

Arcadian King Atlas and Plato's Atlantis

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Abstract¹

Plato in his dialogue *Critias* (c. 355 BCE) wrote about an imaginary king named Atlas and an island civilisation (Atlantis) which derived its name from him. This article argues Plato based his king Atlas on a mythical Arcadian king of the same name and his main inspiration for Atlantis was the town Methydrium and nearby city Megalopolis, both in Arcadia. Based on an ancient anecdote, it is argued Plato might have visited Megalopolis in the 360s BCE.

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Introduction

The island of Atlantis is almost certainly imaginary.² On the other hand, it is disputed by classical scholars what real location (if any at all) Plato based his fictional island on. There are several places Plato visited or knew about that could have influenced his description of Atlantis in the same way J. R. R. Tolkien likely drew inspiration for his Middle-earth from real places he was familiar with.³ One popular idea is Plato modelled Atlantis on Minoan Crete.⁴ However, “resemblance of the two locations is, really, very slight, and much special pleading is needed to show how Atlantis could have been based on Crete”.⁵ It would also be difficult to explain how Plato (c. 428 – c. 347 BCE) possessed detailed knowledge of Minoan civilisation; Greeks (when Plato was alive) “remembered very little at all about the fifteenth century BC”.⁶ More plausible places suggested by scholars include Ecbatana, Persia, Syracuse, Athens and Helike.⁷

King Atlas

None of the aforementioned real places that could have inspired Atlantis explain Plato’s pseudo-mythology of the king Atlas in his dialogue *Critias* (c. 355 BCE). According to Plato, Atlantis derived its name⁸ from a son of Poseidon named Atlas (a king of the island). The word Atlantis (Ἀτλαντις) means “of Atlas”.⁹ A king of the same name appears in Arcadian folklore:

Atlas was the first king of the country now called Arcadia, and he lived near the mountain called Thaumasius. He had seven daughters, who are said to be numbered

² Vidal-Naquet, 1964; Renfrew, 1992; Ellis, 1998; Smith, 2016; Gill, 2017.

³ Garth, 2020.

⁴ Forsyth, 1980, 159-168; the idea Plato used Crete as a prototype for Atlantis should not be confused with the Thera-Cretan hypothesis which argues Atlantis was a real place and literally Crete (or Santorini); see Smith, 2020.

⁵ Gill, *op. cit.*, 47.

⁶ Luce, 1969: 203; undoubtedly Greek myth preserves faint memories of Minoan and Mycenaean civilisation, but not in vivid detail; for a discussion of the kernel Bronze Age setting in Homer’s *Iliad*, see Hood, 1995.

⁷ Gill, *op. cit.*, 159 (Ecbatana), 155, 169, 171 (Persia), 163, 167 (Athens); for Syracuse see Forsyth, *op. cit.* 169-181 (Forsyth, 180 argues Plato used Minoan Crete as his main model but supplemented features of Atlantis with “real details of Sicily and Syracuse”); a useful discussion on Helike in relation to Atlantis can be found in Ellis, 1998: 238-244. Helike was a Greek city submerged in 373 BCE, when Plato was alive; Ellis, 240 notes: “Plato was born in Athens around 428 BC, and died in 347 BC, which means he was fifty-five when Helice disappeared”.

⁸ Plat. *Crit.* 114a.

⁹ The word Atlantis (Ἀτλαντις) is found in ancient Greek literature before Plato (*Ti.* 25d: Ἀτλαντις νῆσος, “island of Atlas”) e.g., Hes. *Th.* 938 (Ἀτλαντις Μαίη, “Maia, daughter of Atlas”) and Hdt. 1. 202. 4 (Ἀτλαντις θάλασσα, “sea of Atlas”). Different spellings include *Ti.* 25a, Atlantidi (Ἀτλαντίδι) and *Cri.* 108e, Atlantidos (Ἀτλαντίδος).

now among the constellations under the name of the Pleiades; Zeus married one of these, Electra, and had by her two sons, Iasus and Dardanus. Iasus remained unmarried, but Dardanus married Chrysê, the daughter of Pallas, by whom he had two sons, Idaeus and Deimas and these, succeeding Atlas in the kingdom, reign for some time in Arcadia. Afterwards, a great deluge occurring throughout Arcadia, the plains were overflowed and for a long time could not be tilled; and the inhabitants, living upon the mountains and eking out a sorry livelihood, decided that the land remaining would not be sufficient for the support of them all, and so divided themselves into two groups, one of which remained in Arcadia, after making Deimas, the son of Dardanus, their king, while the other left the Peloponnesus on board a large fleet.¹⁰

This tradition first recorded by Dionysius of Halicarnassus (1st century BCE) is strikingly similar to Plato's *Critias*. Both the Arcadian tradition and *Critias* involve a king named Atlas, a flood, mountains, and a large number of ships.¹¹ In Greek mythology, Titan Atlas had seven daughters, the Pleiades.¹² The Arcadian Atlas is a local variant of Titan Atlas since he has the same daughters who were personified as constellations. Plato describes an earthquake and flood as having destroyed the island of Atlantis "after an unbearable day and night".¹³ In the Arcadian tradition a deluge sweeps across Arcadia forcing survivors to live upon the tops of mountains.¹⁴

There is remarkable similarity between the ten kings of Atlantis and first ten Arcadian kings; the below table produces two genealogical king lists; the first from *Critias*¹⁵ and second from Pausanias' *Description of Greece* (2nd century CE).¹⁶ Based on similarity of these names it is possible Plato based his imaginary Atlantean king list on the mythical kings of Arcadia.¹⁷

¹⁰ Dion. Hal. 1. 61. 1; the Arcadian tradition of Atlas is also mentioned by Serv. ad *Aen.* 8. 134.

¹¹ Plat. *Crit.* 114a (king Atlas), *Ti.* 25d (flood), *Cri.* 118a-b (mountains on Atlantis), *Cri.* 117d-e (ships).

¹² Ps-Apollod. 3. 10. 1; Hyg. *Ast.* 2. 21. 4-5; an alternative name for the Pleiades was 'Atlantides'.

¹³ Plat. *Ti.* 25d.

¹⁴ This mirrors Plat. *Cri.* 109d ("when there were any survivors... they were men who dwelt in the mountains").

¹⁵ Plat. *Cri.* 113e-114c.

¹⁶ Paus. 8. 1. 4-6 (Pelagus), 8. 2. 1-3 (Lycaon), 8. 3. 1 (Nyctimus), 8. 4. 1 (Arcas), 8. 4. 2-3 (Autolaus, Elatus, Apeidas and Azan), 8. 4. 4-5 (Cleitor). Atlas is absent from Pausanias' list but appears in Dion. Hal. 1. 61. 1.

¹⁷ These mythical Arcadian kings may be semi-historical, although this would be quite difficult to prove; Pausanias attempted to date some of the kings e.g., Lycaon as a contemporary of king Cecrops of Athens, see Paus. 8. 2. 2. Cecrops was dated to the 16th century BCE by ancient Greek chroniclers; Plat. *Cri.* 110a-b even mentions Cecrops.

Kings of Atlantis	Kings of Arcadia
Atlas	Atlas
Eumelos	Pelasgus
Ampheres	Lycaon
Euaemon	Nyctimus
Mneseas	Arcas
Autochthon	Autolaus
Elasippus	Elatus
Mestor	Apheidas
Azaes	Azan
Diaprepes	Cleitor

Methydrium and Megapolis

More similarities between Arcadian mythology and Atlantis infer Plato had the former in his mind when writing *Critias*.¹⁸ For example, Poseidon (the father of king Atlas) was the founder of Atlantis.¹⁹ The same god was highly revered in Arcadia, arguably more so than any separate region of ancient Greece.²⁰ Is there a town or city within Arcadia – Plato could have specifically modelled Atlantis’ metropolis (capital) on? Dionysius of Halicarnassus wrote the Arcadian king Atlas lived near a mountain named Thaumasius. Pausanias²¹ described the same mountain in Arcadia and located it close to a town named Methydrium (“Between the Waters”):

Methydrium itself, which is distant from Tricoloni one hundred and thirty-seven stades. It received the name Methydrium (Between the Waters) because there is a high knoll between the river Maloetas and the Mylaon, and on it, Orchomenus²² built his city. Methydrium too had citizens victorious at Olympia before it belonged to Megalopolis. There is in Methydrium a temple of Horse Poseidon, standing by the Mylaon. But Mount Thaumasius (Wonderful) lies beyond the river Maloetas, and the Methydrians hold that when Rhea was pregnant with Zeus, she came to this mountain and enlisted as her allies, in case Cronus should attack her, Hopladamus

¹⁸ Flooding was common in Arcadia because of the karstic landscape and drainage problems, see Paus. 8. 14. 1 and Strab. 8. 8. 4. These floods are connected to Poseidon in Arcadian myth who was thought to be responsible for earthquakes in Arcadia, especially near the town Pheneus, see Diod. Sic. 15. 49. 4-5. Plat. *Cri.* 115d-e, 118d describes canals on Atlantis and in Arcadian mythology, Heracles built canals (artificial water channels), see Paus. 8. 14. 3. The first mortals to inhabit Atlantis and Arcadia were autochthones; Plat. *Cri.* 113d, describes Evenor as “sprung from earth”, while Pelasgus, according to one tradition, sprung from the ground, see Ps-Apollod. 2. 1. 1.

¹⁹ Plat. *Cri.* 113c.

²⁰ Balériaux, 2018.

²¹ Paus. 8. 36. 1-4.

²² Paus. 8. 3. 3 (“Orchomenus became founder of both the town called Methydrium and of Orchomenus”).

and his few giants. They allow that she gave birth to her son on some part of Mount Lycaeus, but they claim that here Cronus was deceived, and here took place the substitution of a stone for the child that is spoken of in the Greek legend. On the summit of the mountain is Rhea's Cave, into which no human beings may enter save only the women who are sacred to the goddess. About thirty stades from Methydrium is a spring Nymphasia, and it is also thirty stades from Nymphasia to the common boundaries of Megalopolis, Orchomenus and Caphyae.

Methydrium was positioned on a hill between two rivers (Maloetas and Mylaon) and the town had a temple dedicated to Poseidon. This description closely resembles the metropolis on Atlantis as a hill with a temple of Poseidon, surrounded by rings of water.²³ About three miles distant from Methydrium was a spring; Plato describes springs of water inside the metropolis.²⁴ Considering these similarities, it can be argued Plato modelled the metropolis on Methydrium. Plato's description of Atlantis surrounded by high mountains²⁵ also resembles the topography of Arcadia and in the words of the ancient geographer Strabo (1st century BCE), "most of the country it includes is mountainous".²⁶ The *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Geography*²⁷ notes Arcadia was, "surrounded on all sides by a ring of mountains, forming a kind of natural wall".

Methydrium was formerly controlled by a city, Orchomenus,²⁸ but power transferred to Megalopolis ("Great city"), nineteen miles from Methydrium.²⁹ Megalopolis was founded in 371 BCE and built within three years, in other words, during Plato's lifetime. As a major city he would have known about its creation.³⁰ Megalopolis attracted thousands of visitors with its theatre; Pausanias claimed it was the largest in ancient Greece.³¹ In 222 BCE the city was burnt and largely depopulated; by the 1st century BCE, much of Megalopolis was in ruins.³² Is there any evidence Plato in 360s BCE visited Megalopolis when it was a thriving city? Interestingly, the ancient biographer of Greek philosophers, Diogenes Laërtius (3rd century CE) recorded an

²³ Plato. *Crit.* 113c-d (hill), 113d (rings of water), 116c-e (temple); both temples are related to horses.

²⁴ Plat. *Crit.* 113e, 117a-b.

²⁵ Plat. *Crit.* 118a.

²⁶ Strab. 8. 8. 1.

²⁷ Smith, 1854: 190.

²⁸ Paus. 8. 27. 4; in Arcadian myth, Orchomenus was a son of king Lycaon, see Ps-Apollod. 3. 8. 1. Methydrium was at least as old as the 5th century BCE and is mentioned by early ancient Greek historians, see Thuc. 5. 58. 2.

²⁹ Paus. 8. 35. 5; for transfer of power to Megalopolis, see Paus. 8. 27. 5-7.

³⁰ Plato supposedly sent one of his pupils (Aristonymus) to Arcadia, probably Methydrium see Plut. *Adv. Col.* 32.

³¹ Paus. 8. 32. 1.

³² Strab. 8. 8. 1; Pausanias in the 2nd century CE described seeing numerous buildings in ruins, see 8. 31. 9, 32. 3; he further described Megalopolis during his day as having "lost all its beauty and its old prosperity", see 8. 33. 1.

anecdote Plato was invited to be a lawgiver (*nomothetēs*) in Megalopolis but declined.³³ This anecdote was not made up by Laërtius and was attributed by him to the ancient Egypto-Greek writer Pamphile of Epidaurus, author of a collection of historical anecdotes (1st century CE).³⁴

Conclusion

There is no way to verify the story Plato was invited to Megalopolis. Nevertheless, no ancient writer doubted veracity of the anecdote and it is mentioned in another literary source.³⁵ The story may have some historical basis.³⁶ If true, although Plato declined the invitation – he could have still visited Megalopolis and nearby towns in Arcadia. This would explain how he came to acquire knowledge of Arcadian mythology and why the kings listed in *Critias* are similar in name to mythical kings from Arcadia. It further explains how Arcadian landscape inspired his imaginary Atlantis and similarities of its metropolis to Methydrium, perhaps with the grandiosity of the metropolis inspired by Megalopolis. Classicists have struggled to come up with ideas³⁷ why Plato put elephants on his imaginary island.³⁸ If he visited Megalopolis this mystery is solved. Fossil bones of prehistoric elephants (*Palaeoloxodon antiquus*) were dug up by Arcadians and once housed at Megalopolis; it is possible Plato saw them in person.³⁹

³³ DL. 3. 23; Plato is said to have declined because Megalopolis' rejected equality (*ison echein*). This must refer to equality of property, Plat. *Rep.* 462b-c envisioned an ideal society as collective ownership of land and houses.

³⁴ Riginos, 1976: 191.

³⁵ Ael. *Var. Hist.* 2. 42; for an overview see Riginos, *op. cit.*, 191-193.

³⁶ Trampedach, 1994: 37-41.

³⁷ Luce, *op. cit.*, 177 ("How did herds of elephants come to be out on an island in the Atlantic?").

³⁸ Plato. *Crit.* 114e.

³⁹ Mayor, 2000, 97-99; Paus. 8. 32. 5, describes huge fossil bones preserved in a sanctuary at Megalopolis.

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