

- - - Research Note - - -

ATLANTIS/LYONESSE (The plains of imagination)

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ABSTRACT: This research note looks at the confluence of myths of Atlantis and Lyonesse in contemporary Internet culture. It examines online crypto-historical accounts that have hypothesised that the city of Atlantis was located in close proximity to the area usually associated with Lyonesse and, separately, discusses the nature of the mythical territories claimed by the online micronation of Lyonesse. These discussions lead to a characterisation of the manner in which Internet culture promulgates mythic entities such as Atlantis and Lyonesse and gives them fresh inflections for contemporary aficionados to elaborate upon.

KEY WORDS: Atlantis, Lyonesse, crypto-history, online micronations

The Internet is a wonderfully sprawling repository of arcane fictions and *crypto-everything*. Its fragmentary and often inter-generative texts thrive and gain momentum with the slightest (and often most erroneous) of pretexts, generating threads of online mythology that variously intersect with older folkloric and mythological stories or else develop independently. The Internet is also particularly suited to the establishment of virtual entities that only exist through their representation *on* the Internet. As has been discussed in previous issues of *Shima*, fanciful micronations abound online, many of them notionally based on islands (see Khamis and Hayward, 2015, for instance on Lundy Island's re-imagination as a virtual micronation). Similarly, the Internet is a fertile environment for speculation about the locations, character and/or residual traces of Atlantis and similar (supposedly 'lost') continental islands. There are hundreds of contesting accounts of the supposed whereabouts of the fabled land and many quasi-documentary videos attempting to variously promote different accounts or (less often, unfortunately) expose the flawed precepts and practice of the projects concerned.

In this environment curious shapes and filaments appear and recede. One is of particular relevance to this special issue of *Shima* by dint of combining reference to Atlantis and the less celebrated lost land of Lyonesse (see Mitchell, 2016). The filament comes complete with a typical crypto-*anything* flavour, apparently emanating from a mysterious 'Moscow Institute of Meta-History' (see website) and its equally mysterious researcher, Vitacheslav Koudriavtsev.¹ Despite this shadowy context, the premise of Koudriavtsev's account (set

¹ I have not been able to obtain any corroborating evidence that the name 'Vitacheslav Koudriavtsev' refers to a real person nor that the Moscow Institute of Meta-History had any existence outside of website references to it. Neither of these points are however

out in a 1997 essay) is engagingly straightforward and cogently asserted – particularly in contrast to various fanciful new age cocktails of Atlantis/Bermuda Triangle/UFO media-lore that regularly surface online (see, for instance Section 51, 2015).

In brief, in his consideration of Plato's original discussions of Atlantis Koudriavtsev argues that while the Greek word *nesos* appears to unambiguously characterise Atlantis as an island, it can be better understood (in the context of Plato's descriptions) to refer to a moated inner area of a city on an elevated bluff on the edge of a coastal plain whose name (ie Atlantis) also came to serve as the name for the broader territory that it formed the centre of. Having (re-)characterised Atlantis in this manner he also moves on to consider research that suggests that during the last glaciation the sea level was 121+/-5 metres lower than it is today. Only considering areas beyond the Pillars of Hercules (ie outside of the Mediterranean) he goes on to evaluate some of the main Atlantic candidates for the site of Atlantis with regard to the area of surrounding subsurface shelf at that depth. This leads him to rule out the Azores and Canaries as possible sites due to their steep coastal drop-offs (which would not generate enough land to constitute an Atlantis-scale area were sea levels to be lowered to peak glaciation levels). This leads him to observe that:

in the west of Europe, where now the North Sea and the Celtic Shelf are situated, to the south of the British Isles, during the last glaciation, at the time when the sea level was lower, there had existed a vast area of land. (ibid)

While his contentions in the latter regard are undoubtedly correct, he rapidly moves to identify a precise location on that shelf as the site of Atlantis (see Figure 1). His identification rests upon a particular dual characterisation, first that “there is no indication whatsoever of land surrounded by the sea on all sides” (ibid), a point that few scholars would disagree with. His second is a more idiosyncratic interpretation, namely that Critas is described in Plato as characterising the city of Atlantis as:

situated high above the sea level, from which it rises precipitously, after which he contrasts it... with the flat plain surrounding the city. Such an interpretation of the logic of the passage is borne out by the use in the same passage of two words - khoras and topos, which semantically must refer to different notions, hence, it was only the city that was situated high above the sea level, but not the plain... The only image evoked by this description is that of a city on a hill rising precipitously from the sea, and the flat plain surrounding it, enclosed on three sides by mountains.

Koudriavtsev's identification of the separate uses of *khoras/topos* as proving his contention is somewhat tendentious, given that no other scholar conversant in the subtleties of Ancient Greek has recognised such an issue or produced such a characterisation,² but – unabashed – he goes on to produce the following characterisation:

This description suits in every detail, the land that once existed in the west of Europe: the mountains are the present Ireland, Great Britain and, possibly, the north-western part of France; the plain itself, which now constitutes the Celtic Shelf to the south of the British Isles fits the dimensions specified by

germane to this research note as it is the online texts *attributed to them* that are the subject of my discussion.

² Thanks to Oliver Smith for his discussion of this issue (pc 3rd August 2016).

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Plato, and the edge of the continental platform faces south-southwest. Not far from this edge, at about 48 d 16-29' N and 8 d 46-59' W, there is a remarkable underwater hill called the Little Sole Bank marked on sufficiently minute maps. The top of the hill is 57 metres below the sea surface, while the average depth around it is 160-170 metres. The hill is located approximately in the middle of the greater length of the plain in question. (ibid)

After this sudden swoop on Little Sole Bank as the likely location of Atlantis, Koudriavtsev goes on to discuss the cataclysm that overcame it and contends that:

Another argument to back the thesis that none other than the rising of the sea level was the catastrophe that Plato described, is that the relief of the plain in point, in the west of Europe, was of such character, that the rising of the sea level by one metre could often have meant the retreat of the coastline by kilometres. I am sure that even if the full submerging of the territory lasted several years, the eye-witnesses (and victims), who were on a flat plain, must have perceived it as a very fast sinking of all the land they could see, from horizon to horizon. (ibid)

It is worth noting that the issues raised by Koudriavtsev here have also argued in a far more sober (but also speculative) context by Leary (2015) with regard to the possible perceptions of rising sea levels and fragmentations of livable areas of dry land by the inhabitants of the 'Northsealand' alluvial plains to the north east of the Celtic Shelf.

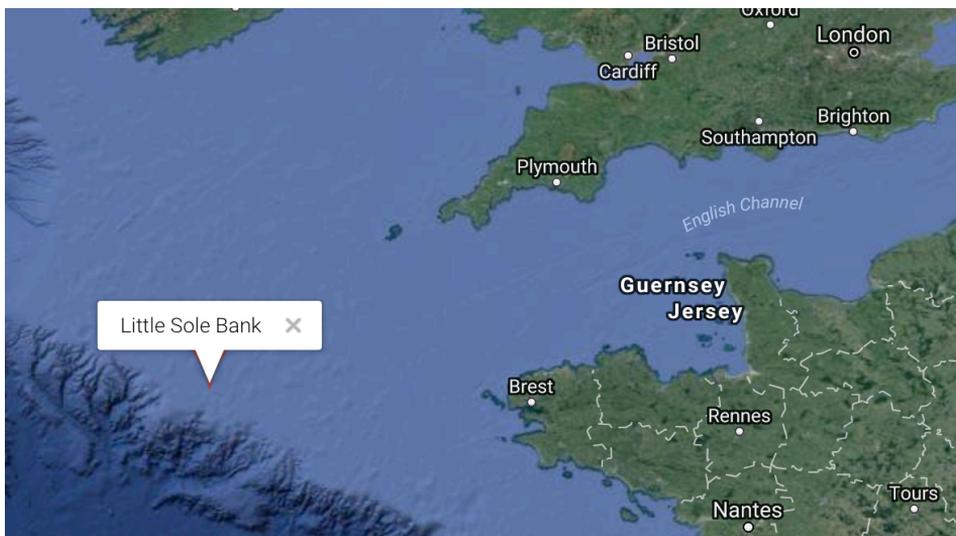


Figure 1 - Google Earth map of Little Sole Bank and edge of coastal shelf (note – all the sea area above the shelf drop-off at bottom left of image was land during the peak of the last Ice Age.)

Admirably characterising his discussions as a hypothesis, Koudriavtsev went on to assert that an expedition to the area to survey and digitally model the seafloor would be necessary in order to detect whether there was evidence of substantial human construction on and around Little Sole Bank that might end what he characterises as a

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“more than two thousand-year-old debate on Atlantis”, allowing “new horizons” to open for an “overhaul of the existing ideas of the history of mankind” (ibid).

While Koudriavtsev’s work in the 1990s was obscure, and the nature of the Moscow Institute he was supposedly associated with, even more so, he attracted interest in his claims when he announced a marine expedition to and survey of Little Sole Bank due to take place in 1998. The BBC, for instance, broadcast a news about it entitled ‘Russians seek Atlantis off Cornwall’. But despite his announcement the expedition never took place. Although brief, the BBC News item in question also identified an aspect unremarked upon by Koudriavtsev, namely that his hypothesis about the Little Sole Bank site had substantial resonance with myth of the land of lost Cornish land of Lyonesse (BBC, 1997: online). While the latter characterisation is only partially correct - as Lyonesse is now more commonly conceived of as being located between the tip of Cornwall and the Scilly area³ - it nevertheless merits consideration both with regard to the established myth (see Mitchell, 2016) and more recent micronational fictions of Lyonesse.

Lyonesse was established (and only exists) as an online entity. The micronation was announced in 2012 as a principality, headed by the (self-proclaimed) HR Lothian I. Its website provides a particular interpretation of traditional myths and of aspects of geographical positioning concerning Lyonesse:

On August 1, 2012, HRH Lothian I, with consent of the Royal Court, laid claim of the Atlantic Ocean Seafloor from the Celtic Shelf to Lorient Bank to Flemish Cap to Atlantis Seamount and back to the Celtic Shelf, encompassing a region formerly being the ancient lands of the Island Kingdom of Lyonesse also known as Albion in English lore, Ys in French myth, Tir na Nog of Irish legend, and even by the Greek writer Plato as Atlantis. (2015: online)

Such ambitious claims for territory are a hallmark of online micronations (which often claim far larger areas of land than their “micro” designations suggest) but the territory indicated in the above statement is somewhat confusing. Lorient Bank is located to the west of Ireland, Flemish Cap is a shallow area to the east of the Grand Banks off Newfoundland, and Atlantis Seamount lies to the north of the Azores. The expanses between these points occur within an inverted triangular shape that encompasses coastal shelves, seamounts and areas of considerable depth that would have been wholly under water during the last Ice Age.⁴ Given that the micronation is a wholly notional entity performed by the uploading of text and images to a website, such issues are, of course, trifling. The website even identifies that it subsequently extended its territorial claim under a ‘Families’ and Lands Expansion Initiative’ which added adjacent areas including the (above surface) areas of Scilly, the Azores and the Caribbean Antilles (ibid). The claim to encompass the mythical territories of Atlantis, Tir na Nog, Ys, Albion and Lyonesse is

³ The first reference to Lyonesse that suggests its position occurs in Camden (1586), which refers to the Cornish peninsula extending an unspecified length further than its current length. As Mitchell (2016) details, subsequent accounts located it somewhere in between Cornwall and the Scilly islands.

⁴ More recently the Principality has engaged in a form of online gaming by claiming the area of the US states of North and South Carolina, formerly claimed by a now defunct online micronation known as the Kingdom of Greater Carolina.

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similarly fanciful (if impressively ambitious).⁵ The Lyonesse website is, like many micronational websites, strong on symbolism, including a flag and a coat of arms. Somewhat unusually, it has a strong emphasis on the Christian nature of the nation and identifies it as being protected by an order of the Knights Templar, vividly represented by an artwork combining medieval knights, sailing ships and a vision of the Holy Grail.⁶

In response to an email I sent to Lyonesse's website inquiring as to the motivations for establishing the micronation, a representative identifying himself as the Duke of Ys⁷ communicated the following:

It is our belief that each of us... you, me, and any... are born Noble and with that our lives and what we teach ourselves and our children will reflect who we are for generations to come. It was with this in mind that we established the Principality of Lyonesse, to simply reconnect our people and any wishing these things in their lives, a chance to reconnect with their Noble and/or Royal pasts that surround each of us, to honor those in our ancestry for the benefit and honor of our inheritors... That in itself is the dream we call "Lyonesse", based upon that epic legendary Island Kingdom that once existed off the coast of Cornwall. Claiming something for ourselves and a set of ideals and code we live by. (p.c. 2nd September 2016)

In one sense there is little significance to online micronations such as Lyonesse aside from their function as showcases for imaginative fictions that allow the website's creators and subsequent collaborators to explore alternative identities in online contexts. In another, such sites – and particularly those that take established myths as their points of inspiration – are notable for representing the modern incarnations of the myths concerned and, in performing this function, extend their longevity. There is also a notable degree of overlap between Koudriavtsev's hypothesis about Atlantis occupying a similar area to that associated with lost Lyonesse and the micronation's claims to areas of the Celtic Shelf that include Sole Bank and its adjacent (and now) submarine plains. In these regards, such online fictions and amateur crypto-histories interweave to produce contemporary stories that – if only faintly – might be considered as echoes of previous human experience of coastal inundation that are particularly marked in areas such those parts of Western Europe considered by Leary (2015). It is also evident that these deep histories are of increasing relevance in the light of increasing media coverage of climate change and sea level rise. In these regards, the Lyonesse website's fanciful claims of ownership over marine areas that were once land might almost be considered a premonition of future impulses to perceive such residual ownership over the drowned coastal plains of a future Planet Earth where dispossession and alienation from traditional homelands will in all likelihood be keenly felt.

Thanks to Philip Hayward for his encouragement to write this research note and for his feedback on an earlier draft.

⁵ This general vision has much in common with Jack Vance's trilogy of Lyonesse novels (1983, 1985 and 1989), set in the mythical Elder Isles, located in (and largely filling) the Bay of Biscay.

⁶ See the Red Guard page: <http://lyonesse.weebly.com/knights-templar.html> - accessed September 2nd 2016

⁷ In Breton folklore Ys is a submerged town somewhat analogous to Lyonesse.

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