

PART ONE THE AFRICAN ATLANTIS

I. A Bird's-Eye View of the Island

Atlantis was an island of great celebrity in remote antiquity; its origin and even its life are lost in the night of time. The ancients say that it was the most anciently inhabited land.¹

It was situated on the west coast of Africa, in the midst of the waters that, presumably taking their name from it, were called the Atlantic Sea.

It was, the ancient historians say, three thousand stades long by two thousand wide—which is to say, about a hundred leagues by fifty, approximately the size of France.

Its population was immense, swelled by that of small islands that surrounded it in great number, over which it reigned and which linked it to the neighboring continent.²

Atlantis extracted from its own soil almost everything necessary to life: wheat, wine, fruits, the most sought-after perfumes, fabrics, precious kinds of wood for construction of luxury and furniture. All minerals were abundant there, including gold, silver, iron and orichalcum, a precious metal of which only the name is any longer known.

Thus, its commerce was immense, but it was praised above all for all its beauty and the mildness of its climate as well as its admirable fertility. The earth produced two crops a year there, watered as it was in winter by benevolent rains and in summer by canals that refreshed all the fields.

The cities were splendid. They had magnificent temples filled with golden statues, and decorations of the same metal and of orichalcum, magical palaces, expertly constructed ports and numerous harbors for vessels.

Its metropolis, most of all, was indescribably beautiful and wealthy. It was surrounded by profound ditches filled with water, over which a large number of bold bridges had been projected. Broad canals departed from there to extend throughout the island, greatly facilitating communications. Those that opened to the sea were broad enough to allow access to triremes. A host of other smaller canals served for the transportation of people and merchandise.

Atlantean warriors were reputedly heroic; their boldness and good fortune were universally feared.

The civilization of Atlantis arrived in due course at a height that astonished the world of that time, all of which was warmed by its benevolent radiation, which expanded everywhere.

What science there was in Egypt, Phoenicia, Chaldea, India and China—among all the oldest peoples, in sum, whose surprising knowledge we still admire today—came from Atlantis.

Like all peoples, the Atlanteans had their period of infancy, their period of growth, that of degeneration and their end.

The period of infancy was undoubtedly simple; a people is not born in splendor and opulence, like the son of a great lord. But it was wise, apparently, and eminently wise, for it imposed its beliefs and their worship on others.

The theogony of the Atlanteans even had the rare good fortune to become almost universal, to survive its authors for many centuries after their disappearance and to make polytheism the religion of all civilized peoples even in recent times. The greatest gods of ancient Greece and Italy came from Atlantis. It was in Atlantis that Uranus, Neptune and Atlas—all the familiar gods and heroes of mythology, in

¹ Author's note: "The Atlanteans, says Solon and Plato with him, were already a great people nine thousand years before the voyage of the former to Said in Egypt—which is to say, about 600 B.C."

² Author's citation: "'They [the kings of Atlantis] also reigned over the entire region from Libya to Egypt, and over the coast of Europe as far as Tyrrhenia.' Plato, Dialogues of *Timaeus* and *Critias*."

fact—reigned successively, and of whom we have been taught to consider as myths, although a serious history says otherwise.

Whatever the first theology of Atlantis was, however, it was not the last; at least, it was not the only one prior to the catastrophe that carried them away.

Like many peoples, the Atlanteans experienced over time the need to modify and even change their beliefs, rendering them more subtle and more worthy of the philosophy of scholars making progress.

We should not criticize them for that, for those days were not the least glorious of their life. The debates were lively, even bitter, it is true; but from their collision a higher expression of religious philosophy eventually emerged: Brahmanism, which lent its dogmas and its doctrine to more than one religion, and gradually spread through almost all the peoples of the Orient, into China and India, where it still endures, even though it appears to have been annihilated for centuries.

If the debuts of the Atlantean people were happy steps and giant strides, history does not leave us unaware of the fact that its period of growth also shone with an unprecedented gleam, and that its power eventually became immense.

But was it happy in those days? Were there political revolutions in that beautiful country?

One cannot doubt it—and that should not surprise us on the part of people who had achieved such a great civilization, for the power of their kings cannot have been in harmony with the rights of the citizen. The power of kings over men was absolute and unbridled, for it was also absolute over laws. The law was nothing other than the will of the god Neptune speaking in his temple, and therefore theirs, the god always speaking, undoubtedly, as they wished.

What is astonishing, in consequence, in the fact that the people eventually thought that it would be better to have fixed laws than arbitrary ones, and to make a *tabula rasa* of their government?

We do not know anything about these revolutions, however, except that they occurred. That is unfortunate for the philosophy and science of today—an irreparable misfortune, for the little we know about the island causes us keenly to regret what we have lost.³

The African Atlantis had, therefore, all the best-founded entitlements to the credence and renown of history, our study and our admiration, or at least to our curiosity.

But where is it? What became of it?

“Atlantis disappeared in the space of a single day and night, under floods and earthquakes. It is buried at the bottom of the sea.”⁴

In what time?

History does not say. But it must have been in a very distant era, since no other monuments, documents or reports of Atlantis existed other than a few volumes mysteriously buried in a library in Said in Egypt, where only a few scholars, of whom Solon was the first, discovered them, and which have not survived to our era.

Fortunately, their civilization and their sciences were not extinguished with them. They had spread them far and wide before dying. There was also their name...but so many centuries have passed over it, so many upheavals followed in their empire, so many barbarian feet trampled it that it was lost in the desert. As Citizen Bailly puts it, no more than an indistinct echo of it was any longer heard; it was no longer understood as anything but the memory of a dream.

That, I repeat, was a great misfortune!

Then again, perhaps the Atlanteans were, after all, like our noble and ancient families of the Middle Ages, who did not know how to write. Fully occupied with living as great lords, with fighting and

³ Author's citation: “There is a misfortune common to noble and ancient families. The testimony of historians has been effaced, the thread of tradition has been broken in the deserts formed by war and the centuries of ignorance that are the deserts of time. But a confused notion remains, a few facts engraved in memory, the duration of which advertises the importance of the truth. A long memory, the memory of humans, is something else entirely: I give great weight to ancient traditions preciously conserved by a sequence of generations.’ Bailly, *Lettres sur l’Atlantide*.”

⁴ Author's citation: “Plato, *Dialogue of Timaeus*.”

conquests, and of finally settling here or there, according to the needs of their population, perhaps capriciously and perhaps also in accordance with points of honor, such as they were reckoned in the mores of antiquity, perhaps the Atlanteans could not write.

II. The War of the Gods

About three thousand five hundred years before our era—which is to say, more than a thousand years before the deluge—the Atlantians were in the full flower of their growth. Their feats of arms, which had been numerous and brilliant before, were immense in those times, permitting them to consolidate the large-scale conquests that they had made in all parts of the world.

Thus, they had tributaries everywhere; they had founded substantial colonies everywhere, establishing the supremacy of their tactics, their courage and their civilization.

They would have been able to rest on their laurels, which were adequate for men of war, but their active and restless spirit could not rest in peace. No longer battling externally they were gripped by the need to argue with one another. They did so with all the vivacity of their enthusiasm, which was sometimes devoted to the sciences, and sometimes to religious philosophy, which is exactly what gives the greatest purchase to acrimony and dissent.

It must also be admitted that the worship of Uranus and company was already old and that its origin did not date from the times of high civilization—perhaps reasons strong enough to render it suspect to the generous and free thinkers who eventually took it into their heads to weigh everything in the balance of their logic, without listening to the arguments of the believers who thought it good to worship Uranus because he was the god of their ancestors, without wondering whether he was really the god of the world.

At any rate, the ancient theogony—which is to say, pantheism—was fiercely attacked in those days, and, if it did not crumble away entirely, it could not prevent the triumph of a rival and powerful deity: the divinity of the monotheists, the divinity of progressives and scholars—in sum, the divinity of Brahma.

Between polytheism and monotheism these was an immense difference. The former was the religion of materialists, the second the religion of spiritualists.

The old believers were either simple people who made gods of men who were reputed to have done good, or flatterers and sots who raised altars to the powerful individuals who governed them.

If they placed a god on high, nothing said so.

It was precisely this God that the new believers wanted to reveal, leaving to human beings that which was only human, and seeking beyond for the Creator of the world.

Brahma was the name they gave to that Supreme Being, whom they called unique, eternal, omnipotent, perfect, existing by Himself, containing everything within Himself, the Creator and moderator of all things.

Thus far, everything went well and could be agreed upon by all, but humans never stop in time. If reason and conviction give them a good idea, it is very rare that their innate imperfection—which is to say their prejudice, their pride, their love of the marvelous and the incomprehensible, and their immoderate desire for pedantry—does not push them beyond the good and the true.

Brahma was not only the God of all, invisible and incomprehensible; they wanted to characterize Him, to give Him attributes, to specialize His being, His constitution, His essence, His various transformations and His mystic trinity; they wanted to reveal how He had created humans, His ministers, His court, how He reigned, how He administered the heavens and the earth. They made Him a father, a master, a king—in sum, they spoiled the idea of God; they created dreams, but those dreams were very scholarly, full of grandiose, sentimental and, above all, incomprehensible hallucinations.

But a religious system, no more than any other political and social system, cannot be born without subsequently exciting around it an upsurge of different opinions. The minds of all thinkers awakened then, possessing some with the desire to arrive at the truth by discussing the new system seriously and conscientiously, and others with the passion of contradiction, and in yet others with sentiments perhaps narrower still.

Once the impetus was given to theological discussion among the Atlantians, it did not stop at the new religion of Brahma. Scarcely was it established than it was obliged to submit to the reproaches of a dogma that claimed to be more perfect and which we would, in fact, regard as such, because it is singularly similar to our own, to the point of sometimes being confused with it.

The dogma in question was that of Buddhism.

In that epoch lived a pure young man of high intelligence, a friend of the good and the true, which he sought in peace and meditation in the bosom of a retreat for which he was not made, for he belonged to the military and royal caste, and in that capacity, should have been destined for the agitation of politics and war. His name was Sylax.

Sylax was, above all, a philosopher and an ascetic. So far as he was concerned, Brahmanism had not yet forgotten enough of the religion of the old believers in Uranus. He even reproached it for worshipping the material that was forbidden to it. But the Buddha Sylax had a faith that he had scrupulously purified in retreat, and with inescapable logic he proved to his adversaries that God was as immaterial as a principle, without a beginning or an end, like a principle, and that although Brahma was all of that, the Brahmins had forgotten the immaterial principle and no longer saw anything but the forms and idols they adored.

His own dogmas were based uniquely in spiritualism, rejecting any appearance of materialism with the most scrupulous care. As in Brahmanism, unfortunately, there was no shortage of mysticism in it: mysticism pushed as far as dreams of the uncomprehended and doubtless the incomprehensible.

We shall not charge him with a crime on that basis, because the Buddha, like all men living voluntarily in retreat, given to absorbing meditations on the future life, annihilated in the profound and unfathomable mystery of the generating and moderating principle of the world, thought with his heart, his desires and his illusions, not with his mind and his reason.

His morality was severe, even more so than the destination of the man that his strength of mind required. Having renounced all the pleasures of the world, he thought it good to make a virtue of absolute silence, the abnegation of society, the celibate monastic life of study and the contemplation of divine perfection.

That life was hard, but minds were inclined to theological discussion and it began to be fashionable for scholars to live like that.

[Author's note: However little is known about the history of present-day Buddhism, it can easily be seen that although it was born later than the man of whom I speak, its dogmas and doctrine are nevertheless those of the Buddha Sylax, the dogmas and doctrine of Christianity, with a few variations. Even its liturgy and hierarchical organization have an extraordinary resemblance to those of Christianity, sometimes so perfect that one cannot doubt that one served as a model for the other.

That resemblance goes so far as confusion on one very unusual point, which is none other than the narration of the death of Christ. That legend is recounted in its entirety in *Observations sur les Doctrines Samanéenes* by Dr. Abel Rémusat,⁵ a scholarly Orientalist—as everyone knows—who found it in a very old Chinese book.

Here it is:

“The nations of the Far East say that 97 lis from China lie the borders of Si-Kiang. In that land there was once a virgin named Ma-li-a. She lived in the reign of Youen-Tchi, of the Han dynasty. A celestial God appeared to her, saying: The Lord of Heaven has chosen you to be his mother. After these words, she conceived and gave birth to a son. Full of joy and veneration, she wrapped him up and placed him in a crib. A company of celestial gods sang and rejoiced in the void. Forty days later, his mother presented him to the holy instructor and named him Ye-sou. He was not yet twelve when he went with his mother, who was going to make her devotions, to the temple, but on the way back they became separated. After searching for her son for three days, Ma-li-a found him again in the temple, sitting on a seat of honor conversing with old men and scholars about the works and doctrines of the Lord of Heaven. He was delighted to see his mother again, returned home with her, and lived with her as a respectful son. At the age of thirty he left his mother and his teacher and traveled the land of Yu-Te-a, instructing people as to

⁵ Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat (1788-1832) was the most important sinologist of the 19th century; the chair of Sinology at the Collège de France was created for him. His “Observations sur le religion samaneene” is contained in *Mélanges Posthumes d’Histoire et de Littérature* (1843) and might be apocryphal, as the cited document obviously is.

what is good. The miracles he worked were very numerous. The principal families and those who occupied employment in the region were proud and excessively wicked, which led them to envy him because of the multitude of people who joined him; they therefore planned to have him killed.

“Among the twelve disciples of Ye-Sou there was an avaricious man named Yu-Ta-ssé. In return for a sum of money, he guided a troop of men by night who captured Ye-sou, tied him up and dragged him before Ana-ssé in the courtyard of the house of Pi-la-to. There they took off his clothes, attached him to a stake and inflicted five thousand four hundred blows on him, so that his entire body was torn to shreds. Nevertheless, he still maintained silence, and like a lamb, did not murmur. The cruel populace, taking a bonnet made of thorns, forced it down over his temples, threw a wretched red cloak over his shoulders, and prostrated themselves hypocritically before him as if he were a king. His persecutors then constructed a wooden machine, very large and heavy, resembling the character Ten (a cross) and obliged him to carry it himself. It was so heavy that he fell down several times on the way. Finally, his hands and feet were nailed to the wood; then, as he was thirsty, he was given a bitter and acidic beverage.

“On the day of his death, Ye-sou was thirty-three years old.”

If the author of the Atlantean religion, the Buddha Sylax, probably the forefather of present-day Buddhism, is little known, no one, by contract, is ignorant of the name of the creator of the Buddhism of our days, Siddhartha.

Well, Siddhartha was an Indian prince who lived eleven hundred years before Jesus Christ according to come, only seven hundred years according to others.⁶

I hasten to say, in order to be completely honest, that few people suppose the legend of Ye-Sou to be found among the primitive dogmas of Siddhartha, but that it was introduced at a later date—no one knows by whom or in what era.

That supposition is probably true, but it is difficult to believe that a religion admitted by a considerable number of adherents—Buddhism counts about two hundred million—could be corrected and augmented surreptitiously, accepting important beliefs extraneous to the views of its author.]

⁶ Modern estimates prefer death dates in the fifth century B.C.