

Was Atlantis An Allegorical Flight of Fancy Like Plato's Cave And His Ideal Forms?

Post by "Don" of January 28, 2025 at 8:22 AM

CASSIUS ADMIN NOTE: I am splitting this off from another thread ([link here](#)) so as not to divert that one. My main interest at the moment is to trace back in outline form the question of what the Epicureans and/or other ancients might have thought about this question, given the importance of the Timaeus in Greek ideas about world history and the nature of the world as a whole. Don's links may answer that question already but I think the topic is worthy of being clear so we can relate that aspect to the rest of Plato's discussion of creation and world history.

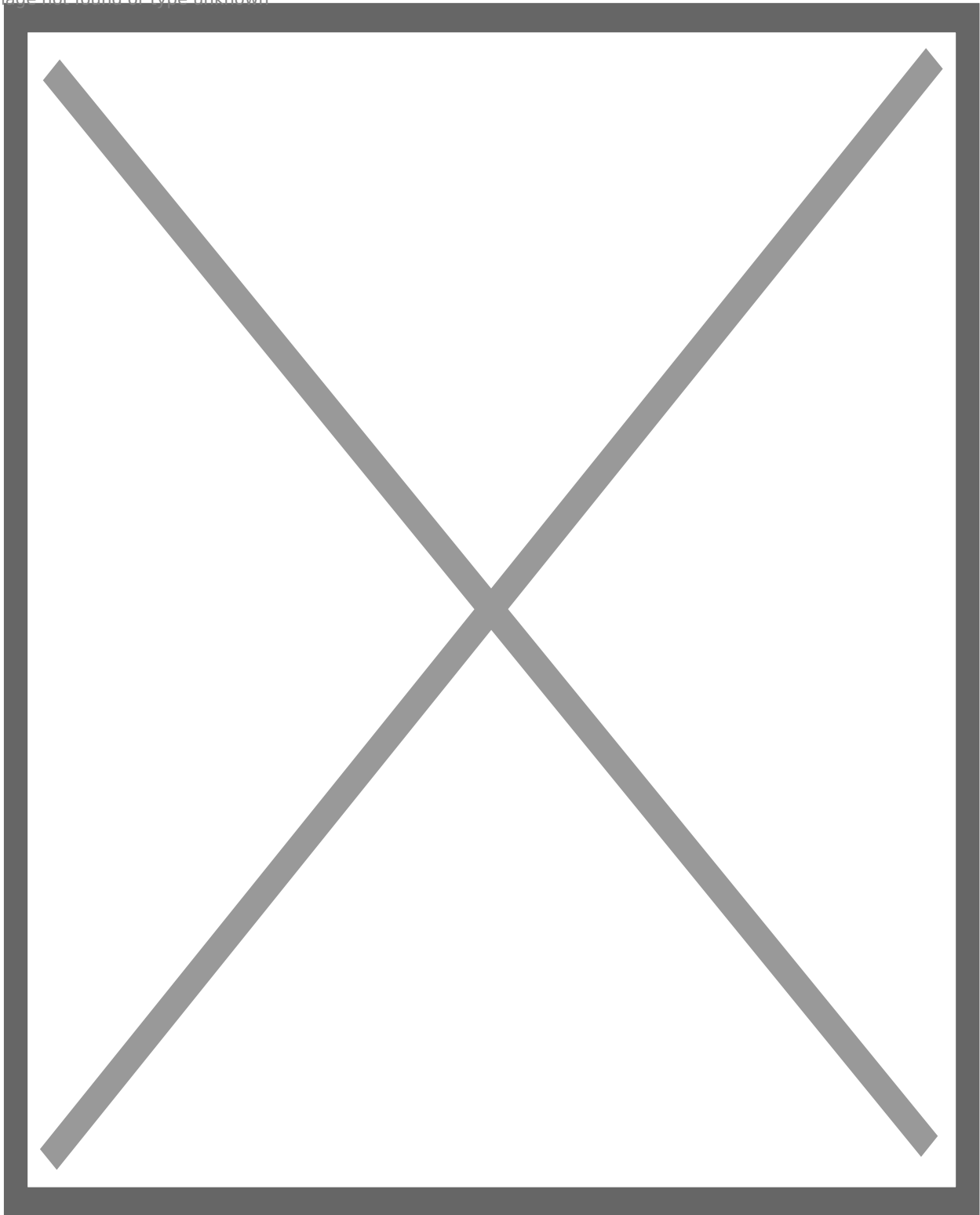
Was the entire story of Atlantis, and/or the rest of his creation story, understood by the ancients to be allegorical?

[Quote from Cassius](#)

This is the source (or part of the source) of the story of Atlantis, so it's interesting for lots of reasons.

Just for the record, there was no physical place called Atlantis. It is entirely a literary invention of Plato to make a philosophical point.

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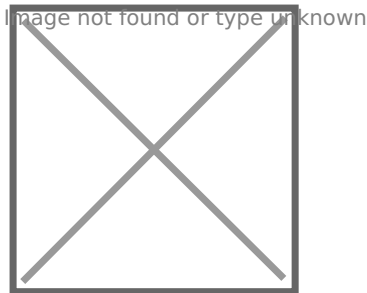


[Atlantis - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org)
en.wikipedia.org

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4271-was-atlantis-an-allegorical-flight-of-fancy-like-plato-s-cave-and-his-ideal-form/>

While some leave open the idea that Plato may have been *inspired* by accounts of the eruption of Thera or other events, the "myth of Atlantis" is just that - a myth.

The podcast *Let's Talk About Myths, Baby!* did an excellent series on Atlantis:



[Atlantis — Let's Talk About Myths, Baby!](https://www.mythsbaby.com)

www.mythsbaby.com

Post by “Cassius” of January 28, 2025 at 10:50 AM

From the wikipedia article:

Some ancient writers viewed Atlantis as fictional or metaphorical myth; others believed it to be real.^[30] [Aristotle](#) believed that Plato, his teacher, had invented the island to teach philosophy.^[21] The philosopher [Crantor](#), a student of Plato's student [Xenocrates](#), is cited often as an example of a writer who thought the story to be historical fact. His work, a commentary on *Timaeus*, is lost, but [Proclus](#), a [Neoplatonist](#) of the fifth century AD, reports on it.^[31] The passage in question has been represented in the modern literature either as claiming that Crantor visited Egypt, had conversations with priests, and saw hieroglyphs confirming the story, or, as claiming that he learned about them from other visitors to Egypt.^[32] Proclus wrote:

Quote

As for the whole of this account of the Atlanteans, some say that it is unadorned history, such as Crantor, the first commentator on Plato. Crantor also says that Plato's contemporaries used to criticize him jokingly for not being the inventor of his Republic but copying the institutions of the Egyptians. Plato took these critics seriously enough to assign to the Egyptians this story about the Athenians and Atlanteans, so as to make them say that the Athenians really once lived according to that system.

The next sentence is often translated "Crantor adds, that this is testified by the prophets of the Egyptians, who assert that these particulars [which are narrated by Plato] are written on pillars

which are still preserved." But in the original, the sentence starts not with the name Crantor but with the ambiguous *He*; whether this referred to Crantor or to Plato is the subject of considerable debate. Proponents of both Atlantis as a metaphorical myth and Atlantis as history have argued that the pronoun refers to Crantor.^[33]

....

Other ancient historians and philosophers who believed in the existence of Atlantis were [Strabo](#) and [Posidonius](#).^[37] Some have theorized that, before the sixth century BC, the "Pillars of Hercules" may have applied to mountains on either side of the [Gulf of Laconia](#), and also may have been part of the pillar cult of the Aegean.^{[38][39]} The mountains stood at either side of the southernmost gulf in Greece, the largest in the Peloponnese, and it opens onto the Mediterranean Sea. This would have placed Atlantis in the Mediterranean, lending credence to many details in Plato's discussion.

The fourth-century historian [Ammianus Marcellinus](#), relying on a lost work by [Timagenes](#), a historian writing in the first century BC, writes that the [Druids](#) of [Gaul](#) said that part of the inhabitants of Gaul had migrated there from distant islands. Some have understood Ammianus's testimony as a claim that at the time of Atlantis's sinking into the sea, its inhabitants fled to western Europe; but Ammianus, in fact, says that "the Drasidae (Druids) recall that a part of the population is indigenous but others also migrated in from islands and lands beyond the [Rhine](#)" (*Res Gestae* 15.9), an indication that the immigrants came to Gaul from the north (Britain, the Netherlands, or Germany), not from a theorized location in the Atlantic Ocean to the south-west.^[40] Instead, the Celts who dwelled along the ocean were reported to venerate twin gods, ([Dioscori](#)), who appeared to them coming from that ocean.^[41]

Post by "Cassius" of January 28, 2025 at 10:55 AM

Two questions that occur to me are whether any of these referenced writers are known to have been sympathetic to Epicurus, or were all of them of other schools? Also, are any of the references in Lucretius to the development of civilizations and/or destruction of worlds relevant to this story?

But the main aspect that I think would be interesting to discuss would be whether the Epicureans would have interpreted the Atlantis story as an example of Plato weaving ridiculous tales, in a way related to his cave analogy or discussion of ideal forms?

Post by "Bryan" of January 28, 2025 at 11:03 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4271-was-atlantis-an-allegorical-flight-of-fancy-like-plato-s-cave-and-his-ideal-form/>

[Quote from Don](#)

It is entirely a literary invention of Plato

And of course some scholars throw out all of *Timaeus*, as a mere "rhetorical exercise" that Plato himself did not take seriously. But it could be just the opposite. It among his last works, and seems to be a sustained, sincere look into the best model of nature he could come up with. In book 14, Epicurus appears to interpret the *Timaeus* literally.

Post by "Cassius" of January 28, 2025 at 11:06 AM

[Quote from Bryan](#)

In book 14, Epicurus appears to interpret the *Timaeus* literally.

And that (including what *parts* of *Timaeus*?) is what I am definitely looking forward to hearing about!

Bryan if it makes sense NOT to split these threads we can add them back together.

Post by "Bryan" of January 28, 2025 at 11:12 AM

It makes sense to split, because Atlantis is a distracting introduction (which I brought up) but it is not addressed by Epikouros, who is focused instead on the restrictive geometry that Plato assigns to the elements.

Post by "Cassius" of January 28, 2025 at 11:29 AM

[Quote from Bryan](#)

It makes sense to split, because Atlantis is a distracting introduction (which I brought up) but it is not address by Epikouros, who is focused instead on the restrictive geometry that Plato assigns to the elements.

It may be distracting to the original topic, but I won't be surprised if over time it turns into a popular thread. 😊

Post by “Don” of January 28, 2025 at 12:26 PM

All evidence points to Plato making Atlantis up for rhetorical purposes. Everybody points back to him. The podcast series I posted does a good job of debunking the myth, and also goes into the nasty white supremacist uses of the myth as well.

Post by “Eikadistes” of January 28, 2025 at 2:12 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

All evidence points to Plato making Atlantis up for rhetorical purposes. Everybody points back to him.

Yep, yep, yep! Plato is the singular author of that allegory, and Aristotle confirms it.

On thing I'd like to add:

Only 13 years before Plato published the Timaeus (c. 360 BCE) while living in Athens, the city of Helike literally became "submerged" in the ocean due to a rare seismic event (c. 373).

If Plato didn't witness it with his own eyes, he almost certainly would have felt the seismic shock, followed shortly thereafter by the news of a horrific event just miles East of him. And if he didn't feel the shock, he definitely would have spent the next few months discussing the narrative of a known, friendly city that sank into the sea, (so long as that event captured public interest).

I maintain **Helike** was the inspiration behind the fate Plato assigns to his allegorical city.

Post by “Cassius” of January 28, 2025 at 3:26 PM

Here are two generic references in Book 5 that perhaps holds open the possibility that such stories might be true, but definitely doesn't say that they are:

Quote

[324] Moreover, if there was no birth and beginning of the earth and sky, and they were always from everlasting, why beyond the Theban war and the doom of Troy have not other poets sung of other happenings as well? whither have so many deeds of men so often passed away? why are they nowhere enshrined in glory in the everlasting memorials of fame? But indeed, I trow, our whole world is in its youth, and quite new is the nature of the firmament, nor long ago did it receive its first-beginnings. Wherefore even now certain arts are being perfected, even now are growing; much now has been added to ships, but a while ago musicians gave birth to tuneful harmonies. Again, this nature of things, this philosophy, is but lately discovered, and I myself was found the very first of all who could turn it into the speech of my country.

[338] But if by chance you think that all these same things were aforesaid, but that the generations of men perished in burning heat, or that cities have fallen in some great upheaval of the world, or that from ceaseless rains ravaging rivers have issued over the lands and swallowed up cities, all the more must you be vanquished and confess that there will come to pass a perishing of earth and sky as well. For when things were assailed by such great maladies and dangers, then if a more fatal cause had pressed upon them, far and wide would they have spread their destruction and mighty ruin. Nor in any other way do we see one another to be mortal; except that we fall sick of the same diseases as those whom nature has sundered from life.

[351] Moreover, if ever things abide for everlasting, it must needs be either that, because they are of solid body, they beat back assaults, nor suffer anything to come within them, which might unloose the close-locked parts within, such as are the bodies of matter, whose nature we have declared before; or that they are able to continue through all time, because they are exempt from blows, as is the void, which abides untouched nor suffers a whit from assault; or else because there is no supply of room all around, into which things might part asunder and be broken up—even as the sum of sums is eternal—nor is there any room without into which they may leap apart, nor are there bodies which might fall upon them and break them up with stout blow. But neither, as I have shown, is the nature of the world endowed with solid body, since there is void mingled in things; nor yet is it as the void, nor indeed are bodies lacking, which might by chance gather together out of infinite space and overwhelm this sum of things with headstrong hurricane, or bear down on it some other form of dangerous

destruction; nor again is there nature of room or space in the deep wanting, into which the walls of the world might be scattered forth; or else they may be pounded and perish by any other force you will. The gate of death then is not shut on sky or sun or earth or the deep waters of the sea, but it stands open facing them with huge vast gaping maw. Wherefore, again, you must needs confess that these same things have a birth; for indeed, things that are of mortal body could not from limitless time up till now have been able to set at defiance the stern strength of immeasurable age.

[380] Again, since the mighty members of the world so furiously fight one against the other, stirred up in most unhallowed warfare, do you not see that some end may be set to their long contest? Either when the sun and every kind of heat have drunk up all the moisture and won the day: which they are struggling to do, but as yet they have not accomplished their effort: so great a supply do the rivers bring and threaten to go beyond their bounds, and deluge all things from out the deep abyss of ocean; all in vain, since the winds as they sweep the seas, diminish them, and so does the sun in heaven, as he unravels their fabric with his rays, and they boast that they can dry up all things, ere moisture can reach the end of its task. So vast a war do they breathe out in equal contest, as they struggle and strive one with another for mighty issues; yet once in this fight fire gained the upper hand, and once, as the story goes, moisture reigned supreme on the plains.

[396] For fire won its way and burnt up many things, all-devouring, when the resistless might of the horses of the sun went astray and carried Phaethon amain through the whole heavens and over all lands. But, thereupon, the almighty father, thrilled with keen anger, with sudden stroke of his thunder dashed high-souled Phaethon from his chariot to earth, and the sun, meeting him as he fell, caught the everlasting lamp of the world, and tamed the scattered steeds, and yoked them trembling, and so guiding them along their own path, replenished all things; so forsooth sang the old poets of the Greeks: but it is exceeding far removed from true reasoning. For fire can only prevail when more bodies of its substance have risen up out of infinite space; and then its strength fails, vanquished in some way, or else things perish, burnt up by its fiery breath.

[411] Moisture likewise, once gathered together and began to prevail, as the story goes, when it overwhelmed living men with its waves. Thereafter, when its force was by some means turned aside and went its way, even all that had gathered together from infinite space, the rains ceased, and the strength of the rivers was brought low.

Display More

Post by “Don” of January 28, 2025 at 4:59 PM

411 sounds more like the Biblical and Gilgamesh floods... Or just floods in general.

Again, from all I've seen, there's *nothing* to show Atlantis was a real place.

Post by “Bryan” of January 28, 2025 at 5:29 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

just floods in general.

Yes I think this is correct.

Plato places this back 9,000 years from his day. Most civilizations were still using very natural materials, and the larger and more advanced of these lived near the coast. Given that a lot of ice was still melting in the north and sea levels were rising, it seems very possible that most early civilizations during that time were built on coasts that are now far under the sea.

Plato says the Egyptians mentioned a large power in the west that held most of North Africa up to Egypt's borders, parts of Spain, and the bottom half of Italy (as well as islands in the Atlantic)—but the people in what is now Athens fought them back from further advancing east.

Not that a specific event is recorded, but in general, this sounds possible and like the exact type of general activity that would be "big news" in the Mediterranean 11,000 years ago.

I think this is something Plato probably believed to be true—he would have wanted it to be true. As he says, it shows that Athens was, in a way, destined to be great because of its geography and because of the race of those who live there. Solon, a relative of Plato and the origin of this story, famously did travel to Egypt and was friendly with their government.

Post by “Eikadistes” of January 29, 2025 at 10:01 AM

[Quote from Bryan](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

just floods in general.

The way I'm thinking about it ... imagine a writer living a few miles North of Portland in 1980. Let's say the writer has a passing interest in volcanism, specifically the *Ring of Fire* for which the Pacific is known. Of course, there are thousands of regular of seismic events that inhabitants of the Pacific coast and Pacific islands anticipate. Supposing our writer sets his stories in the Pacific Northwest, he would likely incorporate this theme of volcanism. But if, say, in 1993, he published a story about a stratovolcano that exploded, ripping the top of the mountain off, with a pyroclastic flow that kills a few dozen people ... I would have to guess that the specifics are not an amalgamation of the regular seismic activity: the specifics are available because the author would have personally experienced the event, and borrowed the realistic specifics from his proximity to Mt. St. Helens in 1980.

I would be surprised if Plato were writing an amalgamation of shared cultural experience, rather than borrowing some of the details from his own, personal experience. Though, I could be wrong.