

Well, Plato is quite into Sparta.

I mean, the Athenian elites, particularly the kind of aristocratic ones, are quite interested in Sparta.

There is a sense in which-

Because they're conscious that Sparta beat them, and therefore they want to understand why?

No, I think it's less that.

I think it's the idea that there's a kind of deep, deep vein of snobbery that runs through Greek philosophy.

The contempt for the masses is very, very strong, and there's a feeling that Sparta, in a way, offers a kind of more disciplined and more serious and more intense way of organizing a city than the chaos and the kind of the follies, as they see it, the kind of the tendency of the people to vote for Brexit, all that kind of stuff.

I knew you were going to go there, I just knew you.

I mean, if you want to map the contempt that academics on Twitter feel for people who vote for Brexit, it's not an entirely, I think, far-fetched analogy as to how philosophers in Athens view the mistakes made by the democracy.

This is very much their tale.

But what Plato is doing is, essentially, he's looking at how can you write philosophy, this model of an ideal city, and put it within time?

Because Socrates is absolutely right that there's no point in talking about an ideal city if you can't show that it would actually function within an actual narrative.

But there's a kind of implicit acknowledgement that this is very difficult, because what Plato is doing is taking elements from the two great works of history that have been written.

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Eroticus' history of the Persian Wars, Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War, and he's taking elements and he's mixing them up to kind of create what seems to be a narrative about something that happened nine millennia before, but he's actually absolutely about the events of the previous century.

And I think it's brilliantly, brilliantly done.

And the tribute to that, the proof of that, is the fact that the story of Atlantis has haunted people ever since, although having said that, one of the things that is interesting about the reception of the story that told by Plato is that very few people initially seem to have actually believed that it was true.

People absolutely seem to have understood that what he was doing with this.

So that's fascinating.

So Aristotle, you know, Plato's student with Plato, one of the two towering figures of Greek philosophy, he never mentions Atlantis, even though Aristotle is fascinated both by constitutions and by things like earthquakes by natural phenomena, but he never mentions it.

But well, he's one of the great geographers of all time, isn't he, Aristotle?

And if he never mentions it, and he's obviously aware of Plato's thought, that the implication of that would be that he, like a lot of those first, that audience, recognize this as a wonderful political literary conceit rather than as a statement of historical geographical fact.

Yeah.

So I think Aristotle, he's the dog that doesn't bark in the night.

And basically, right the way through into the Roman period, people who you think might be interested in it, don't mention it.

So Seneca, who is the tutor of Nero, ends up having to commit suicide after being embroiled in a plot.

He was fascinated by the idea that it might be possible to island hop to a new world.

So he writes about it in philosophical dramas.

He writes about it in natural dramas, but he never mentions Atlantis.

But even Pliny the Elder, who, you know, very much a friend of the show, very prone to believing all kinds of nonsense, he does refer to Atlantis, but he says basically, if we can trust Plato.

So he's putting in that caveat.

So I think if Pliny the Elder.

So that suggests that Pliny doesn't recognize it as a political metaphor, but he does recognize it as probably nonsense.

Yeah, basically.

Yeah.

It's not a story for Pliny to miss out, but he's kind of saying, yeah, probably Plato made it up, but it's still quite fun, so I'll put it in.

And it's really only towards the end of the classical period.

So deep into late antiquity, do you get someone who's wholeheartedly a fan of the whole story of Atlantis?

And this is a philosopher who's a student of Plato, absolutely devoted to him called Proclus, who's writing in the 5th century AD.



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And he's all over the idea that Atlantis is true.

But even he, you see, there's a fascinating passage where he kind of recognizes the parallels between the Persian invasion of Greece and Plato's story of the Atlanteans invading Europe and Asia from the Atlantic.

So he says that, I mean, he explicitly compares the Persian invasion force set out against the Greeks from the East and the Atlanteans came from the West.

And so this is an example of the perfect patterns that history creates, he says.

Not recognizing it, but in fact, it's a perfect pattern created by Plato.

So he's obviously writing in Greek, he's in the eastern half of the Roman Empire.

The western half by this point has collapsed and increasingly over the course of the early middle ages, contacts with the Greek speaking half are lost.

And although Timaeus is one of, is I think, almost the only dialogue that's translated into Latin.

So the only text by Plato that people in Latin Christendom have, the rest of the dialogues are lost.

And it's not until the 15th century, the Renaissance, that Plato's dialogues come to be rediscovered.

So the idea of Atlantis just vanishes, does it, effectively?

Pretty much, I think.

I mean, it's because there are mentions of it in Pliny, people know about it.

But it's not a kind of overwhelming obsession.

And I think that what a really fascinating piece of evidence for that is the guy who we've just done four episodes on, Christopher Columbus, who I don't think really mentions it at all.

No.

When I think back, because we did some stuff, didn't we, about how Columbus, he went to the monastery of Larabidaire and he read Toscanelli and various other authorities, sort of late 15th century authorities, and Marco Polo and Pliny, Ptolemy, Claudius Ptolemy.

But actually Atlantis has never met Brazil, there's an idea of an island called Brazil.

But no talk of Atlantis actually, when I now that I think of it, that's very, that is another dog that you have two dogs that don't bark in the night, I mean, you can have a whole kennel.

Well, go on.

So that then raises the question, if you're right, Tom, if you were right and Graham Hancock is not right.

So if you're right that this is a sort of political metaphor, very much sort of generated by the peculiar circumstances of Athens, what, the turn of the fourth century BC, sort of the fifth, fourth century BC.

Then that raises the question, why on earth did Atlantis revive in recent centuries?

And is it, is it to do with European colonialism?

Is it to do with the rise of science or scientific racism?

Is it, you know, what's, what, what explains our appetite for, I don't want to use the word pseudo history because people who love this stuff get very offended by that.

So Graham Hancock is outraged of somebody called some pseudo historian or pseudo archeologist.

But there is a kind of fascinating story here about how this comes to assume this enormous,

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is it about our own sense of our own hubris and our own, you know, the consequences of industrialization or something?

Well, I think that one of the things that very clearly happens is that the Atlanteans who in Plato's account are the villains, they actually come to really to be the heroes. So that passage from Graham Hancock that you read at the beginning, I mean, these are people from Atlantis are going around trying to resurrect civilization.

So that's definitely one of the things that happens.

And there are various other elements.

The shining ones, Tom.

Yeah, the shining ones.

I think, I mean, I think the appeal of it fundamentally is that it's a brilliant story.

Well, I mean, it's, it's a brilliant story and Plato tells it, you know, fantastically well, but it gets rift upon in all kinds of really, really intriguing ways.

Yeah.

And I think that we should talk about that in our next episode.

Brilliant.

Well, that will be something to look forward to.

Tom, you talk about dogs not barking in the night.

I think it's fair to say that in this episode, I have been very much Dr. Watson and you have been an excellent, excellent Sherlock Holmes.

Oh, too kind.

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There's no mystery about that, Tom.

No.

But if they want, if they love suspense for whatever perverted reason, they can wait till Thursday to get the truth about Atlantis.

And just to enhance the sense of suspense, although I, I, I don't believe in Atlantis.

And so therefore I don't actually believe in the kind of the central thrust of Graham Hancock's thesis.

I do think that in, in certain intriguing ways, he is onto something.

Oh, I cannot wait to find out what you're going to say.

I'm going to say he's totally wrong.

If I wasn't doing this podcast, I would already have signed up through Apple.

So the Restless History, because I'd be so keen to hear the ways in which you think Graham Hancock is not entirely wrong.

So on that bombshell, we will see you all next time.

Goodbye.

Bye-bye.

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