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 fortunees 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 is-
lands of Madeira, the Azores, and the
Canaries, rising above the Atlantic like
the masts of a sunken ship.

It does sound plausible, although mod-
ern-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 ru-
ined palaces and temples of vanished At-
lantis. 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 ves-
tige 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 sev-
ên Canary Islands that lie just off the Mo-
roccan 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 popula-
tion of the Canaries today.

They were a handsome race. A six-
teenth-century account by the friar Alon-
so 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 con-
quest against them, island by island, from
the first Spanish landing in 1417 to their
final defeat in 1497, and most of the sur-
vivors 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 van-
ished 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 re-
markable records of their presence as the
dazzling cave paintings of Chauvet, Las-
caux, 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 other-
wise the resemblance is considerable, and
a solid case can be made out for the is-
landers as being the last surviving ves-
tige 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 curi-
ous 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 expand-
ing 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 consid-
erable acceptance is that Cro-Magnons
could have crossed over from the main-
land 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 abili-
ty 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 At-
lantis. 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
channel 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 plea-
sure many a novel of lost Atlantis—Cut-
cliffe Hyne’s The Lost Continent, Francis
Ashton’s The Breakings of the Seals, Phyl-
lis 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 per-
fected Pompeii escaped beneath the wa-
ters,” and chalked the one word AT-
LANTIS 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 lan-
guage, which bears no resemblance to any
language spoken anywhere else. Chucar
guayoc Archimencey reste Bencom sanec,
we are assured by Antonio de Viana, a na-
tive of Tenerife who wrote in 1604, meant
“Spare the life of the noble protector Ben-
com’s brother.” Van der relac machet Za-
hana was Guanche for “native born who
becomes your vassal.” Zucasa meant
“daughter.” An anapa was a spear carried
before the king. The early Spanish ac-
counts 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 citi-
zens 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
dozens 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 va-
grant species native to nearby Morocco.
Aeoniums do well in the climate of Cali-
ifornia, 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 At-
lantis is particularly charming to me. And
so, here in the winter of 2012, I have gone
off to the Canary Islands to look at aeoni-
ums 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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