

## MY VOYAGE TO ATLANTIS

By the time you read this, I will have made a voyage to the lost continent of Atlantis—what’s left of it, if it ever was there in the first place. If I unearth any relics of its ancient fabulous civilization while I’m there, I’ll surely make that news known in a later column.

A voyage to Atlantis? What did you say, Silverberg?

Let me explain.

Atlantis has been a topic of speculation ever since about 355 B.C., when Plato, then in his seventies, composed a dialog called *Timaeus*. Its chief characters are Socrates and two friends, Timaeus and Critias. At one point Critias tells the story of the ancient, vanished island of Atlantis, which, he says, his great-grandfather Dropides had first heard from the great lawgiver Solon. Solon, Critias declares, learned about Atlantis from Egyptian priests of the city of Sais around 550 B.C. They had told him of the invasion of Athens, nine thousand years earlier, by a mighty army that had entered the Mediterranean from the Atlantic at the Pillars of Hercules, today known as the Strait of Gibraltar. These invaders came from an island called Atlantis, larger than Asia and Africa put together. (What Plato meant by “Asia” and “Africa” was what we know as Asia Minor and North Africa.)

The Atlantean warriors attempted to subdue Greece and Egypt, but were met and driven back by the Athenian army. “Then, O Solon,” the Egyptians had said, “did the power of your city shine forth in all men’s eyes, glorious in valor and strength.” (Both Greece and Egypt as political entities were still far in the future, nine thousand years ago.) Not long after this great victory, “there occurred violent earthquakes and floods, and in a single day and night of rain . . . the island of Atlantis disappeared, and was sunk beneath the sea.”

In a second dialog, *Critias*, Plato provided further details about the lost continent. It had been, he said, a place of high splendor, with soaring palaces and vast canals and majestic bridges. One temple, six hundred feet long and three hundred feet wide, was entirely covered by silver, and its roof was of gold. Its ceiling was fashioned from ivory inlaid with silver and gold. There were gardens, racecourses, parks, superb harbors thronged with ships, and wealth beyond measure. And all this had gone to the bottom of the sea in a single day and night.

Plato’s Atlantis was fiction. His pupil Aristotle said of it, “He who invented it destroyed it.” But the fable was a compelling one, and it survived the downfall of Greek culture. When European seamen began venturing into the Atlantic in the fifteenth century, there were frequent reports that the remnants of the lost continent had been sighted, and when they reached South and Central America and found the highly developed civilizations of the Aztecs, Incas, and Mayas, it was easy to conclude that these were descendants of refugees from that great land.

In the centuries that followed many a scholar, working from the assumption that Plato’s story was no fable but veritable history, and that Atlantis was the region where mankind first rose from barbarism to civilization, propounded theories of where Atlantis had been, what had happened to it, and where the survivors of the great cataclysm had gone. Some said that Atlantis had been as far away as the vicinity of Brazil, but other students of the tale had different ideas. Among them was one Bory de Saint-Vincent, whose *Essai sur des Iles fortunées et l’antique Atlantide* of 1803 set forth the notion that Atlantis had been located just off the northwest corner of Africa, close by

the shore of what is now Morocco, and that after the earthquake and flood all that remained of it were the tips of its highest mountains, the present-day islands of Madeira, the Azores, and the Canaries, rising above the Atlantic like the masts of a sunken ship.

It does sound plausible, although modern-day geologists and climatologists have shown pretty conclusively that the islands could not have been formed that way, nor has undersea exploration in the area turned up any evidence of the ruined palaces and temples of vanished Atlantis. But one argument in favor of the Canary Islands theory that kept the idea alive for many decades was the verifiable presence in historic times of a genuine and mysterious lost race, a group of tall, dark-haired, blue-eyed folk who could have been the survivors of the destruction of Atlantis and—all Atlantean fantasies aside—might well have been the last vestige of the Cro-Magnon race that once dominated much of Western Europe.

They are known as the Guanches—a term derived from the words *Guan Chen-erfe*, which in their language meant “Son of Tenerife,” Tenerife being one of the seven Canary Islands that lie just off the Moroccan shore. In fact they were found on the other six islands too, and each had its own name for them—Mahos, Bimbaches, Gomeros, etc. But it is as Guanches that we refer to the entire aboriginal population of the Canaries today.

They were a handsome race. A sixteenth-century account by the friar Alonso de Espinosa says of them, “This people had very good and perfect features, and well-shaped bodies. They were of tall stature, with proportionate limbs. . . . The people to the south are of rather a brown color, either from inheritance or from the hot climate, their skins being toasted by the sun, as they go about nearly naked. But on the north side they are white, and the woman are beautiful and rosy, with long hair.” Their clothes were made of the skins of animals; they farmed only barley and beans; each island had a king who presided over a court of nobles and

knights. By the time Father Espinosa wrote of them they were virtually extinct, for the Spaniards had waged a war of conquest against them, island by island, from the first Spanish landing in 1417 to their final defeat in 1497, and most of the survivors were finished off by the diseases that the Spaniards had brought with them. A certain amount of inbreeding has probably perpetuated Guanche genes among the present-day population of the Canaries, but they are essentially a vanished race, as lost as . . . well, Atlantis.

One interesting thing about the Guanches is their physical resemblance to the Cro-Magnons who occupied Western Europe from about twenty-five thousand years B.C.E. onward, driving out the older Neanderthal race and leaving such remarkable records of their presence as the dazzling cave paintings of Chauvet, Lascaux, and Altamira. The Cro-Magnons, like the Guanches, were a tall people, the men averaging more than six feet in height. Like the Guanches, they had high foreheads, big skulls, wide cheekbones, long skulls, and relatively short arms. We have no way of knowing what color eyes and hair the Cro-Magnons had, but otherwise the resemblance is considerable, and a solid case can be made out for the islanders as being the last surviving vestige of the Cro-Magnon folk, who had moved south from their French homeland to escape later invaders and to find warmer weather and settled in Spain and Morocco, just a short hop across the Mediterranean from the Canaries.

And the Atlantis connection? One curious thing about the Guanches is that they had no maritime skills—very odd, for island-dwellers. Each group of them lived a land-bound life on its own island, and there was no commerce between one and another. It is tempting to think that the ancestors of the Guanches got to the Canaries at a time in the distant past when some great and vigorously expanding civilization existed in that part of the Atlantic—the Cro-Magnons, let us say. There is not much support for the idea that any human group was capable of

lengthy travel by sea at such an early time, but one theory that has won considerable acceptance is that Cro-Magnons could have crossed over from the mainland of North Africa on a land bridge that subsequently sank into the sea. Another theory, a rather more speculative one, to put it mildly, proposes that the Cro-Magnons had originally come *eastward* on that bridge from the lost continent of Atlantis to conquer France and Spain. But either theory easily allows for the theory that the people that became known as the Guanches, having no ability to travel by water, were stranded atop the highest mountains of Atlantis when that continent was swallowed by the ocean, and dwelled in utter isolation on what were now the Canary Islands until the seagoing Spaniards arrived.

I like the idea. I *want* to believe in Atlantis. I'm not really someone who leaps to embrace far-fetched fantastic theories, but the romantic fantasist in me loves Plato's tale of temples roofed with ivory, gold, and silver, of grand palaces, of a canal that flowed through the country for more than a thousand miles, bringing transport and irrigation to a population of many thousands and leading down to a harbor crowded with merchant-vessels from far and wide. I have read with pleasure many a novel of lost Atlantis—Cutcliffe Hyne's *The Lost Continent*, Francis Ashton's *The Breaking of the Seals*, Phyllis Craddock's *Gateway to Remembrance*. As a boy I shivered when Jules Verne's Captain Nemo took his submarine, the *Nautilus*, to the floor of the sea, showed his companions "long lines of sunken walls and broad, deserted streets—a perfect Pompeii escaped beneath the waters," and chalked the one word ATLANTIS on a block of black stone by way of explanation.

The Spaniards, though they had pretty

well wiped the Guanches out by 1497, did preserve a few fragments of their language, which bears no resemblance to any language spoken anywhere else. *Chucar guayoc Archimencey reste Bencom sanec*, we are assured by Antonio de Viana, a native of Tenerife who wrote in 1604, meant "Spare the life of the noble protector Bencom's brother." *Van der relac machet Zahana* was Guanche for "native born who becomes your vassal." *Zucasa* meant "daughter." An *anapa* was a spear carried before the king. The early Spanish accounts give us seven more full sentences and about one hundred single words.

Are these the only surviving words of the language that was spoken by the citizens of Atlantis, or, better yet, by the Cro-Magnon artists who painted the cave of Lascaux? A pretty wild speculation, yes. How lovely to think so, anyway!

One unique thing about the Canary Islands is not in any way speculative. On the seven islands are found some two dozen species of odd-looking succulents that belong to the genus *Aeonium*. Nowhere else in the world are *aeoniums* to be found in the wild, except for one vagrant species native to nearby Morocco. *Aeoniums* do well in the climate of California, and I grow about fifteen different kinds in my garden. (My wife calls them "Martian roses.") I am very fond of them indeed, and have been for decades; and the possibility that my garden is full of plants descended from those that once flourished on the lost continent of Atlantis is particularly charming to me. And so, here in the winter of 2012, I have gone off to the Canary Islands to look at *aeoniums* in their native habitat and, perhaps, to discover a few artifacts of that great vanished civilization of long ago. I'll give you a report when I get back. ○

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