

## Proclus on the Atlantis Story

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### Abstract

This paper explores the central thesis of the story of Atlantis put forward by Proclus in his *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*. For Proclus, who interprets this story eight centuries after his invention by Plato, the Atlantean account does not constitute the “birth of fiction”, nor a historical novel composed in order to criticize the politics of his time, but a total historical account, “entirely true”. The conflict between ancient Athens, the city of Athena, and Atlantis, dedicated to Poseidon, exposes an episode of the constitution of the cosmos of which the history of humanity is a part. Therefore, the story of Atlantis is a representation of the new creation or second demiurgy.

**Keywords:** Atlantis; Proclus; Neoplatonism; Athena; Poseidon

### Introduction

Amongst the many controversies in the long history of readings of Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias*, the story of Atlantis is one of the the lengthy and complex, giving rise to almost continual debate since the time of Crantor, who regarded it simply as a “pure history” (Gill, 2017, p. 40), up to present times, passing through Thomas More's *Utopia*, the most notable variation of Plato's myth, which in turn has inspired a series of future utopias.

Our present aim is to analyse the treatment of the Atlantis story in the work of the most reputable philosopher of late antiquity, the “successor” (*diadochos*) of the Athens “Academy”, who played a pivotal role on the transmission of platonic philosophy from antiquity to the Middle Ages. Proclus of Lycia (412 – 485 C.E.), philosopher and Neoplatonist commentator, successor to Syrianus as director of the Athens Platonic school, composed three types of works: introductions to Plato's philosophy, commentaries and monographs. In developing his commentaries to Plato he follows the principles of the Neoplatonic *cursus*, based upon the selection of twelve dialogues, established by Iamblichus (see Festugière, 1969). From his *Commentary on the Timaeus*, written according to his biographer Marinus (*Life of Proclus*, 13, 14-17; Saffrey & Segonds, 2001, p. 16) when he was twenty seven years old, five book survive – the fifth incomplete, for the exegesis stops at *Tim.* 44d2, the remainder being mutilated up to the end of 92c9, but which is partially transmitted (89e4-90c7) in the Arabic translation by de Ishāq ibn Hunayn, written in Baghdad during the IX – X centuries (see Festugière, 1966-1968, V, pp. 241-248). The first book, after analysing the summary of the *Republic* (in *Tim.* I, 14-75 Diehl), is dedicated by Proclus to a detailed commentary of the myth of Atlantis (I, 75-204).

For Proclus there is a mimetic relationship between demiurgic and human affairs. Consequently, Atlantis is not simply a fiction story, nor a historical novel composed as a critique of contemporary politics. It is rather a total story which gives voice to the ancients and connects the platonic theory of principles with the philosophy of history.

### **Plato's Atlantis story: *Timaeus* and *Critias***

The *Timaeus* begins with a summary of the ideal constitution described in the *Republic*, a dialogue traditionally subtitled *On Justice*, then alludes to the victorious war sustained between ancient Athens and Atlantis. Is this story, which Plato describes at the beginning of the *Timaeus* (17a-27b) and in the *Critias*, narrated by the tyrant of the same name or his grandfather, a historical or a fictional account? We might surmise that it is the earliest example of the "historical novel" genre, designed to critique contemporary politics (Vidal-Naquet, 2007), or the "birth of fiction" (Gill, 1979), which Plato established with his political allegory, or else a "noble falsehood", product of his "fertile imagination" (van den Berg, 2017).

Following a lengthy introduction (106a-109a), the *Critias* focuses on a description of the essential Athens (109a-113b), followed by an account of Atlantis (113b-121e). But the narrative is interrupted abruptly and unexpectedly, for no apparent reason, leaving the reader the fascinating task of finishing the story. This interpretive task, embracing the entire platonic perspective, has experienced an incredible development since Greco-Roman Antiquity through to Jules Verne, passing through the Renaissance with Thomas More or Francis Bacon, reaching our days (see Welliver, 1977, pp. 61-63).

In the *Timaeus* Plato attempts to find "in nature" the ideal constitution as described in the *Republic*, showing how ancient Athens was closer to the original constitution than the current Athens, which corresponds better with the ends of human beings. In this sense, as Naddaf (1994, p. 190) suggests, the story of Atlantis plays a central role in Plato's *historia peri physeos*, that is, "an inquiry into the origin and evolution of the present order of things".

Ancient Athens represents an idealised view of Athens that fought in Marathon, a moderate warrior democracy, respecting law and based on a fundamentally agrarian economy. This ancient Athens has no agora or emblematic buildings, has neither ports nor merchant or warrior fleet. It contrasts, therefore, with the Athens in which Plato lived, and resembles rather an idealized reflection of Sparta. The military class plays a central role, political organization is based on a body of older laws and the circulation of money is reduced to the bare minimum (see Tigersted, 1965).

In contrast to this, Atlantis resembles the Athens which engaged in the Peloponnesian war (431 – 404 B.C.E.), during which time young Plato grew up. Under the democratic hegemony of Themistocles and Pericles, Athens witnessed military and economic expansion, based on Mediterranean naval supremacy, which corrupted Athens' moral and political life, since it stimulated tendencies to materialism and envy (*Gorgias*, 515a sqq.; *Laws*, IV, 704a sqq.). This political decline resulted, according to Plato, in the Peloponnesian wars.

Plato's message to his contemporaries, at the beginning of the *Timaeus* and in the *Critias*, is basically as follows: it is necessary to return to the constitution and customs of their ancestors, and precautions should be taken against all forms of excessive democracy and of imperialism that leads to the Peloponnesian wars. Plato attributes to Solon, exponent of the ancestral constitution, the story which he would have brought from Egypt, the source of all civilization for the ancient

Greeks (Brisson, 1995).

In the *Timaeus* and *Critias* human time does not proceed in circular fashion or in cycles. Floods and disasters caused by fire are the “major” (μέγιστα) catastrophes (*Tim.* 22c). Ancient Athens, which was the “best at war and the best legislated in every respect” *polis* (23c), suffered a great flood. However, since periodic interruptions of water and fire greatly affect human time, they could not identify with these, because they are not limited to what happens between different catastrophes. The Athens of before and after the great destruction has completely different constitutions; hence the Socrates of the *Republic* has to create in words the best *polis*. If there were any coincidence between events during the intermediate epochs that separate one catastrophe from another, the object of the *Republic* would be invalidated, since on day one there would be an Athens constituted as the best *polis*, which would be destroyed, and later it would reappear, and be destroyed again, until the end of time. But human time continues, surviving destructions. The human “race” (γένος) continues, albeit threatened (*Tim.* 22e-23a; see *Criti.* 109d), in accordance with the imperishable life of the cosmos.

The memory and voice of pre-literate and uncultured men (*Tim.* 23a-b), survivors of the catastrophe, assumes a determinant role, constituting the basis of Egyptian archives, making possible a memory of the best *polis* (25e-26a). Thus, the Egyptian city, which emerges one thousand years after the Athenian city, was established eight thousand years ago, according to Egyptian sacred texts (23d-e). Certainly, thanks to knowledge of these texts, the priest of Sais could teach Solon something about the laws and accomplishments of ancient Athens. In this way, what he had heard about Athenian exploits and constitution passed from Greece to Egypt, and from Egypt – through Solon – to Critias, who, in turn, transmits it to the four actors involved in the *Timaeus*. Therefore, in a support as fragile as the Egyptian writings, the testimony of the Greek voice remains irreducible.

### Veracity of the historical account

The *Timaeus*, apart from the two prologues and the transition, is the least dialogical of the dialogues, since it is made up of two extended monologues. To present the story of Atlantis, within the first monologue, Plato grants the word to the ancients in order to transmit the message of the origins. In this way, Critias commits to writing a story which had been intermittently transmitted orally from the Egyptian priest of Sais, through Solon, via his grandfather of the same name, to his interlocutors Timaeus, Socrates and Hermocrates in the dialogue (*Tim.* 20d).

Now, Plato does not identify the story about ancient Athens and Atlantis with a “fable/myth” (*mythos*), but with a “account” (*logos*), an “archaic word”, a historical account based on truth.

“Critias: Let me tell you this story then, Socrates. It’s a very strange one (λόγου μάλα μὲν ἀτόπου), but even so, every word of it is true (παντάπασί γε μὴν ἀληθοῦς). It’s a story that Solon, the wisest of the seven sages once vouched for.” (Plato, *Tim.* 20d7-e1; trans. Zeyl 1997, p. 1228).

For Critias, the main task is to compose a suitable discourse for the aims expressed by Socrates (*Tim.* 26a), which consist in putting the ideal constitution to the test of military events. For this reason, Proclus inserts the Atlantis story at the juncture between cosmology and the philosophy of history: Critias considers his story “entirely true” because it describes a conflict that concerns the absolute totality of the world and all ages of man. The war actually happened. For

Proclus, the story alludes on the one hand to a cosmological conflict and, on the other, to the history of humanity.

Proclus maintains the veracity of the Atlantis conflict story in the function it performs within the cosmo-historical exegesis it proposes: the conflict expresses an episode of the constitution of the cosmos of which the history of humanity is a part.

Plato divides the story of Atlantis into two different dialogues: in the *Timaeus*, within a scientific and historical presentation, he describes it as an “entirely true” discourse (*Tim.* 20d7-8); and in the *Critias*, which he devotes to the description of Athenian and Atlantean societies, where it is a matter of *logoi*, who participate in the truth, in opposition to the *mythoi* (*Criti.* 109a3; 113a1-4; 113b5-6; 120d8).

The main objective of this “very strange story” (λόγος μάλα ἄτοπος) connects directly with the reference to the ideal city of the *Republic*. However, when placed right at the beginning of the physical dialogue, constituting a kind of preamble to the cosmological discourse, its quandary is not only political, but also metaphysical: the ideal city is the paradigm in light of which it is necessary to clarify the meaning of all the events reported (see Vidal-Naquet, 1981, p. 337). In this way, the *logos* of Atlantis serves as a link between political discourse and the theory of nature, opening a discussion about political structure and historical cosmology.

### **A hymn in honour of Athena and Zeus**

Proclus comments on the story of Atlantis eight centuries after Plato conceived it. In its reading it dispenses with the analysis of political, geographical, economic and military issues, to focus on cosmology and the philosophy of history. If the *Republic* resembles the celestial order, as the model of the state resides in heaven (*Republic*, IX, 592b), the war against Atlantis resembles the sublunary world that results from the opposition and change of the becoming (*in Tim.* I, 4, 20-25).

According to Vidal-Naquet (2007, p. 47), in Proclus we find an account of the interpretation of the Atlantis story and its own exegesis. From the old Academy up to Neoplatonism, the *Timaeus* has always focused the minds of Platonists of antiquity. It is this period which has most commentaries on the *Timaeus*. In the old Academy, both Clearchus and Xenocrates studied this dialogue in depth. But Crantor of Soli (c. 335 – 275 B.C.E.) is credited with the first commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*, according to Proclus' testimony, in interpreting the first *lemma* of Atlantis (*Tim.* 20d-e; see *in Tim.* I, 76, 1 *sqq.*; I, 277, 8 *sqq.*). Amelius (c. 216/226 – 290/300 C.E.), disciple of Plotinus, considers the ancient Athenians analogous to fixed stars and the atlantes to the planets, entering into combat when turning in the opposite direction (I, 76, 20-30).

As van den Berg (2001, pp. 22-34) points out, Proclus considers that the history of Atlantis, as Critias tells it, is a hymn in honour of Athena. Likewise, the account of *Timaeus* itself is classified as a hymn, and the divinity evoked by Plato is the demiurge, by means of “a kind of hymn (οἶον ὕμνος τις)” to Zeus (*Theol. Plat.* V, 20, 75, 11; Saffrey & Westerink, 1968-1997, V, p. 75; see Martijn, 2010, p. 12).

According to Proclus, the story of Atlantis is completely suited to its proper objective: the war of the Whole (universe), the opposition of the first powers within the world. Through human history, Plato attempts to express the cosmic opposition that directs the order and disposition of the Whole (*in Tim.* I, 197, 21).

Plato resorts to history to represent the universal opposition that drives the universal constitution of the Whole as a united entity. In his physiological-political exegesis of the story Proclus connects the war described by Plato in the *Timaeus* and the *Critias* with cosmology and the ages of man:

- 1) The story of Atlantis opposes a proportionate city, ancient Athens, close to intelligible perfection, the first historical manifestation of the ideal city of the *Republic*, to the unbalanced city, Atlantis, located ontologically after the One, under the control of the indefinite dyad of the Large and the Small. The conflict of the Athenians against the Atlanteans embodies the conflict between the limit and the unlimited, form and matter, rest and motion, unity and multiplicity.
- 2) The story relates a conflict between the prehistoric Athens, the city of Athena, and Atlantis, once sacred to Poseidon. But this historical conflict is only a part – human and political – of the whole cosmogonic conflict, in which the whole affects the parts, since:

“That is why we say that this myth (μῦθον) is useful also for the total study of nature (πρὸς τὴν ὅλην θεωρίαν τῆς φύσεως), as, from the activities and movements [depicted], it gives an indication of the cosmic rivalry (τὴν ἐναντίωσιν τὴν κοσμικήν).” (Proclus, *in Tim.* I, 132,16-19 Diehl; trans. Tarrant, 2007, p. 228).

Plato shows us, by means of “symbols” (σύμβολα) and “riddles” (αἰνίγματα), of what nature is the opposition of genres within the Whole, and in what way, by virtue of the intelligent action of Athena, the inferior is subordinated to the superior (*in Tim.* I, 132, 21-24). Atlantean conflict is present in the nature of things. This kind of “proportionate relation” (*analogia*) covers the whole field of the real (I, 132, 26-27).

“Proclus treats these histories and myths as reflections of the universe as an analogical whole and construes them as a narrative mirror of the presence of higher realities in lower phenomena” (Kutash, 2011, p. 44). The historical-political dimension is allegory and part of the cosmogonic dimension (see Pradeau, 1997, pp. 68-70). Proclus interprets the story of Atlantis from a double perspective: (1) allegorical, from the cosmogony, and (2) historical, from its veracity. The historical account serves as an instrument to explain that the first and intelligent principles are the cause of the productive activity of the lower causes. In this way, the war (ὁ πόλεμος) of the Atlanteans is “an image (εἰκῶν) of warfare throughout the cosmos (τῶν κοσμικῶν πολέμων)” (*in Tim.* I, 197, 4-5; see I, 78, 16-18; and see also I, 85, 9-12). Therefore, the history of Atlantis is a representation of the new creation or second demiurgy. If the absolute cosmos concerns the first demiurgy, the war of the Atlanteans really belongs to the second demiurgy, which deals with the parts of the universe (I, 127, 14-23; I, 132, 27; I, 133, 23-25).

On the other hand, in his exegesis Proclus connects the story of Atlantis with the Pythagorean sources of Plato's oral teaching. Thus, to decode the story in the most reliable way, he proposes using the Pythagorean table of the ten pairs of opposites (*in Tim.* I, 182, 10-14). In the intelligible domain, the One and the indefinite dyad generate the decade, whose principle, according to the Tetraktys of the Pythagoreans, is originally harmonic:  $10 = 1 + 2 + 3 + 4$  (I, 16, 32; I, 17, 23; I, 155, 7). Atlantis is the historical symbol of the sensible, and ancient Athens, on the other hand, the historical symbol of the intelligible. In this way, Poseidon, when settling on the Atlantis Island that has been entrusted to him, takes a mortal, Cleito, and begets with her the first ten kings, five pairs of twins (I, 182, 3-5). Immediately, the island is marked by the parity of the indefinite dyad. In opposition are the five first kings “born of the earth” of ancient Athens. Therefore, Atlantis has a mixed character, male and female, a mixture of men and gods, while

ancient Athens is characterized by its autochthonous character, unmixed, exclusively male and asexual.

### **Poseidon, the generation-worker**

Poseidon throws the Atlanteans against Athens (*Critias*, 120d). Although still a perfect god in himself, Poseidon, as god of the ocean, metaphysically represents the principle of *apeiron*, the unlimited, the indefinite dyad. However, in the realm of the sensible, he symbolises the One, while the mortal Cleito is the living expression of the indefinite dyad. The explanation is in terms of relationships (*logoi*): if in relation to Cleito, Poseidon personifies the One, in relation to Athena and Hephaestus – gods that descend directly from Zeus – he manifests the power of the indefinite dyad. On the other hand, on a metaphysical level, Zeus personifies the One, in relation to Athena and Hephaestus who represent the indefinite dyad. Therefore, each living being is a mixed of two principles, in which one principle or another dominates – the One or the indefinite dyad – depending on the perspective taken.

In his commentary on Atlantis Proclus makes special mention of the victory of Athena over Poseidon that the Athenians still celebrated as Panathenaic festivities, the victory of the “intellective order”, subject to the power of the limit, on the unlimited scope of becoming:

“Furthermore the victory tokens (τὰ νικητήρια) of Athena are celebrated among the Athenians, and they conduct this feast on the assumption that Poseidon was beaten by Athena, the generation-producing (τῆς γενεσιουργοῦ) defeated by the intellective, and that after the provision of necessities the inhabitants of this land have set out upon the road to life in accordance with intelligence (κατὰ νοῦν). For they regard Poseidon as presiding over generation (γενέσεως) and Athena as overseeing intellectual life (νοεραῶς ζωῆς).” (*in Tim.* I, 173, 9-15 Diehl; trans. Tarrant, 2007, p. 273).

Proclus relegates Poseidon to an intermediate demiurgy, he is the “generation-worker” (γενεσιουργός) and, together with Apollo, the producer “of all of becoming (τῆς ὅλης γενέσεως)” (*in Tim.* I, 79, 4). In effect, Poseidon is the second member of the triad of demiurges – Zeus, Poseidon and Hades (I, 9, 16-24; see Tarrant, 2007, p. 273, n. 741) –, brought to fullness by Athena and the other invisible causes (I, 173, 22-24).

Atlanteans are “descendants of Poseidon” (Ποσειδῶνος ἀπόγονοι), just as Athenians receive their name from the goddess Athena (*in Tim.* I, 173, 17-10; see Plato, *Criti.* 113c2-4). For this reason, Proclus establishes an opposition between two demiurgic series: (1) the Athenian divine government, and (2) the multiple governments of the lower Atlantean gods. In contrast to Athena, who by her intelligent action always prefers the superior to the inferior, the Atlanteans, pitted against Athens by Poseidon (*Criti.* 120d), act in an excessive way, moving away from the gods and the divine realities (*in Tim.* I, 175, 14-16), towards matter, the multiple, the impure and the unstable. The pillars of Heracles mark the border between the Same and the Other. Thus, the Atlantic Ocean, which Proclus connects with the “abyss” or the “ocean of dissimilarity” mentioned by Plato in the *Statesman* (273d7), receives its name from matter (see Kutash, 2011, p. 46 and p. 61).

“For matter (ὕλη) receives the names of the inferior column of opposites (τῆς χείρονος συστοιχίας), being called ‘limitlessness’ (ἀπειρία), ‘darkness’ (σκοτός), ‘irrationality’ (ἄλογία), ‘measurelessness’ (ἀμετρία), principle of otherness’ (ἑτεροιώσεως ἀρχή), and ‘dyad’ (δυάς) – just as the Atlantic Ocean gets its name from Atlantis.” (*in Tim.* I, 175, 21-24;

trans. Tarrant, 2007, p. 275).

Faced with the superior Athenian series, transcendent, dominating lower realms by its power, the lower Atlantean series is characterized by procession, division and conversion to matter (I, 175, 26-176, 2). In order for the demiurgy to complete and providence to penetrate all things, both series must converge into the absolute terms of the Whole, “and through causing them to disappear in this way imitates the Orphic ‘entartarization’ (Ὀρφικὴν καταταρτάρωσιν)” (I, 189, 6-9).

### Two opposing city images

The relationship (*logos*) between ancient Athens and the ideal city has to be the same as the relationship established between the sensible world and the intelligible world, which the demiurge takes as a model to forge (*Tim.* 30c-31b).

Between ancient Athens and Atlantis there is an opposition between two images of the city, between *eicastic* and *phantastic*, according to the dichotomy that Plato establishes in the *Sophist* (236b-c), that is, between a faithful copy of the model and a deformed copy. In this sense, Mattéi (1996, p. 258) differentiates three cities present at the beginning of the *Timaeus* and in the *Critias*: (1) the ideal city (*paradigm*), to which Socrates refers in the summary of the conversation of the previous day (*Tim.* 17b-19b), characterized by its immobile perfection. (2) Ancient Athens, which is an image of the sensible, a copy (*icon*) of the ideal model, constituted under the protection of Athena and Hephaestus and consecrated to “justice” (δική). (3) Atlantis, which is the copy of this copy (*idol*), the image of the sensible, a pure simulacrum, consecrated to “insolence” (ὑβρις), which is confronted by ancient Athens, before being destroyed.

Proclus summarises the history of humanity from the duality of the *icon* and the *idol* as good and bad copies of the paradigm: ancient Athens and Atlantis represent at the dawn of time the beginning and the end of the history of humanity.

Atlantis, more than utopian, is atopic, since it merges the human and the divine in a mixture dominated by disorder and disharmony. In the Greek epistemologies of perception, simulacra (φαντάσματα) exist not only mentally, but have an objective existence, as they are emanations or radiations coming from real objects. Therefore, as Périllié (2003, p. 443) suggests, the duly attested veracity of the Atlantis narrative leads us to think that for Plato the simulacrum has as much historical reality as the faithful image, located at the beginning of the cycle of Zeus.

According to Proclus’ reading, Plato does not so much forge a primarily dissuasive myth, but rather takes advantage of the seductive power of the sensible world. Proclean exegesis tries to show how the city of Athens has passed from the *icon*, when Solon’s constitution was still faithful to the intelligible model, to the simulacrum, when it reproduces, as an *idol*, the Atlantean antithesis of the paradigm. Therefore, the Atlanteans, far from the divine, rush towards matter and evil.

### Conclusion

Ancient Athens is to harmony that which Atlantis is to disharmony. Proclus interprets the summary of the *Republic*, the request of Socrates and the story of Atlantis (*Tim.* 17b-20c) as representations of the universe in “images” (εἰκόνες) and “symbols” (σύμβολα) respectively (*in Tim.* I, 26, 21-73, 21; I, 73, 23-196, 29). Thus, the *Timaeus* begins, according to the Pythagorean

tradition, with the aim of stimulating the soul of the reader and purifying her gaze. But, unlike this beginning, the story of the natural philosopher Timaeus does not use literary images in his exposition of the universe, that is, does not employ metaphorical or allegorical representations of reality – “Timaeus is not forging myths (οὐ μύθους πλάττων)” (*Theol. Plat.* V, 36, 133, 11; Saffrey & Westerink, 1968-1997, V, p. 133) –, but prefers to literally describe the creation of the cosmos using the demiurge and the paradigm (*in Tim.* I, 63, 8-9; see Martijn, 2010, p. 246).

The story of Critias, recited during the Panathenaic festivals, is framed within the tradition of the discourses that recount the Athenian victories over the Persian expeditions (*in Tim.* I, 171, 32-172, 4; 172, 10-20; see Festugière, 1966-1968, I, pp. 226-227). However, the Atlanteans do not represent the Persians, but with the barbarians who came from the West nine thousand years ago (I, 172, 6-15). For this reason, for Proclus, this story is not fiction, since it compiles an analogue sequence of conflicts: (1) the war between ancient Athens and Atlantis resembles the Median wars. (2) The poets and theologians, from the second demiurgy, describe a similar conflict between the Olympians (the Athenians) and the titans (the Atlanteans). (3) Likewise, this war resembles the confrontation of two opposing series on the metaphysical plane of the principles: the One and the indefinite dyad.

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