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CRANTOR AND POSIDONIUS ON ATLANTIS

The story of Atlantis, inspiration (on a recent estimate) of more than 20,000 books, rests entirely on an elaborate Platonic myth (*Timaeus* 20d–26e, continued in *Critias* 108d–121c), allegedly based on a private, oral tradition deriving from Solon. Solon himself is supposed to have heard the story in Egypt; a priest obligingly translated it for him from hieroglyphic inscriptions in a temple in Sais. It might be added that (unlike his modern readers) Plato is less concerned with Atlantis than with her rival and conqueror, the Athens of that antediluvian age 9600 B.C. That Plato himself made the whole story up (fashionable recent theories about Thera notwithstanding) is indeed virtually demonstrable. This is not the place for such a demonstration (not that any amount of proof could destroy the faith of the true believer),[1] but it is at any rate possible to eliminate completely one of the crucial props on which belief has always leaned.

I

According to almost every Atlantis book with enough scholarly pretensions to quote ancient sources at all, Plato's account was checked and confirmed from the same Egyptian records shown to Solon by the first commentator on the *Timaeus*, Crantor of Soli (ca. 340–275 B.C.). This claim, based on Proclus' commentary on the *Timaeus* (*In Tim.* 24a–b, i p. 76 Diehl), appears not only in such flights of fantasy as the recent book of the German scientist Otto Muck[2] (for whom Atlantis was destroyed by an asteroid at 1 p.m. on 5 June, 8498 B.C.):

> Crantor came to Sais and saw there in the temple of Neith the column, completely covered with hieroglyphs, on which the history of Atlantis was recorded. Scholars translated it for him, and he testified that their account fully agreed with Plato's account of Atlantis.... Perhaps this priceless document is still hidden in the silt of the Nile.

but also in the sane and scholarly book of J. V. Luce:[3]

> Crantor...even, it seems, went to the length of sending a special enquiry to Egypt to verify the sources of the story, and the priests replied that the records of it were still extant 'on pillars'.

and even in so formidable a connoisseur of fourth-century Greek literature as Werner Jaeger:[4]

> Krantor hält den Atlantismythos für Geschichte. Denn inzwischen, führte er aus, hätten die ägyptischen Priester auf alten στήλαι, die noch zu seiner Zeit vorhanden seien, die Existenz des athenischen Volkes in Jener frühen Zeit bestätigt gefunden.

There is no need to amass further examples. The only difference between the various modern versions lies in whether Crantor is supposed to have seen the hieroglyphs and

[1] Much the best account of Atlantis literature over the centuries is L. Sprague De Camp's *Lost Continents: The Atlantis Theme in History, Science and Literature* (revised edition, New York, Dover Books, 1970). The estimate of 20,000 books is taken from O. Muck (next note).

[2] *The Secret of Atlantis* (New York, 1978), pp. 16–17.

[3] *The End of Atlantis* (London, 1969), p. 12.

[4] *Diokles von Karystos: die griechische Medizin und die Schule des Aristoteles* (Berlin, 1938), pp. 128–9.

spoken to the priests himself[5] or simply learned of them from contemporary travellers.[6] Either way, if there is any truth in the story at all, unbelievers have more than Plato to contend with.

One might and should begin by pointing out that in the first place Egyptian records are not known for sympathetic accounts of foreign powers, and that even if Crantor (or for that matter Solon) had had direct communication with the priests of Sais, it would be naive to suppose that they had not added a further level of distortion themselves. The two Greek historians we know to have drawn on Egyptian priestly records, Herodotus and Hecataeus of Abdera (of whom more below), undoubtedly report a great deal of very dubious information, the priestly bias of which can sometimes be clearly perceived.[7] By Crantor's day a priest of Ptolemaic Egypt might well have known Plato's *Timaeus* (if not Hecataeus too) and would have had as strong a motive as Crantor to wish it literally true. For if true, it was as vital a document for Egyptian (especially Saite) as for Athenian history.

Fortunately, we do not need to question either the honesty or the credulity of Crantor or his informants – or even the expertise of their interpreters. The entire story is based on a simple misinterpretation of Proclus. Here is the passage (p. 76 Diehl):

> As for the whole of this account of the Atlanteans, some say that it is unadorned history (*ἱστορίαν ψιλήν*),[8] such as Crantor, the first commentator on Plato. Crantor also says (*φησι*) 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.

Then comes the crucial sentence:

μαρτυροῦσι δὲ καὶ οἱ προφῆται, φησι, Αἰγυπτίων ἐν στήλαις ταῖς ἔτι σωζομέναις ταῦτα γεγράφθαι λέγοντες,

which Thomas Taylor[9] translated as follows:

> 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.

This is obviously the source of the story of Crantor's Egyptian researches. Not only, however, does it lack all the circumstantial detail of the modern versions. More important, there is no indication in Proclus that it is Crantor rather than Plato who is the subject of the sentence.

Now it is theoretically possible to take Crantor as the subject, on the ground that the second *φησι*, like the first (quoted above), introduces a statement from Crantor's commentary. Yet the run of the passage points more naturally to Plato. Note too that

[5] e.g. A. G. Galanopoulos and E. Bacon, *Atlantis: The Truth Behind the Legend* (Indianapolis/New York, 1969), p. 15: 'Crantor had been shown panels bearing hieroglyphic inscriptions...'.

[6] e.g. J. Bramwell, *Lost Atlantis* (New York, 1938), p. 64 ('contemporary Greeks'), De Camp, *Lost Continents* (n. 1), p. 18 ('Egyptian priests who showed tourists columns'), and Martin, quoted below, n. 13.

[7] Oswyn Murray's excellent recent study of the bias of Hecataeus' history (n. 16 below) carries as its motto Gibbon's remark that 'falsehood...is not incompatible with the sacerdotal character'.

[8] There is no reason to believe that this phrase is Crantor's rather than Proclus'; *ψιλός* perhaps means rather 'literal' as opposed to metaphorical, a meaning amply attested in and after Origen (Lampe, *Patr. Lex.* s.v.l.a.).

[9] *The Commentaries of Proclus on the Timaeus of Plato* 1 (London, 1820), p. 64; Taylor had already made his misinterpretation public in the brief introduction to his translation of the *Timaeus* itself (London, 1804).

in its context this brief sentence does not at all suggest the dramatic confirmation and vindication of Plato's story that has been claimed for it in modern times. Nor is there any indication whether Crantor (if he were really the subject) obtained this Egyptian information in person, from a written source or by consulting travellers. Yet if he had indeed discovered the 'priceless document' Muck supposed, he would surely have given (and Proclus would have repeated) some such circumstantial validating details as the modern writers quoted above, perceiving the need, supply out of their own imagination.

The sentence cannot be torn out of its context in this way. Proclus begins this section of his commentary by stating 'as for this whole story about the Atlanteans, some say that it is unadorned history', and then continues after the sentence we are discussing: 'others say that it is a myth and a fiction and never happened at all....' Fifty pages later he recapitulates, echoing his own earlier words: 'we must bear in mind concerning this whole feat of the Athenians, that it is neither a mere myth nor unadorned history, although some take it as history and others as myth...' (i p. 129 Diehl). Some more discussion of the mythical interpretation follows, but nothing more on the historical interpretations, nothing more about Crantor and his supposed pillars, before Proclus states his own subtle compromise between the two extremes. That is to say, the course of Proclus' argument has proceeded entirely as if he had *not* already himself quoted decisive documentary proof of the historical interpretation. On the contrary, he clearly treated Crantor's view as mere personal opinion, nothing more; in fact he first quotes and then dismisses it as representing one of the two unacceptable extremes.

Once Plato is restored as subject, the sentence about the priests and pillars takes on a perfectly natural and appropriate sense in its context. Proclus quotes two quite separate comments from Crantor: first a bare statement of his belief in the historical truth of the Atlantis story; and second, in more detail, his explanation of Plato's Egyptian framework. Contemporaries had jokingly accused Plato of taking his ideas for the *Republic* from the Egyptians, evidently referring to the similarities between Plato's caste system and the Egyptian caste system well known from Herodotus (2. 164 f.) and, more recently, from Isocrates' *Busiris* (15 f.). Whether or not Isocrates' remark that 'philosophers who undertake to discuss such topics and have won the greatest reputation prefer above all others the Egyptian form of government' (*Bus.* 19) is a direct reference to the *Republic* depends on the dates of the two works, neither certainly known,[10] but in view of the known rivalry of Plato and Isocrates, this is likely to have been one of the passages Crantor had in mind. The rejoinder to this criticism, which Proclus describes, is to be found in *Timaeus* 24b–d, where the Egyptian priest explicitly credits the antediluvian Athenians with priority over his own ancestors in the matter of the caste system. The vexed sentence is merely one more detail in this comment: the way Plato 'proved' the priority of the Athenians was the story of the pillars reported to Solon by the priests.

The recent translation by A. J. Festugière[11] gets the subject of $\phi\eta\sigma\iota$ right, but leaves one other point in doubt:

en témoignent, *dit Platon* (23a4), les prophètes aussi des Égyptiens, qui disent que ces choses ont été gravées sur des stèles conservées jusqu'à ce jour.

[10] See K. Ries, *Isokrates und Platon im Ringen um die Philosophia*, Diss. (Munich, 1959), pp. 51 f. It is in any case perfectly possible, in the small academic world of fourth-century Athens, that Plato's views might have become well known through lectures and discussions long before he issued the *Republic* in its final form.

[11] *Proclus: commentaire sur le Timée* 1 (Paris, 1966), p. 111 (my italics).

Proclus' ἔτι σωζομέναις surely refers, not (as Festugière implies) to Proclus' day, nor even to Plato's day (Plato is careful not to lay himself open to contradiction by suggesting that there was any documentary evidence extant when he wrote), but to *Solon's* day. ἔτι σωζομέναις picks up σεσωσμένα in the very *Timaeus* passage (23a) where the priest first mentions the ancient records he is going to report to Solon.

It might be added that, even if Crantor were supplied as the subject of the second φησι, it would still be more natural to refer the sentence to *Plato's* proof as described in this passage of *Timaeus*. That is to say:

> the proof (of the story), says (Crantor), is the Egyptian priests who report that it was inscribed on pillars that still stood (sc. in Solon's day).

Assuming that he did *not* rediscover the pillars, what else could Crantor do but refer to Plato's claim that they once existed?

The ultimate source of the diffusion of this misinterpretation of Proclus' reference to Crantor is probably to be sought, not in Taylor's translation itself,[12] but in the full and balanced survey of early Atlantis literature in T. H. Martin's *Études sur le Timée de Platon*:[13] 'Crantor...admettait de même la vérité parfaite de ce recit, et citait à l'appui l'autorité des prêtres Égyptiens qui de son temps montraient aux Grecs des colonnes où tout cette histoire, disaient-ils, se trouvait écrite' (p. 259, though his common sense led him to add later, p. 325, that 'ces voyageurs grecs, ne sachant pas plus que Solon lire les hiéroglyphes, étaient obligés, comme lui, d'en croire les prêtres sur parole'). Martin's was the first comprehensive survey of ancient, medieval and modern writings on Atlantis and exercised a wide influence (still cited, for example, by Bramwell, De Camp and Luce).

II

So no confirmation, whether at first or second hand, of the hieroglyphs in the temple of Neith at Sais supposedly seen by Solon. Plato's wonderful story has to stand entirely on its own. All that we can attribute to Crantor is an act of faith, and readers must make up their own minds whether the now unsupported belief of a man writing at least fifty years after Plato's death outweighs the trenchantly expressed disbelief of Aristotle, Plato's colleague at the Academy for twenty years:[14] 'its creator destroyed it' (ὁ πλάσας αὐτὴν ἠφάνισεν).

No less decisive in a different way is the silence of the series of Atthides that appeared during the century after the *Timaeus*. How could a genre invented at just this moment for the sole purpose of investigating and recording the origins and glories of Athens have passed up so glorious an achievement at an unsuspectedly early dawn of Athenian history if it had any basis in history – or even legend? For the scope of the Atthides was by no means restricted to securely attested historical events. Much space was devoted to the collecting and embellishing of the myths and legends of Athens. The same applies to the orators. For example, the earliest Athenian exploits in Isocrates' *Panathenaicus* or the *Funeral Oration* ascribed to Lysias are from the age of Theseus. The answer is simple and revealing. Not only did the orators and

[12] Though De Camp, for example, quotes directly from Taylor's translation in an appendix (*Lost Continents*, pp. 309–11).

[13] 2 (Paris, 1841), pp. 257–333.

[14] A combination from Strabo 2. 3. 6 and 13. 1. 36. The second passage seems to be a quotation of a well known judgment on Atlantis, and the first implies that its author was Aristotle. But the attribution is far from certain.

Atthidographers not regard Plato's account of the struggle between antediluvian Athens and Atlantis as history; they did not even regard it as genuine legend.

Crantor seems to have stood alone among Athenian intellectuals of his age in seeing Plato's story as anything but a typical Platonic myth. Some of Plato's myths do have roots in genuinely ancient myths and legends, of course; for example, the story of Prometheus and Epimetheus in the *Protagoras*, the three races of men in *Rep.* 3, or the judgment of the dead in the *Gorgias*. But most do not, and in the judgment of contemporaries, it seems, the Atlantis story was wholly the product of Plato's own rich imagination, with no basis in authentic Athenian tradition.

So what, assuming that we can forget about the supposed rediscovery of the Saite stelae, led Crantor to his own rather surprising conviction that it was 'unadorned history'? So far as can be judged from the excerpts quoted by Proclus and Plutarch, Crantor was a conscientious and intelligent commentator;[15] certainly no crackpot forerunner of Ignatius Donnelly or the Theosophists. First, we should not perhaps underestimate the sheer power of wishful thinking on the man who wants enough to believe. Then there is the consideration, which still weighed heavily with Proclus and indeed Dr Muck ('those who insist that it is a myth accuse Plato of a blatant lie'), that Plato twice states that his story is not fiction (μῦθος) but fact (*Tim.* 20e, 26e). 'These comments', writes J. V. Luce, 'seem noticeably different in tone from those which frame the myth of Theuth and Thamus in the *Phaedrus* (e.g. 274c, "I can tell you a story from the men of former times, but only they know whether or not it is true", and cf. 275b).' But in the course of the *Gorgias* myth Plato insists no fewer than four times that it is fact rather than fiction (523a, 524b, 526d, 527a), and who can believe that he was much concerned with the *literal* rather than the religious truth of that myth (see E. R. Dodds' commentary on 523a2)? Furthermore, the *Timaeus* affirmations are not to be extracted from their context. The dialogue opens with Socrates recapitulating the main features of his ideal republic and hoping that someone will illustrate his theory in practice, in particular how it functions in war, the acid test of a constitution. This is what Critias' account of the war between antediluvian Athens and Atlantis supplies. It is not being described as true *absolutely*, but as a 'historical' illustration of Plato's political theory.

Crantor evidently took a more literal line. But, living as he did in the great age of historical research at Athens, he is bound to have looked for more circumstantial support as well. Jaeger argued that he read the *Egyptian History* of Hecataeus of Abdera, a work which unquestionably made extensive use of Egyptian priestly sources.[16] Jaeger's only positive argument, Crantor's supposed reference to the stelae at Sais, must unfortunately now be abandoned. None the less, it is in itself highly

[15] Von Arnim, *PW* xi. 2. 1585–8.

[16] See the full discussion (with earlier bibliography) in O. Murray, 'Hecataeus of Abdera and Pharaonic Kingship', *JEA* 56 (1970), 141–71, and the summary in P. M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria* 1 (Oxford, 1972), pp. 496–505. Anne Burton, *Diodorus Siculus Book i: A Commentary* (Leiden, 1972), argues, following Spoerri, that Schwartz and Jacoby exaggerated the extent of the Hecataean material in Diodorus 1, but it is doubtful whether her objections go as far to undermine their case as she supposes. I take only one: 'it is difficult to understand why Diodorus should not have named Hecataeus elsewhere in the book [i.e. elsewhere than 1. 46. 8], if he is excerpting him as assiduously as is generally believed, particularly when one considers, for example, the many references to Ctesias in Book II' (pp. 8–9). But almost all the references to Ctesias are for silly stories or ridiculous figures for which even Diodorus was unwilling to take sole responsibility, whereas he was anxious to conceal the extent of his debt to the more reliable Hecataeus, as the deliberately misleading form of his reference at 1. 46. 8 makes clear (cf. Murray, p. 145, n. 1).

probable that, given the crucial and controversial background of his subject, the *Timaeus*, Crantor should have turned to this authoritative and philosophically oriented recent work. Hecataeus' book seems to have appeared around 315, certainly not later than 305, well before Crantor is likely to have published.

Theophrastus' *de lapidibus*, probably published in 315/14, quotes twice from 'records concerning the Egyptian kings', and it is hardly likely that both men were engaged in simultaneous but independent research into Egyptian records. Then there is the quarrelsome Alexinus of Elis, who taught at Megara early in the third century. In his *On self-sufficiency* (περὶ αὐταρκείας) he quotes as an example of the virtue the preference of Bocchoris and his father 'Neochabis' for simple food, quoting Hecataeus for the Egyptians as bread-eaters. More details are supplied by Diodorus 1. 45. 2 (drawing on Hecataeus, as we shall see) and Plutarch *De Is. et. Osir.* 8, *Mor.* 354B (quoting Hecataeus on the preceding and following pages, 353B and 354D): Tnephachthus (Techactis, Plutarch) the father of Bocchoris once ate common food when his supplies were held up on a campaign in Arabia; he enjoyed it – and execrated luxurious living in a hieroglyphic inscription in the temple of 'Zeus' (Amun) in Thebes. By a lucky chance what must be a copy, if not the original, of this very inscription has survived, the stele of the Nubian conqueror Piankhi. Only here it is in the course of a humble letter of *submission* to Piankhi that Tefnakhte, a Saite prince whose son Bocchoris later established himself as Pharaoh, confessed:[17]

> By thy ka, the terror of thee is in my body. I have not sat in the beer-hall, nor has the harp been played for me; but I have eaten bread in hunger, and I have drunk water in thirst, since that day when thou heardest my name. Disease is in my bones, my head is bare, my clothing is rags, till Neith is appeased towards me.

Little sign in the description of Tefnakhte's diet here of voluntary renunciation. Yet it is difficult to believe that there was ever another inscription (especially in Upper Egypt, where Tefnakhte's writ did not run) which made any reference at all to the modesty of his diet. Once his son had become Pharaoh it was inevitable that Tefnakhte's fame should be embellished, and it is not surprising that this public reference to his enforced and metaphorical abstemiousness was given a more favourable, literal reinterpretation. Its eventual classification under the very Greek heading of self-sufficiency we may surely ascribe to Hecataeus hmself, who (according to Clement of Alexandria) proclaimed-self-sufficiency as the principal goal of man.

Two conclusions relevant to this study follow. First, it is instructive to see how far the combination of priestly rewriting and Greek philosophizing has falsified the original inscription – which is none the less still cited as though it validated Hecataeus' story to the letter. Second, Alexinus must have derived his unhistorical moral example directly from Hecataeus, whose book was evidently already circulating in the philosophical circles of the Greek mainland by the turn of the century. Half a century later the Atthidographer Philochorus seems to have derived his account of the supposed Egyptian origin of Cecrops from Hecataeus.[18] It would be natural for Crantor too to have turned to him in search of confirmation for the Egyptian side of Plato's Atlantis story.

If so, however, he will not have found there all that he wanted. Hecataeus' book does not survive intact, but we can form a fairly good idea of its scope and contents from Bk 1 of Diodorus Siculus, which (it is now generally agreed) is essentially an epitome of Hecataeus. This must certainly be true of Diod. 1. 28–9, a detailed attempt

[17] J. H. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt* (Chicago, 1906), p. 442.
[18] Murray, pp. 166–9.

to prove that Athens was a Saite colony.[19] This is a good example of the bias that characterized Hecataeus' history as a whole and doubtless won him the favour of its new ruler Ptolemy, 'a work of propaganda portraying Egypt in a light which would appeal to Greek, and perhaps Egyptian, educated opinion'.[20] The Egyptian priest in the *Timaeus* had taken diametrically the opposite line. Hecataeus (ap. Diod. 1. 28. 5) specifically derived the historical Athenian classes of Eupatrids, geomoroi and demiourgoi from the Egyptian caste system; Plato's priest went out of his way to concede Athenian priority on precisely this point (*Tim.* 24b). It is natural to wonder whether Hecataeus was consciously contradicting Plato here, though there are several other texts to be taken into account before we are in a position to pose such a question. According to a later page in Proclus' commentary,[21] Callisthenes[22] and Phanodemus[23] claimed that 'the Athenians were the ancestors of the Saites whereas Theopompus said that Athens was a colony of Sais'.

Callisthenes is the historian executed by Alexander in 327, and Phanodemus the Athenian politician and Atthidographer, a close contemporary of Callisthenes. 'Theopompus', however, refers to the pseudonymous pamphlet *Trikaranos* put out under Theopompus' name to discredit him by the rhetor Anaximenes of Lampsacus, some time before 336.[24] The probability is that Anaximenes was first in the field and that Phanodemus wrote in reply, though no precision is possible. All three wrote before Hecataeus and Crantor, and it may be that it was Crantor who first assembled the dossier (though Proclus may have found his summary of the controversy in the commentary of the second century A.D. Platonist Atticus, whose adverse judgment on the 'Theopompus' version he quotes).

Then there is the anti-Egyptian chapter in Diodorus 5. 57. 2 f., where, after stating that after the destruction of all Greek records in the flood the Egyptians falsely claimed credit for the astrological knowledge they had in fact learned from the Heliadae of Rhodes, Diodorus continues (in flat contradiction to 1. 28. 4 from Hecataeus):

> Likewise the Athenians, although they were the founders of the city in Egypt men called Sais, suffered from the same ignorance because of the flood.

Diodorus' immediate source here was apparently the second-century Rhodian historian Zeno of Rhodes,[25] though it would not be surprising if Zeno had derived this detail from his fellow local historian Phanodemus. But whatever the ultimate source of the passage, more important and relevant is the obvious use of Plato's argument (*Timaeus* 22 c f.) that it was because of the destruction of their records in one of the several intervening floods that the Athenians were ignorant of their priority over the Egyptians.

Even if it was Phanodemus who used Plato's argument, there is certainly nothing

[19] Burton is at her weakest when she argues (p. 11) that this section might as easily derive from Plato (who said the opposite) or 'Theopompus' (whom she takes to be Theopompus). In the context it is obvious Ptolemaic propaganda (Murray, pp. 145–8). Diodorus concludes (1. 29. 5–6) that these stories of the spread of culture to the rest of the world through Egyptian colonies were not sufficiently documented, and '*since no historian worthy of trust supports them*, I have not thought their accounts worth recording'. Burton infers that this excludes Hecataeus (p. 18), but Diodorus surely means that Hecataeus' improbable colonization stories (as he rightly judged them) were not borne out by any of the obvious *other* sources (i.e. the relevant local historians). Who but a pro-Egyptian writer such as Hecataeus would have invented such stories?

[20] Murray, p. 166.

[21] I. p. 97.27f. Diehl with the notes in Festugière's translation, p. 139.

[22] F. Jacoby, *FGrHist* IIB 124 F51.

[23] *FGrHist* IIIB 325 F25, with Jacoby's commentary in IIIB Suppl. I, pp. 193–4.

[24] *FGrHist* IIA F20. For Athens as a Saite colony see too Charax of Pergamum (now known to be of the 2nd c. A.D.), *FGrHist* 103 F39.

[25] Abel, *PW* XA, Zenon 6, 138–40.

to indicate that either he or Callisthenes took Plato's account as a whole for history. Indeed the fact that Proclus only cites them in his note on the 'kinship' between Athens and Sais (*Tim.* 21e) is proof enough that they cannot have said anything either way on the larger and (to him) more relevant issue of Atlantis. Nor does Plato say that Sais was an Athenian colony, though his claim that Athens was founded 1000 years before Sais (*Tim.* 23e) might well have suggested the idea. None the less, a commentator on the *Timaeus* early in the third century is bound to have been impressed by the preoccupation of recent historians with the links between prehistoric Athens and Egypt – and by the use they made of the *Timaeus*. Though naturally disappointed that Hecataeus' Egyptian records did not actually mention Atlantis, he may well have felt that, provided that one reversed Hecataeus' own obvious bias, the parallels he had collected went some way to confirm at any rate the Athenian side of Plato's story, the similarity between early Athenian and Egyptian institutions. In particular, the connection which Plato himself had not mentioned, between the Egyptian castes and the pre-Solonian classes at Athens (traditionally attributed to Theseus), might have seemed to support Plato's case in an important detail.

Furthermore, Hecataeus twice refers to the Egyptian visit of Solon (Diod. 1. 69, 98). Now Proclus, on the authority of the 'histories of the Egyptians' (i, p. 101 Diehl), tells us the names of the priests Solon talked to, not only at Sais (Pateneit) but at Heliopolis and Sebennytos. Now there are not many 'Egyptian histories' which are likely to have offered this information, and since Hecataeus undoubtedly discussed Solon's visit and had every motive to play up his debt to Egyptian wisdom, he may fairly be reckoned the favourite candidate. Nor is there any need to talk of fraud or fiction. He may simply have consulted priest-lists for the incumbents at the presumed time of Solon's visit.[26]

It is in this sort of general circumstantial detail that Crantor is likely to have found his confirmation. Hardly the spectacular proof with which he has been credited hitherto, but perhaps enough for one who was only looking for confirmation.

The Athenian side of Plato's story harmonizes very well with the traditional Greek picture of the philhellene Saite kingdom (664–525) – too well, in fact. The identification of Neith, in whose temple the precious pillars stood (*Tim.* 21e; 23a), with Athena was firmly established by Herodotus' day (2. 28), and no doubt by Solon's too.[27] But it cannot have gone back much before then, nor was Neith a prominent deity in pre-Saite times.[28] The pre-Saite dynasties had no such special relationship with Athens as Plato describes, and the Old Kingdom (the period Plato had in mind, despite his '9000 years' before Solon – cf. *Laws* 2, 656e) no relationship with Greece at all. Nor would Old Kingdom records have been engraved on pillars at Sais. Paradoxically enough, the details that may have most impressed Crantor are in fact the clearest proofs that Plato's Atlantis story does *not* preserve a genuinely early Egyptian tradition.

III

So far as can be judged from the names and opinions cited by Proclus, not one of the many other *Timaeus*–commentators in the eight centuries between Crantor and himself shared Crantor's literalist approach. But one more important figure (who may

[26] The fact that Plutarch (*Solon* 26) names two different priests from Sais and Heliopolis does not necessarily prove both lists fictitious, though of course either or both may be.

[27] Rusch, *PW* s.v. Neith, 2190 f.; Hofer, Roscher's *Myth. Lexicon* iv. 275.

[28] Rusch. ib. 2197–8, argues that she only rose 'zur offiziellen Reichsgottheit' in the XXVI (Saite) dynasty.

incidentally have written a commentary on the *Timaeus*)[29] is said to have believed in Atlantis: the historian, geographer and polymath Posidonius. Once more, we do not have his original words or arguments, but a brief report by the Augustan geographer Strabo, once more too often quoted out of context:[30]

'On the other hand, he correctly sets down in his work the fact that the earth sometimes rises and undergoes settling processes, and undergoes changes that result from earthquakes and the other similar agencies, all of which I too have enumerated above. And on this point he does well to cite (*παρατίθησιν*) the statement of Plato that it is possible that the story about the island of Atlantis is not a fiction. Concerning Atlantis Plato relates that Solon, after having made inquiry of the Egyptian priests, reported that Atlantis did once exist, but disappeared – an island no smaller in size than a continent; and Posidonius thinks that it is better (*βέλτιον*) to put the matter in that way than to say of Atlantis that its inventor caused it to disappear, just as did the Poet the wall of the Achaeans. And Posidonius also conjectures that the migration of the Cimbrians and their kinsfolk from their native country occurred as the result of an inundation of the sea that came on all of a sudden...' (Strabo, 2. 3. 6, trans. H. L. Jones).

The work of Posidonius in question is his *On the Ocean*, and this chapter is concerned with earthquakes and 'tidal' waves, that is to say the sort of seismic wave that is now technically known as a 'tsunami'. As Jacoby saw,[31] it looks as if, after discussing some historical examples of whole cities destroyed by the combination of quake and tsunami, Posidonius 'cited' or 'compared' (note Strabo's use of the *vox propria* of the commentator) the case of Atlantis. For Plato was very precise that it was the combination of quake and tsunami that destroyed Atlantis (and so not the volcanic eruption required by the Thera hypothesis).[32] From the next sentence it appears that Posidonius similarly interpreted the disaster which is supposed to have led to the migration of the Cimbri from their coastal homelands in Jutland (cf. Florus 1. 38. 1, 'cum terras eorum inundasset Oceanus'). It is also suggestive that Posidonius is not said to have described Aristotle's scepticism as unjustified or mistaken. It would just be 'better' to leave the possibility open. There is nothing here to suggest that Posidonius was expressing any degree of positive belief in Plato's Atlantis. He was simply stating that, scientifically speaking, Plato's account of its destruction was possible and could be paralleled. Proclus too remarks, towards the end of his first book (i pp. 177–8 Diehl), that from the scientific point of view Plato's account was plausible enough.

It evidently did not occur to either Posidonius or Proclus (or even to the more sceptical Strabo) that the reason the disaster Plato described could be paralleled so satisfactorily was that he had modelled it on real-life disasters of that sort. Only two need be mentioned. First, Orobiae in Euboea and the significantly named island of Atalante (off the coast of Opuntian Locris), whose devastation by a tsunami in 426 is described by Thucydides (3. 89), who correctly linked the tsunami with an earthquake: at Orobiae (he wrote) 'what was once land is now sea'. The second case is the inundation of Helice in 373 (when Plato was about 50); the entire city was

[29] According to Sextus Empiricus, *adv. math.* 7. 93, though often doubted: see most recently K. Abel, *Rh. Mus.* 107 (1964), 371–3, and cf. H. Cherniss, Plutarch, *Moralia* 13. 1 (1976), 217 f.

[30] 2. 3. 6 (trans. H. L. Jones) = frag. 49. 298 in L. Edelstein and I. G. Kidd, *Posidonius* I: *the Fragments* (Cambridge, 1972).

[31] *FGrHist* IIA 87 F28, with the commentary in IIC, p. 177.

[32] The experts are in any case becoming increasingly sceptical about the supposed role played by the Thera eruption in the destruction of the palaces of Minoan Crete: see the papers and discussions in C. Doumas (ed.), *Thera and the Aegean World: Papers of the Second International Scientific Congress, Santorini, August 1978*, I (1979) and II (1980).

overwhelmed with all its inhabitants. For centuries the ruins were clearly visible beneath the sea, a major tourist attraction.[33] Two of Plato's colleagues at the Academy, Aristotle[34] and Heraclides Ponticus,[35] investigated and wrote about the disaster. Aristotle's nephew Callisthenes also wrote at length on the theme (in several books, according to Seneca).[36] Aristotle thought that the inundation was caused by winds, about which he had evidently made careful inquiries. Callisthenes too favoured an explanation in terms of natural causes, whereas Heraclides saw the disaster as proof of divine anger.[37] They were presumably the protagonists in the 'great debate' recorded by another contemporary, Ephorus of Cumae, between 'the scientists' (οἱ φυσικοί) and 'the religious' (οἱ εὐσεβῶς διακείμενοι). The religious did their best to discover 'some plausible cause or other' for divine wrath. Ephorus reported in detail (presumably from Heraclides) an alleged act of sacrilege towards Poseidon on the part of the people of Helice.[38]

So we should not be surprised that it was this model Plato chose when he needed a catastrophe to sweep away his Atlantis. Nor are we surprised to discover on the last page of the unfinished *Critias* that the destruction of Atlantis is a divine punishment. Furthermore, Heraclides happens to report that the inundation of Helice took place at night[39] – just like the flood that swept away Plato's antediluvian Atlantis.[40] These coincidences would not have been lost on the first readers of the *Timaeus* and *Critias*.

The hypothesis that the destruction of Atlantis is a 'dim recollection' of the explosion of Thera and (alleged) consequent devastation of Minoan Crete is not only improbable on a multitude of historical grounds.[41] More important, it is a basic misunderstanding of Plato's purpose, which was undoubtedly political allegory. Antediluvian Athens and Atlantis both represent different aspects of the historical Athens: antediluvian Athens the sturdy, virtuous farmers of the days before the Persian Wars; Atlantis the corrupt, imperialist seapower that developed out of the Delian League. For further details it will be enough for our present needs to refer to the brilliant essay of P. Vidal-Naquet.[42] In order to save the phenomena, clearly Plato's myth had to explain why there was no longer any such huge island on the far side of the straits of Gibraltar. The catastrophe was merely a device to achieve this end, a detail rather than the essence of the story. Contemporaries familiar with both Plato's ideas and his ways of expressing them would (of course) have realized this. That is

[33] Strabo 8. 7. 2 and Pausanias 7. 24. 4 f., with J. G. Frazer's commentary, the notes in Peter Levi's Penguin translation, and Jacoby's commentary to Callisthenes F21 (quoted n. 36). The fate of nearby Bura is usually linked to that of Helice, but though both were destroyed in the same earthquake, only Helice was inundated: for the details, see the *PW* entries for Bura and Helice.

[34] Aristotle, *Meteorol.* 1. 6, 343b2; 1. 7, 344b34 f.; 2. 8, 368b7 f.

[35] Strabo 7. 7. 2.

[36] Jacoby, *FGrHist* 124 F21, assuming (perhaps wrongly) that Callisthenes' discussion was a digression in his *Hellenica*; so too L. Pearson, *The Lost Histories of Alexander the Great* (1960), p. 30.

[37] Jacoby, notes to Callisthenes F19–21, IIB, p. 423; H. B. Gottschalk, *Heraclides Ponticus* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 94–5.

[38] Diodorus, 15. 48–9.

[39] Strabo, 8. 7. 2.

[40] *Critias* 112a.

[41] See J. Rufus Fears, in *Atlantis: Fact or Fiction?* (Indiana, 1978), pp. 103–34.

[42] *REG* 77 (1964), 420–44; cf. too C. Gill, *CP* 72 (1977), 287–304, and the fascinating first chapter (to be read with caution) in John Onians, *Art and Thought in the Hellenistic World* (London, 1979).

why no contemporary was tempted to believe in the historical reality of Atlantis. It would be another two generations before such a misunderstanding was possible. It was quite a different controversy to which the *Timaeus* gave rise among Plato's followers: whether the creation myth was to be taken literally or metaphorically. Here at least we know that the orthodox interpretation among Plato's immediate disciples – Xenocrates, Speusippus and probably Heraclides – was metaphorical. Chief among the minority who took a literal line was Aristotle.[43] It is curious that, having taken the Atlantis story literally, Crantor should have been among those who took the creation myth metaphorically.[44]

Plato used the model of earthquake and tsunami because it was the only mechanism he knew capable of sweeping away a land mass. Posidonius thought so too; on the basis of the information he had collected on tsunamis, he concluded that this part of Plato's story could not be faulted. In fact this is the second point on which Plato's obsession with the circumstantial details of his myth let him down. For we now know that, while a tsunami can do terrible damage to a low-lying coastal strip, especially if it is heavily populated, like Helice in 373 B.C. or Lisbon in 1755, it could never destroy a whole island, much less a mountainous continent such as Plato's Atlantis.[45] It was only because he too did not know this that Posidonius included Plato's Atlantis, no doubt only half seriously, in a footnote to his catalogue of places destroyed by tsunamis. He should not be counted a serious believer.

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[43] For all the details, see Leonardo Tarán, *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, ed. J. P. Anton with G. L. Kustas (1971), pp. 387–90.

[44] Tarán, l.c. and in *Speusippus of Athens* (1981), p. 384.

[45] Sprague De Camp, *Lost Continents*, pp. 166–70.