

# THE ATLANTIS STORY:

## An authentic oral tradition?

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**ABSTRACT:** The story of Atlantis appears in Plato's *Timaeus-Critias* (c. 355 BCE) as an oral tradition Solon acquired in Egypt and adapted into an epic poem, but which he left unfinished. Nevertheless, Solon told the story to his family relative Dropides, who passed it orally to his son (Critias the elder), who in turn told it to his grandson (Critias the younger). Either this oral transmission actually took place, or Plato was the fabricator. If the latter, the entire tradition (including the island of Atlantis) is likely to be fiction. This article shows there is a lack of evidence for the Atlantis story being an authentic oral tradition and highlights problems with the transmission. Supposing oral retellings of the tradition did take place, it is seemingly impossible to distinguish fact from fiction in the story since the tale of Atlantis must have been garbled as it was retold over generations; reciting a tradition by word of mouth is unreliable.

**KEYWORDS:** Atlantis; Solon; Egypt; Oral Tradition; Plato

### Introduction

As a speaker in Plato's *Timaeus-Critias*,<sup>1</sup> Critias the younger states he heard the Atlantis tale from his grandfather Critias the elder, who heard it from Dropides (his great-grandfather), a family relative and friend of Solon (*Ti.* 20e). It was Solon who acquired the oral tradition of Atlantis in Egypt (Sais) and "brought it back with him" to Athens, adapting it into an epic poem (*Ti.* 21c-d; *Cri.* 113a). The poem was left unfinished, but Solon told Dropides the story:

*CRITIAS [the younger]: It's a story that Solon, the wisest of the seven sages once vouched for. He was a kinsman and a very close friend of my great-grandfather Dropides. Solon himself says as much in his many places in his poetry. Well, Dropides told the story to my grandfather Critias, and the old man would tell it to us from memory.*<sup>2</sup> (*Ti.* 20d-e)

*CRITIAS [the younger]: It's an ancient story I heard from a man who was no youngster himself. In fact, at the time Critias [the elder] was pretty close to ninety years old already – so he said – and I was around ten or so.* (*Ti.* 21b-c)

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<sup>1</sup> *Timaeus* and *Critias* form two parts of a continuous dialogue, *Timaeus-Critias* (c. 355 BCE).

<sup>2</sup> Translation by Zeyl (1997), cf. Lee (1971) who omits Dropides from the oral transmission based on an ambiguous "he" in this passage; Lee translates "he" as Solon. Zeyl however translates "he" as Dropides, which is more likely (if Dropides was not directly involved in the oral transmission there would be no need for him to be mentioned, *Ti.* 20e).

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There is no hint as to Solon's poem being written down; Dropides, Critias the elder and Critias the younger transmit the story using their memory (*Ti.* 20e, 26a) and a "concise version" of the oral tradition was retold (*Ti.* 25e). Solon is described as having written a manuscript containing some notes on Egyptian names translated into Greek (*Cri.* 113a-b) which ended up in the possession of Critias the elder (and younger), but the manuscript did not include the story:

*There is no indication, in the Timaeus at least, that Solon did other than transmit the tale orally... Only in the Critias do we hear of a Solonian manuscript (113a-b). The two dialogues are not necessarily inconsistent on this point. The manuscript, we are told, contained a list of names which Solon had established by inquiry as to the Greek equivalents of those used in Egyptian documents. We are not told it contained any more than a mere list of names, designed as an aide memoire by Solon for his projected epic poem on the Atlantis legend. (Luce, 1978)*

Although Egyptian hieroglyphs ("documents") are mentioned as preserving the Atlantis story (*Ti.* 24a, 24e), Solon is not said to have seen them.<sup>3</sup> The pre-Solonic source of the tradition therefore is oral; the Egyptians too rely on their memory, not a written record (Clay, 1999). Whether Atlantis is "fact or fiction"<sup>4</sup> can be deduced from the authenticity of the Atlantis tale as an Egyptian oral tradition and its transmission by word of mouth. Plato could have fabricated the origin of the tradition and its oral transmission, which casts doubt on the island of Atlantis having ever existed:

*If Plato was willing to 'bend the facts' about the transmission of the tale, might not the tale itself have experienced such distortion? Or... is it all simply a 'literary fiction'? (Forsyth, 1980: 44)*

### Solon and Egypt

There are three problems with accepting Plato's statement that Solon travelled to Egypt and heard an oral tradition (ie the Atlantis story) which he adapted into an epic poem (*Cri.* 113a). Firstly, there is no reliable historical evidence Solon (c. 640 – c. 560 BCE) visited Egypt during his lifetime (Lloyd, 1975: 56-57). Herodotus' *The Histories* (c. 440 BCE) has to be

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<sup>3</sup> When the Egyptian priests discuss the island of Atlantis with Solon (*Ti.* 24e), "documents" are mentioned, but they do not directly consult them. The priests assert they will reveal their written record (*Ti.* 24a), but they could be liars?

<sup>4</sup> The title of a 1975 symposium 'Atlantis: Fact or Fiction?' sponsored by the Department of Classical Studies at Indiana University (Ramage, 1978). The vast majority of classicists since Jowett (1892) maintain the island of Atlantis is fiction, ie Plato's invention. A small number of classicists however have suggested there is a historical core in the Atlantis tale and equate the island of Atlantis with an ancient civilization, eg Minoan Crete (Frost, 1913; Luce, 1969: 140-141). But as Hood has asserted, "[w]hile Luce and Frost have argued in a serious and reasonable manner for an Aegean reality behind the story of Atlantis, the weight of Classical scholarship has always favoured the view that Plato invented it" (1980: 162). It should be noted that the author of this article formerly proposed a historical site for Atlantis in Greece (Smith, 2013). He no longer defends his earlier fringe hypothesis and since 2015 has argued the Atlantis story is fiction, with no underlying basis in history.

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rejected as a historical source because it dates Solon's trip between 569 – 560 BCE when Amasis (II) was pharaoh (Hdt. 1. 29). The problem is Herodotus also states Solon visited Egypt immediately after his archonship (594/3 BCE) during a period of ten years when he travelled abroad (Hdt. 1. 30). It is hard to make much sense of this chronological error, but attempts have been made to revise Solon's archonship twenty years later (Miller, 1969). Such revisions are unnecessary when it is realized Herodotus' *The Histories* includes a made up story about Solon visiting Lydia (Forsyth, 1980: 34-35), in other words stories about Solon should be read with caution. Aristotle in his *Athenian Constitution* (11. 1) repeats Herodotus' claim Solon travelled to Egypt as part of a ten year journey but source criticism should not gloss over the fact Aristotle (384 – 322 BCE) lived two centuries after Solon. A fragment from a poem attributed to Solon by Plutarch (c. 100 CE) does mention the Nile Delta, but he could have written it without first-hand knowledge; the fragment<sup>5</sup> cannot be Solon's unfinished Atlantis poem – it mentions nothing about Atlantis.

Secondly, the oral tradition does not appear in ancient Egyptian myth. While Marinatos (1950) found aspects of the Atlantis story in an Egyptian legend (of the XII Dynasty) called 'Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor', differences exist (Griffiths, 1985), and similarities are coincidental. The fact no evidence supports the oral tradition derived from Egypt is why most scholars are inclined to take the sceptical view Plato not only fabricated the Egyptian source, but the whole Atlantis story (Renfrew, 1992). Thirdly, if Solon went to Egypt and was told an oral tradition, it remains a puzzle why no other traveller heard the same story; Plato notes Solon visited the city Sais (in the Nile Delta) and spoke with its priests (*Ti.* 22a). In the 5th Century BCE, Herodotus visited the same location and conversed with the Saitic priests, yet: "there is nothing in the narrative of Herodotus which can be construed as a reference to Atlantis" (Fears, 1978).

### Plato's Dialogues

*Timaeus-Critias* (c. 355 BCE) was among Plato's last written dialogues. Forsyth (1980: 77) has surveyed his earlier works to see if he recorded any authentic Greek traditions. With the possible exception of a single tale (*Gorgias.* 523a-e), there are no stories recognisable as traditional myths. Concerning the story of Atlantis, Forsyth concludes:

*Plato is twice as likely to have invented it as to have recorded an authentic tradition; our examination has shown that... there is reason to look upon the myth of Atlantis with cautious scepticism.* (ibid)

Plato also had a habit of fabricating oral transmissions of his stories, which suggests he did the same for Atlantis:

*Even if it seems highly probable, or even evident, to us that a certain myth was invented by Plato, he likes to pretend that it is a genuine excerpt from the real reservoir of oral legends present in Greek culture.* (Most, 2012: 17)

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<sup>5</sup> "Where Nile pours Forth his floods, near the Canobic shore." (Plut. *Sol.* 26)

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### The Atlantis Tradition

The tradition of the island of Atlantis is absent from all extant classical Greek literature, except Plato:

*Plato's dialogues contain the only reference in the whole of ancient literature to the disappearing island of Atlantis, and no further mention is made of this story until other people begin quoting Plato. (Ellis, 1998: 11)*

On the other hand, it might be argued the Atlantis story need not be independent of Plato's *Timaeus-Critias* for it to be authentic because Plato describes the oral transmission within a single family (Kopff, 1980). Plato was a sixth-generation descendant of Dropides (Figure 1); those who make a case for the oral transmission can point out Plato's consanguinity to the family to explain how he was a recipient of the tradition and its only publisher in literary form:

*Solon's account... descended to Plato by the route he indicates within his own family. This would explain why it was a genuine historical tradition, and yet not a part of current Greek mythology. (Luce, 1969: 140)*

However, this does not give credence to the oral tradition because passing on a story by word of mouth is not reliable; Plato asserts Critias the younger (despite purporting to recollect the story) had trouble relying on his memory (*Ti.* 26a). Furthermore, according to *Timaeus-Critias*, when Critias the elder recited the story to the much younger Critias, he was ninety years old: "the form of a story told by an old man to a credulous infant does nothing to make it more credible to Plato's readers" (Gill, 1980: 40). If the oral transmission took place, whatever Plato heard could never have been the story (verbatim) as it was originally told from Solon to Dropides. As the tradition was retold over several generations, it was undoubtedly modified in the same way that information is lost, added or changed during a game of Chinese whispers. It follows the Atlantis tale must have already been garbled prior to Solon because the Egyptian priests are not said to have consulted their documents, but too relied on their (fallible) memory to transmit the story.

If the tale of Atlantis is an authentic oral tradition – it is likely to contain a core of historical truth (most oral traditions directly arise out of folk memories), but it is seemingly an impossible task to distinguish fact from fiction in the tale:

*By judicious selection of those parts of Plato's account which fit, and rejection of those which do not as distortions or exaggerations, a case can be made for almost any part of the world as the site of a historical Atlantis, and indeed it is hard to find any part of the world which has not been proposed at one time or another. (Vitaliano, 1973: 229)*

Needless to say this approach is a waste of time and has led to what Jordan (2001) calls the 'Atlantis Syndrome'. Proponents of a historical island of Atlantis should only seek to provide evidence the Atlantis story is an authentic oral tradition. However, because the only source for Solon's poetry is Plato: those who make a case for the oral transmission (eg Luce, 1969: 23-24) base their argument exclusively on "taking Plato's own account of his story at face value" (Gill, 1980: ix) and this lack of evidence is why most classicists deny the existence of the poem (Tulli, 2013).

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### Oral Pedigree

The oral transmission of the Atlantis tale from Dropides to Critias the younger rests on the latter being Plato's great-grandfather. It has been known for a century (Burnet, 1914: 338) that there is a problem with the oral pedigree of the story if Critias the younger is the oligarch Critias the tyrant (Plato's first cousin once removed) not the tyrant's grandfather (Plato's great-grandfather): five generations are telescoped into three, ie two generations are missing:

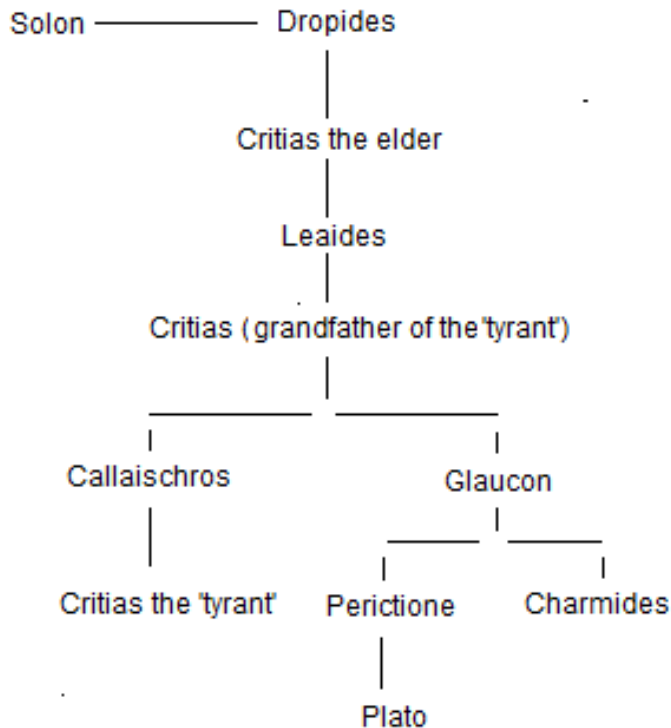


Figure 1 - Plato's genealogy.

Solon is described by Plato as a kinsman of Dropides' family (*Ti.* 20e), but his exact blood relationship is not specified (Diogenes Laertius<sup>6</sup> has him as a brother of Dropides, but he could be a cousin). If Critias the tyrant is Critias the younger in *Timaeus-Critias*, two generations of Plato's ancestors (Leaides and the tyrant's grandfather) in the oral pedigree are missing which means the oral transmission could not have occurred. Despite what some say, there is no valid reason to doubt Critias the younger is the tyrant (460 – 403 BCE):

*Timaeus-Critias does not give any indication that the character of Critias must be distinct from the tyrant... Both Diogenes and Proclus... take the Critias of Timaeus-Critias to be the tyrant... If Plato intended this character to be*

<sup>6</sup> A 3rd Century CE biographer of Plato.

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*identified as the tyrant's grandfather, he would have been more careful in clarifying this, as the name Critias would quickly resonate with the tyrant in the minds of his fourth-century Athenian audience.* (Flores, 2013: 64)

What does this mean for the oral transmission of the story? Simply, it could not have taken place owing to difficulties with chronology.<sup>7</sup> Unless evidence comes to light and identifies the tyrant's grandfather with Critias the younger – the oral transmission of the Atlantis story cannot be considered authentic. Why Plato left out two generations from his lineage remains a mystery: for some the genealogy telescoping is a mistake owing to his carelessness (Rosenmeyer, 1949), for others, he held incomplete genealogical knowledge (Thomas, 1989: 171), or he intentionally tampered with the oral pedigree: “to remind his readers how unreliable stories related by word of mouth are” (Zuckert, 2009: 430).

### Conclusion

It is reasonable to presume that if Plato fabricated the Atlantis story's origin (ie Egypt) he also invented the island of Atlantis, or rather the entire tale. Alternatively, if the story of Atlantis is an authentic oral tradition, it is probable the tale has a core of historical truth. Which of these viewpoints is correct? Almost certainly the former based on the sheer lack of evidence for Solon having travelled to Egypt, absence of the Atlantis tradition in Egyptian mythology, impossible chronology of oral transmission and Plato's penchant for fabricating traditions. One of the first classicists to write a commentary on *Timaeus-Critias* (Benjamin Jowett), independently reached the conclusion of this article:

*Passing from the external to the internal evidence, we may remark that the story is far more likely to have been invented by Plato than to have been brought by Solon from Egypt.* (Jowett, 1892: 431)

At the same time, the Atlantis story as an authentic oral tradition, while very unlikely, has not been discredited. However, if the island of Atlantis existed: garbled oral retellings would have made it impossible to discover. Clearly all ancient traditions suffer from this same problem to some extent, but the Atlantis story, unlike a popular myth like the Trojan War, has only one primary source (ie Plato). Convergence of evidence from separate concurrent sources supports the existence of Troy, but not Atlantis. Luce (1969: 16), a rare scholarly proponent of a historical Atlantis, acknowledged this difficulty: “Atlantis is much less securely rooted in ancient Greek tradition than the Trojan War saga”. In fact, this can be taken further – the island of Atlantis is not rooted in any Greek or Egyptian tradition at all.

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<sup>7</sup> Critias the younger heard the Atlantis story when he was about “ten, or so” when Critias the elder (then ninety years of age) told him the tradition (*Ti.* 21b). Critias the tyrant was born in 460 BCE, which dates the oral transmission from the elder to younger Critias, c. 450 BCE. The elder Critias was born c. 600 BCE (Brisson: 1998: 29). This means the chronology of the oral pedigree is erroneous, ie Critias the elder could not have lived over one and a half centuries.

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