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# The Importance of Herodotus' histories for the Atlantis problem

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## Abstract

In 2006 the first systematic analysis of Herodotus' Histories under the aspect of the Atlantis problem has been published (Franke 2006). This paper presents a short overview of the scope and the results of this German-language analysis in English language.

## Introduction

Herodotus of Halicarnassus, the „Father of History“ (Cicero leg. I 5), mentions Atlantis with not a single word. However his historical work is crucial for the Atlantis problem. Why this?

First of all Herodotus lived very near in time and space to the persons and places related to the assumed historical tradition of the Atlantis account: Around 450 BC Herodotus travelled to Egypt and came by the city of Sais, where he visited the temple of the goddess Neith. From this temple Solon is said to have brought the Atlantis account to Greece around 140 years before Herodotus' visit. Plato most probably has been to Egypt, too, around 50 years after Herodotus' visit to Egypt. When Plato composed the Atlantis account as we know it today a further 40 years later, Herodotus' Histories were known to everybody. So they contributed heavily to Plato's geographical and historical background, which could help to explain Plato's understanding and interpretation of the Atlantis account.

Herodotus did not only visit the temple of Neith in Saitic Egypt at a time when the historical tradition from Solon to Plato still had been in progress, but Herodotus also touches a wide variety of topics, which have a key position for answering the question of Atlantis: Herodotus describes in detail a map of all regions and countries of the whole world known at his time. He talks about geological findings, sinking islands and natural disasters. He presents the history of peoples and empires he visited. He especially gives insight into the Egyptian culture and chronology as he saw them. By this Herodotus provides us with a lot of clues how to interpret the Atlantis account in geographical, historical, literary and many other perspectives.

Furthermore Herodotus' Histories contain a lot of similarities, analogies and parallels to Plato's Atlantis account. Among these are assumedly similar buildings and city plans, analogous chronological data or similar information about the mentality of Egyptian priests. Did

Plato copy parts of his Atlantis account from Herodotus? Or are the assumed similarities not that strong as they seem to be at first glance? Are strong similarities a clue for an invention of the Atlantis account or – in contrary – are loose similarities a clue for the reality of the Atlantis account, since similarities do show, that Plato's Atlantis is not a surrealistic product of mere fantasy but stays within the possibilities of the ancient world's reality?

Even where Herodotus makes mistakes he helps us to reach a better understanding for Plato's Atlantis account. If we know, where and why Herodotus' Histories contain mistakes we get a better idea, which parts of the Atlantis account are correct and which are not, assumed it is not an invention but a historical tradition. As with Plato we also have to become clear about the person of Herodotus and about the question, whether we can trust in Herodotus as a credible reporter. Are Herodotus' mistakes unintentional mistakes or – in contrary – deceitful inventions, which makes a big difference of course.

## Credibility as historian

Herodotus can be considered to be personally credible and reliable, although he made a lot of mistakes. He mentions the sources of his information and uses methods similar to the methods of modern science. Most modern scientists agree with this judgement.

The same credibility can be attributed to Plato. Whereas Herodotus describes history empirically and develops some theory of history and politics inductively, Plato does it the other way round: He first has a theory of politics and tries to prove it deductively using the historic example of Atlantis.

In the end Herodotus and Plato follow the same method. Herodotus VII 152: „*For myself, my duty is to report all that is said; but I am not obliged to believe it all alike*“ – Plato's Critias 118c: „*The depth, and width, and length of this ditch were incredible ... Nevertheless I must say what I was told.*“

## Mistakes

There is a vast variety of reasons for Herodotus' mistakes. Among these are the confusion of Greek, Egyptian, Persian and other measures, unreliable sources like „tourist“ guides and religiously thinking priests, or a lack of local orientation because of the shortness of his visit at certain places. A simple example is the orientation of the Thermopylean pass. Herodotus describes it to be oriented from North to South but in fact the Thermopylean pass is oriented from West to East. Herodotus erred because he had in mind the function of the Thermopylean pass: It connects northern and southern Greece.

Concerning mistakes in time scale the following sizes of errors could be found: 32%, 50%, 300%, 345%. Concerning errors in measuring distances and lengths: 4%, 7%, 19%, 34%, 42%, 65%, 66%, 100%, 220%, 240%, 1283%. Other quantifiable errors: 372%, 660%,

3500%. Not to mention all the errors which cannot be expressed by numbers.

These mistakes make clear that some incredible facts do not falsify an ancient text automatically. Egypt really does exist, although Herodotus made some mistakes. It also makes clear, that we cannot take incredible facts as simple truth. Herodotus' mistakes give us a better idea, what mistakes we have to expect in an ancient text, and why.

Let us have a short look on examples in Plato's Atlantis account: Concerning the measurement of time the 9000 resp. 8000 years correspond to the wrong notion, that all ancient Greek authors had of the age of Egypt. In case of Herodotus we even can demonstrate why he calculated a number of 10000 and more years. Concerning the measurement of lengths Plato's Atlantis account contains at least one passage, which shows clearly, that there must be mistakes in the numbers of lengths (Critias 115d): „... *they bored a canal of three hundred feet in width ... and leaving an opening sufficient to enable the largest vessels to find ingress.*“ If the canal would really have been of that width, then why does Plato add that the canal's opening was sufficient for the largest vessels, although this is absolutely self-explaining in case of a canal of 91,5 m (300 feet) in width?

## Saitic Egypt

Herodotus is the best source concerning the Saitic period of Egypt, when Solon visited Sais. Plato's description of Solon's visit to Sais fits to the nature of Saitic Egypt. Why did the priests tell the Atlantis account to Solon? First of all Solon did indeed ask for information about former times. And he as a statesman had access to a round of priests capable to answer his question. Furthermore Solon has been considered to be a wise man who can imagine the value of the Atlantis account. And the Saitic period had been a time of friendly ties between Egypt and Greece.

In contrast Herodotus did not receive any information about Atlantis when he visited Sais. Herodotus came to Egypt after the Persian conquest. Greeks were now considered to be enemies. Talking about the Athenian victory over Atlantis could have been understood as subversive activity. Furthermore Herodotus had no privileged access to the priesthood in Sais. He even did not ask about history, when he was in Sais. On the other hand Herodotus did also not receive any information about the Sea Peoples' invasion. So the fact that Herodotus did not receive information about Atlantis does not automatically mean that Atlantis is pure fiction.

## Egyptian chronology

Herodotus is a major source for the Greek perception of Egyptian chronology. By talking to priests in different cities Herodotus came to the result, that the first Egyptian king of human nature named Menes lived around 11500 years before his time. Modern Egyptology shows

that the assumed Menes lived around 3000 BC.

Since Herodotus tells us his sources we know why Herodotus came to this wrong result. The reason was not a lunar calendar. The reason was, that he combined information of different quality he received in different cities by different priests. Whereas in Memphis he got roughly correct information about the number of pharaohs, in Thebes a priest gave him fabricated information about his ancestors. Egyptian priests in the Late Period often fabricated genealogies in order to legitimize their position as priests in their temples. Egyptology knows several examples of such constructed genealogies. By combining the information from Memphis and Thebes Herodotus calculated an age of more than 10000 years for Egypt.

Concerning Atlantis this helps us in two ways: First we know that the 9000 years in the Atlantis account have been credible to Greeks. Secondly we got to know a possibility how such a mistake came into being.

Furthermore we can show that Egyptian priests – in contrary to popular belief – did not write history and that Egyptians did not have a historic awareness. Egyptian priests wrote about historical events only for theopolitical reasons: To legitimize Egyptian pharaohs within the framework of Egyptian religious views.

## Interpretatio Graeca

Herodotus applies the principle of *Interpretatio Graeca* to all Egyptian gods. This means that he identifies them with corresponding Greek gods. He mostly uses the Greek names and rarely mentions the Egyptian names of the gods. The goddess Neith e.g. is never mentioned by her Egyptian name „Neith“ but always and only with her Greek name „Athene“.

Plato does it the other way round: Throughout his whole work he is very strict in using only the Egyptian names for Egyptian gods. He does not simply identify Egyptian and Greek gods. But there is one single exception: Only in the Atlantis account Plato mentions a Greek name for an Egyptian deity: Neith is also called Athene. But Plato is obviously reluctant to call Neith with the Greek name Athene (cf. Timaeus 21e). It is obvious that the equation of Neith and Athene does not fit to Plato's views. But why does he then mention the equation? A likely reason would be that Plato is reporting an ancient account containing this equation and feels obliged to report this equation, although he does not like it.

## Map of the world

Herodotus complains about the mistakes of the Ionian maps existing at his time and so he describes his improved version of a map of the world. For the Atlantis problem this provides a lot of information.

Some examples: We clearly get to know, that for Herodotus and so for Plato the Pillars of Hercules have been at the Straits of Gibraltar. Herodotus is the first source where we read

about an „Atlantean Sea“ although Herodotus uses a slightly different grammatical form than Plato does in the Atlantis account. Herodotus also mentions the assumedly muddy sea in front of the Straits of Gibraltar and in front of the estuary of the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean. Another example are details about wind conditions at different places.

## Development of geographical knowledge

Herodotus is an important source for the development of geographical knowledge. Herodotus tells us about the expeditions of the Samians to Tartessos, about the expedition of the Phocaians to the Adriatic sea, Italy, Spain and Tartessos, about the expedition of Aristeias to the Scyths and Hyperboreans, about pharaoh Necho's circumnavigation of Libya, i.e. Africa, about the expedition of pharaoh Sesostri to the Red Sea and about the expedition of Scylax in the Indian Ocean.

We have to conclude that already Solon localised the Pillars of Hercules at the Straits of Gibraltar. But we can see in Homer's *Odyssey*, that at Homer's time the southern Italian regions were still a kind of mythological area for the Greeks.

We encounter a geographical self-contradiction in the Atlantis account: On the one hand Atlantis is said to have had power in Italy and Northern Africa before it invaded the region „within the straits“. On the other hand Atlantis tried to subdue „*at a blow ... the whole of the region within the straits*“ (Timaeus 25b). How can Atlantis subdue „at a blow“ the „whole“ region „within the Straits“ when Atlantis already conquered the whole western Mediterranean sea?

## Division of continents

Herodotus lived at a time when the definition of continents recently had changed. Shortly before Herodotus and surely at Solon's time, only two continents were known: Europe in the north and Asia in the south. So Libya, i.e. Africa, had simply been considered to be a part of Asia. In Herodotus' times Libya had started to be considered as a continent on its own. Herodotus even started to shift the border between Asia and Libya from the river Nile to the Gulf of Suez, where it is today. It would have been unthinkable to Herodotus to consider Egypt simply as a part of Asia.

But exactly this outdated dualistic view is contained in the Atlantis account, cf. e.g. Timaeus 24b: „... *a style of equipment which the goddess taught of Asiatics first to us, as in your part of the world first to you.*“ This is a strong clue that Plato relies on an old account, e.g. an account from Solon's time. If Plato invented this, it would have been an astonishingly good invention (what can be said of some other passages in the Atlantis account, too).

The Atlantis account also contains passages based on the threepartite view of the world (Timaeus 24e): „... *the island was larger than Libya and Asia put together ...*“. Did Plato

transform an old sentence „larger than Asia“ based on the dualistic world view into the sentence „larger than Libya and Asia put together“ based on the threepartite world view? Or is this passage a clue to an Egyptian source, because the Egyptians always made a difference between Asia and Libya, of course in their own words?

## Similar names

Herodotus writes of an „Atlantean Sea“, of a mountain called „Atlas“, of a river called „Atlas“ and of a people of „Atlanteans“. All these names derive from „Atlas“, a titan of Greek mythology. Are there relations to Plato's Atlantis? A detailed analysis clearly shows: In contrary to popular belief there are no relations.

Basically Plato does not establish any connection between king Atlas of Atlantis and the titan Atlas of Greek mythology, although Plato likes demythologizations like that. Plato surely would have used this chance to demythologize titan Atlas, if this was his opinion. Furthermore the attributes of king Atlas and of titan Atlas differ widely and are in clear contradiction. Now that it is clear that king Atlas of Atlantis and the titan Atlas of Greek mythology are different persons, the names derived from the titan Atlas have clearly no relation to Plato's Atlantis.

Plato does not demythologize the titan Atlas but he demythologizes the name of the Atlantean sea by deriving its name from a different person, from king Atlas of Atlantis. So Plato is not identifying king and titan, but *replacing* titan Atlas by the king Atlas as name-giver of the Atlantean sea.

## Similarities and analogies

Herodotus' Histories contain a lot of things which look similar to aspects of Plato's Atlantis. Among these are e.g. cities, ship canals, bridges, irrigation canals, islands, plains, plants, animals, elephants, hot springs, natural disasters, political constitutions and governmental systems, temples, religions and religious rites, weapons and armies. One third of the systematic analysis of Herodotus' Histories is dedicated to these assumed similarities.

An astonishing result is that many aspects of Plato's Atlantis are not unrealistic if compared to Herodotus. Some examples: An Egyptian ship canal is much bigger than that of Atlantis. So are the bridges built by the Persians. Babylonian temples are bigger than the central temple of Atlantis. Herodotus knows much stranger and bigger fountains with mixed hot and cold water than Plato.

Many scientists compare Plato's Atlantean war with the Persian wars. But in the Persian wars the aggressor had been defeated in a sea battle, whereas Plato's ancient Athens had no navy. It is also not valid to call chariots a symbol of the Persian army of that time. The well-known symbol of the Persian army in the Persian wars was the Guard of the Immortals, not

chariots. Furthermore the Persian chariots were scythed chariots, whereas Plato describes two types of chariots, but none of both is a scythed chariot. Also the Persian governmental system with its tyranny of one man, appointing or killing his satraps as he likes, varies heavily from the brotherhood of the ten kings of Atlantis.

Often mentioned is the similarity of cities to Plato's Atlantis. Ecbatana and its seven coloured ring walls are frequently compared with Atlantis. The same happens with the walls and temples of Babylon. The war port of Carthage is sometimes considered to be the pattern for the water rings of Atlantis. Atlantis is regularly interpreted as a negative version of the city of Athens. Herodotus also talks of the later sunken Helike. But also the Egyptian Memphis shows similarities. In the end the analysis shows that these similarities are not justified or only loose.

Especially it is highly unlikely that Plato copied his Atlantis account from Herodotus, combining different aspects from a vast variety to construct a symbolic story and telling a story hidden in allusions – because the similarities are so loose, so unsimilar in important and unimportant details and so widely distributed, that the effect of a recognizable allusion is not given any more.

On the contrary these similarities show that Plato's Atlantis is not that surrealistic and improbable as it is often considered to be. A description of the city of New York shows the effect: With some differences in detail you will find every aspect of New York City in European cities, too: big buildings, a central park, a stock exchange, airports etc. But New York is not an invention inspired by European cities. It is real.

## Herodotus in Atlantis literature

An analysis of 46 works on Atlantis brought the following results: Herodotus is a frequently quoted source in Atlantis literature. But every Atlantis researcher considered only some aspects of Herodotus and missed some other aspects. Depending on the hypothesis on Atlantis most researchers pitched on this or on that aspect and forgot (?) the other aspects. Furthermore there are „favorite“ quotations from Herodotus in Atlantis literature as well as important aspects, which are rarely quoted.

It can be concluded that the quality of a work about Atlantis can be judged by the way how it deals with Herodotus' Histories. According to this measurement the works of John V. Luce show the highest level of quality.

## Summary

Herodotus' Histories are of high importance for Atlantis research. They contain essential information on almost all fields of Atlantis research. On the basis of Herodotus alone it is not possible to decide finally, whether Atlantis is real or an invention by Plato, but it seems much more likely that it is real.



## Dedication

To the memory of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, because to our true pleasure he handed down to us the wide variety of his colourful world by adding his realistic scepticism: the spirit of differentiation, over whose eyes you cannot pull the wool.

## References

1. Franke (2006): Thorwald C. Franke, Mit Herodot auf den Spuren von Atlantis – Koennte Atlantis doch ein realer Ortsein?, Books on Demand, Norderstedt 2006. 260 pages, 650 quotations, 120 references. No English translation is available.
2. Cf. [http://www.atlantis-scout.de/atlantis\\_herodot.htm](http://www.atlantis-scout.de/atlantis_herodot.htm)