

Atlantis, Lake Tritonis and Pharos

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Abstract: The following note looks at Robert Graves's casual writings about Atlantis, 1953-1967, foregrounding areas of difference with classical scholars and suggesting sources of influence.

Keywords: Atlantis, Greek myths, Plato, ancient Egypt

Among the many classical subjects in which Robert Graves took an interest during the nineteen-fifties and sixties, the topic of Atlantis showed particular sticking power. Graves first wrote about it in 'What Happened to Atlantis' (1953), devoted several paragraphs to it in 1955 in *The Greek Myths*, and returned to it again fourteen years later in 'The Lost Atlantis' (1967).

The tale of Atlantis enters Western Literature in Plato's dialogues *Timaeus* and *Critias* c. 355 BCE. Plato claims Solon the Athenian lawmaker and poet visited Saïs, Egypt and heard a tale of a sunken island civilisation named Atlantis from temple priests. He began to adapt the tale into a poem, which he never completed. Nevertheless, the details were passed on by word of mouth to Dropides, Solon's relative and friend.¹ In 'What Happened to Atlantis?' and *The Greek Myths*, Graves argues that what the Saitic priests told to Solon was a tale woven together of a flood in western Libya at Lake Tritonis, during the third millennium BCE, and the 'harbour works [...] on the island of Pharos'.²

In the fourth century BCE, Pharos was connected to the mainland of Egypt by the Hepastadion, a 1200-meter-long causeway. In 1916, the French engineer Gaston Jondet discovered evidence of a submerged harbour adjacent to Pharos, suggesting the island was once larger.³ Jondet dated this harbour to the time of Ramesses II (thirteenth-century BCE). Graves proposed that the ruins of Jondet's

harbour could have been basis for the sunken island civilisation described by Plato. In this etymology, Graves may have been influenced by Spyridon Marinatos an archaeologist whose paper in *Cretica Chronica* (1950) also argued that Saitic priests had conflated separate events.⁴ But Graves disregarded Marinatos's theory that linked Atlantis to the volcanic destruction of the island Thera (What Happened, p. 74).

More than a decade after *The Greek Myths*, Graves returned to the subject in 'The Lost Atlantis' (1967), disputing an Aegean location for the lost island.⁵ In the 1960s, the notion that Thera (Crete) was Atlantis became current among laypersons and was supported by Angelos Galanopoulos, a seismologist whose work (largely based on Marinatos) was familiar to Graves (*Crane Bag*, pp. 69-70). While Graves rejected the Aegean location, he speculated that the harbour on Pharos may have been built by the seafaring Minoans (*Greek Myths*, p. 142), and thus served as the source for the descriptions of Minoan Crete that coloured Plato's description (p. 143). He also sourced Plato's account of Atlantis's mountainous coastline to the coastline of Crete, which he claims the Egyptians had amalgamated into the story, although noting, 'they would have gained knowledge of it only through hearsay' for of their fear of water travel (p. 144).

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NOTES

¹ See Plato, *Timaeus*, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, trans. by W. R. M. Lamb, 12 vols (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd. 1925), IX, 20e and 21c-d.

² Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (London: Penguin, 1955), p. 142; see also Robert Graves, 'What Happened to Atlantis', *Atlantic* (October 1953), 71-74.

³ Gaston Jondet, *Les ports submergés de l'ancienne île de Pharos, Mémoires présentés à l'Institut Égyptien et publiés sous les auspices de Sa Hautesse Hussein Kamel, Sultan d'Égypte* (Cairo: l'Institut Égyptien, 1916), IX.

⁴ Spyridon Marinatos, 'On the Atlantis Legend', *Cretica Chronica*, 4 (1950), 195-213.

⁵ Graves republished the essay two years later in *The Crane Bag*. Robert Graves, 'The Lost Atlantis', in *The Crane Bag and Other Disputed Subjects* (London: Cassell, 1969), pp. 68-74.

POEMS

