

Introduction

SUBMERGENCE:

A special issue on Atlantis and related mythologies

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Over the last decade there has been a growing awareness of the current and likely future impacts of rising sea levels on low-lying islands and coastlines. For island nations such as Kiribati, there is a very real threat of submergence of habitable low-lying areas with a substantial proportion of the population requiring relocation to elsewhere, either collectively – allowing them to reconstitute as a single diasporic community – or else in fragmented and dispersed form. Similarly, the inhabitants of chars (temporary river islands) in Bengal may have to live with a more extreme volatility of emergence and submergence.¹ Such communities are also likely to suffer profound inter-generational shock and senses of dislocation. This of course true of all involuntary migrations but is arguably more so for such migrants in that submerged lands cannot be credibly imagined as places to return to and/or places in possession of residual cultural heritage that the displaced can identify with. As history makes apparent, displacement of populations due to changes in sea levels and/or other events has characterised human existence ever since our species' initial movement out of Africa.² But while many archaeological, climatological and geographical histories have examined communities that have demonstrably accommodated this in their livelihood and habitation patterns,³ speculation as to the likely socio-psychological impacts of these patterns have been minimal. In this regard, Jim Leary's study *The Remembered Land: Surviving Sea-level Rise after the Last Ice Age* (2015) offers a valuable foray into the field. His volume describes the stages of progressive inundation of the area of land formerly lying between the east coast of England and the opposite coasts of Belgium and Holland. Referring to this region as 'Northsealand',⁴ he initially sketches the nature of the inhabited region during the early Mesolithic period (based on his interpretation of fragmentary archaeological evidence) and then goes on to speculate as to how the human population of the low-lying region may have adapted to global warming and sea-level rise. Having characterised Northsealand as "a mostly low-lying, flat and fluvially dominated landscape... created by the processes of rivers and streams" (2015: 16) he goes on to contend that the impact of sea-level rise on ecosystems and on areas of stable dwelling land would have been gradual (rather than catastrophic), requiring groups to re-locate to areas of higher land and/or "led to groups inhabiting

¹ See Lahiri-Dutt (2014) for discussion.

² See Cooper and Sheets (eds) (2012) for a variety of perspectives on this.

³ See Barker (2004) for one example from north east Australia.

⁴ See Leary (2015: 113 fn 2) for discussion of his rejection of the more commonly used term 'Doggerland' to refer to the area.

Dawson and Hayward: Submergence – An Introduction

Northsealand becoming distinctive ‘mari-terrestrial’ or ‘land-sea’ communities [ie aquapelagic ones, which] may also have made it easier for some to adapt to a fully sea faring lifestyle following the submergence of their ancestral land” (ibid: 34).

The model of the loss of land and of social adjustments to this in Leary’s account is far less dramatic than many of the more commonly known myths of Atlantis, Lyonesse and Mu, which involve sudden cataclysms that submerged the islands.⁵ His account is also one that recognises that the inhabitants of Northsealand probably shared similar tools, artefacts and livelihood patterns to those of adjacent British and European communities, unlike the aforementioned myths, many of which involved mythical island-continents being the home to communities with highly sophisticated cultures and technologies. The latter aspects render such mythological locations as tantalising lost nodes of human achievement whose traces might be perceived in the ancient histories of known terrestrial cultures (such as Egypt and the Mayan empire of central America).

The myth of Atlantis, as recounted by Plato, dates back to the mid-4th Century BCE, when the philosopher referred to it as an island city celebrated in Egyptian oral history. As Smith discusses in the opening article in this theme issue, the lost island-continent was – in all likelihood – entirely Plato’s invention for the purposes of illustrating arguments around Grecian polity. Archaeologists broadly agree with the view that Atlantis is quite simply “utopia” (Doumas, 2007), a stance also taken by classical philologists, who interpret Atlantis as a metaphorical rather than an actual place (Broadie, 2013; Gill, 1979; Nesselrath, 2002). One might consider the question as being already reasonably solved but despite the general expert consensus on the matter, countless attempts have been made at finding Atlantis. Most of the locations put forward are in the Mediterranean (where Santorini is a popular candidate) but candidates also include submerged islands off the coast of Sardinia, Sicily and North Africa and around the Strait of Gibraltar. More daring hypotheses include the Yucatan Channel to the west of Cuba (Collins, 2015) and even an island in a lake in the Andes (Allen, 1998).⁶

The history of archaeology is punctuated by the quests for long-lost lands known from ancient sources. In the 19th Century, Heinrich Schliemann famously believed that Homer’s *Iliad* and Virgil’s *Aeneid* were based on historical facts, a conviction that led him to locate and excavate Mycenae, Tiryns, and Troy. His success also encouraged one of the most bizarre engagements with the Atlantis myth when the Nazi SS, headed by Heinrich Himmler employed a young German historian named Herman Wirth to head the *Ahnenerbe* (Ancestral Heritage) unit within the *Allgemeine Schutzstaffel* (the General division of the SS). The unit’s goal was to assist Wirth prove his theory that the Aryan race were descendants of Atlantis, which he located in the Atlantic, somewhere between Portugal and England. Even more bizarrely, this led to an SS funded expedition to Tibet in 1938, which Wirth had come to believe had served as a refuge for Atlantisians. Elements of this theory fed into Nazi ideology about the Aryan master race and the inferiority of those they identified as “lesser races” (Arnold, 1990).

⁵ It should be noted that some crypto-historical speculations about the location of Atlantis have posited similar slower inundation scenarios, see Hallerton (2016) for discussion of Koudriavtsev (1997).

⁶ More imaginatively still, a story recently circulated that Atlantis had been located on Mars (Unattributed, 2014: online).

Dawson and Hayward: Submergence – An Introduction

The discovery of two cities submerged along the coast of Egypt by researchers investigating the area in 2009-2013 illustrates the potential for remarkable finds being made under the sea. The cities of Thonis-Heracleion and Canopus have yielded an incredible array of artefacts and sculpture, currently on display at a blockbuster exhibition at the British Museum in London entitled 'Sunken Cities'.⁷ The cities, which now lie under ten metres of water, were submerged in the 8th Century CE, probably owing to sudden subsidence that may have been exacerbated by a flood, tsunami and/or earthquake (the latter being a common occurrence in the Mediterranean basin). The archaeologist behind these remarkable discoveries has described the painstaking and lengthy work of piecing together textual sources, archaeological and geological data in order to pinpoint the area to carry out the excavations (Goddio, 2011). The British tabloid press referred to these magnificent sites in predictably sensationalist fashion as "Egypt's Atlantis."⁸ With considerable irony, the exhibition was funded by the BP petroleum company, whose products are a significant cause of climate change, resulting in protests about their sponsorship of the exhibition by Greenpeace UK activists, who scaled the building and hung banners off the iconic front columns. As a posting on Greenpeace UK's website identified:

The British Museum dedicates itself to learning, discovery and the conservation of human cultures, but the only discoveries BP seeks are more fossil fuels to dig up and burn which are already polluting our air and warming our world. We're here today taking a stand because of the irony of an oil company sponsoring an exhibition whose name practically spells out impacts of climate change. What were they thinking? We wanted to be imaginative, so we rebranded the exhibition and dressed the pillars at the entrance with five places that evoke flooding, extreme weather and rising sea levels in the 21st century. Among them there's New Orleans, a city almost lost in Hurricane Katrina, and also British towns like Hebden Bridge that were submerged by floods last winter. (Polisano, 2016: online)

At least three major international conferences on Atlantis have taken place in the last decade and the proceedings published (Papamarinopoulos [ed] 2007, 2008), leading to a list of criteria to aid in the correct identification of sites with Atlantis (Kontaratos 2007). A research charter has been published too, with the aim to bestow credibility to the field, and relieve it from the accusation of being "pseudo-science" and overcome the cultural embargo imposed by established "dogmatism" (Franke et al, 2010). Most of the proponents of these identifications are not archaeologists, although admittedly a few are. They support their hypotheses with scientific evidence of geological events and rising sea levels, picking locations that fit Plato's geographical description of Atlantis. Collina-Girard (2001, 2009), for instance, uses detailed bathymetric measurements to show a submerged area just outside the Strait of Gibraltar that would fit the description of Atlantis.

The date mentioned by Plato fits well with the known rise of sea levels in the Mediterranean some 11,000 years ago and it is not beyond reason that memories of such a process might have survived that long (Collina-Girard, 2001: 234). Archaeologists have been able to illustrate the persistence of oral traditions which refer to events that occurred

⁷ See: http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/exhibitions/sunken_cities.aspx - accessed September 2016.

⁸ See, for instance Sooke (2016).

Dawson and Hayward: Submergence – An Introduction

several centuries if not millennia earlier. Amongst Australian Aboriginal groups, for instance, stories of rising sea levels appear to have a striking longevity, plausibly referring to events dating more than 7,000 years ago (Nunn and Reid, 2016). Similarly, elements in Fijian mythology may refer to volcanic eruptions occurring tens of thousands of years earlier (Nunn, 2014). These observations stand at the heart of “geomythology” (Vitaliano, 1973), a branch of geology that aims to find elements of truth in ancient myths, raising the issue as whether the myth of the submergence of Atlantis and other lost locations derives from the rise of sea levels that affected our planet following the last glaciation. Local knowledge and perceptions of past events combined with archaeological data can provide considerable insights for understanding current and future environmental change, in terms of devising predictions and mitigation strategies compatible with local customs (Nunn, 2014).

The global surface lost as a result of the ice melting in the 20,000 years since the last glacial maximum (LGM) has been estimated as being roughly equivalent to the whole of North America (ca. 22.5 million square kilometres) (Dobson, 2014: 126). As sea levels have gradually risen by some 130 metres, land that was once inhabited now lies on the seabed. This submerged land or “aquaterra” (ibid) would have provided an abundance of plants and animals to hunter-gatherer communities across the world (Harff et al, 2015), with the ready availability of resources creating potential “hotspots” for human development (Phoca-Cosmetatou and Rabett, 2014). Of course the largest obstacle that the proponents of a “real” Atlantis face is explaining how an island submerged nine thousand years before could host a civilisation as complex as that described by Plato. This inconvenient discrepancy between the story and the archaeological record as we know it is generally reconciled by admitting that the story contains a mix of reality and invention, while the existence of Atlantis itself is rarely put into question.

The fact that submerged areas exist that were once exposed is clearly not sufficient proof of the existence of Atlantis or any other mythical island. There are several areas around the world that “almost” fit Plato’s description. Atlantis appears to be both everywhere and nowhere at all. Introducing elements of truth into a story has always been a clever escamotage to increase its credibility and ultimately the chances of finding an/the actual Atlantis are slim.

Following Oliver’s introductory article, three contributors to this theme issue address very different interpretations of Atlantis in contemporary culture. Simpson examines the history of ‘Operation Atlantis’, a project that attempted to create a libertarian community outside of the terrestrial environment in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Her study examines the manner in which myths of Atlantis inspired key individuals involved and details the Operation’s various phases and the practical issues involved in creating engineered offshore micronations based on libertarian/utopic principles. McKinnon takes a different perspective, examining a rendition of Atlantis as an extra-terrestrial entity in the *Stargate Atlantis* TV series. Despite its otherworldly location, she considers the operation of the extra-terrestrial Atlantis with regard to concepts of the aquapelago as a socially inhabited space innately implicated with marine environments advanced in previous issues of this journal (see Nash, 2016).⁹ Her study also focuses on the spectacularity of the extra-terrestrial island-city’s construction and operation as a floating space that delivers many of

⁹ Also see the *Shima* anthology of articles on the concept of the aquapelagos at: <http://shimajournal.org/anthologies.php> - accessed August 2016.

Dawson and Hayward: Submergence – An Introduction

the aspects that Operation Atlantis (constrained by actual technologies) aspired to. Complementing these two articles, Shelia Hallerton's research note on Atlantis/Lyonesse examines the convergence of these entities in recent crypto-historical writing and with regard to online micronationality.

One of the closest parallels to Atlantis is that of the variously similar and/or 'sister' lost island-continent of Mu, an entity that surfaced in esoteric pseudo-mythological literature in the mid-19th Century (see Jordan, 2001: 55-62). The fanciful location principally survives in contemporary western discourse through its invocation and use as a key location in Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson's *Illuminatus* trilogy of novels (1975) and its subsequent interpretation in various popular cultural contexts such as the work of British multimedia artists Jimmy Cauty and Bill Drummond with their popular music ensembles The JAMs and The KLF. As Fitzgerald and Hayward analyse in this issue, Mu is developed as a referent across the duo's body of audiovisual work and is synthesised with aspects of Atlantis and, in The KLF's final stage, other actual and fictional islands. As the authors discuss, rather than attempting to represent Mu with any degree of coherence, they scatter invocations of it across their work and ultimately coalesce a syncretic mythical island identity in their final audiovisual work, *The Rites of Mu* (1992).

Mitchell's article on Lyonesse complements the discussions of the island-continent of Atlantis and Mu with the more geographically constrained fictional realm of Lyonesse, supposedly located beneath the sea somewhere between the far west of the English county of Cornwall and the outlying Scilly Islands. Mitchell identifies the concept of Lyonesse as originating in Malory's narrative *Morte d'Arthur* the late 1400s and as being elaborated in 19th and 20th Century literature and, more latterly, song. As she identifies, its very fictitiousness has allowed it to stand for both lost 'elsewheres' and as an essential version of (romanticised) Cornishness.

Gaskins' analysis of Drexciya intersects with the aforementioned discussions of submerged lands and cultures by detailing the complex, politically-charged mythological project of 1990s African American techno duo Drexciya, comprising James Stinson and Gerald Donald. The duo developed a complex mythology concerning the evolution of a new race of aquatic humanoids in the area of the Atlantic known as the 'Middle Passage' from the children of pregnant mothers who were regularly thrown overseas by slave traders. Unlike Atlantis, Mu and Lyonesse, Drexciya begins and primarily exists as a marine world, in which human drowning (rather than inundation of land) provides a creation myth for subsequent elaboration. Approaching another evocation of submergence in African American popular music, Burton analyses rap artist Azealia Banks's engagement with Atlantis in her eponymous music video (2012) and with regard to the related fashion for "seapunk" imagery she drew on in her 2012 mixtape *Fantasea*. Burton identifies these as a particular articulation of what Caribbean cultural theorist Sylvia Wynters refers to as "embattled humanism". This approach tries to reconsider established natures of what is human (in established concepts of humanism) and to conceive of more inclusive formations. Banks's Atlantian imagery signals these as a visual accompaniment to her lyrics and delivery.

Complementing the specific studies of mythological lost island entities in the special issue, Goodall provides an account of the role that fictionalised pre-history plays in interpretation of Neolithic monuments scattered around Guernsey island (in the English Channel) and senses of their relation to modern Guernsey in a variety of poems and

Dawson and Hayward: Submergence – An Introduction

novels. As his article details, while the monuments are authentic artefacts from the island's Neolithic past they are also cues for contrasting imaginations of island histories (originating from an epoch when Guernsey was larger and closer to the continental mainland, prior to the rise in sea levels that submerged Northsealand, to its immediate north - as discussed by Leary, 2015).

In editing this theme issue of *Shima*, it has become apparent that mainstream archaeology has little to offer in explaining the continuing appeal of mythical submerged islands and various manifestations of it in popular culture (and/or the various forms of crypto-/pseudo- history that operate on its fringes). Attempts to locate Atlantis adopting rigorous scientific data and methods have invariably met with too many uncertainties and contradictions to be able to resolve any issues. As the various contributions to this volume make apparent, popular perceptions of mythical submerged islands have developed along paths that have little, if anything, to do with academic discourse but have rather involved the codification of people's imaginations, with the aura of ancient times providing a sense of depth to their fantasies. On the other hand, contemporary concerns with rising sea levels and regular predictions and/or visualisations of submerged cities, deltas, estuaries and coastal plains provide a fertile ground for renewed consideration of ancient inundations (archaeology plays a key role here and make the ancient myths appear fresh and relevant.

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