

# DEBATE

## Aristotle on Plato's Atlantis?

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### Introduction

Concerning Plato's Atlantis we read time and again in academic as well as non-academic publications that Aristotle said: "the man who invented it made it disappear" (Gill 1980: vii), or more precisely in the words of Strabo's *Geographica* 2.3.6: "It's inventor caused it to disappear just as did the Poet the wall of the Achaeans". But on a closer look it becomes quite dubious whether these are Aristotle's words.

### Not a statement by Aristotle

The negative judgement on Plato's Atlantis in Strabo 2.3.6 does only contain a word by Aristotle on the fictional status of the wall of the Achaeans in the Iliad (cf. Strabo 13.1.36), using it for a negative judgement on the truth status of Plato's Atlantis. But there is no hint that the negative judgement on Atlantis itself is by Aristotle. So, when examining the academic literature on Plato's Atlantis it quickly becomes clear that many authors express doubts on Aristotle's authorship by qualifying their statements with a "seems" or "not certain". Mostly in footnotes, only. Some even express an oppositional alternative opinion (such as Rudberg 1917: 11, Herter 1928: 45-46, Festugière 1966: 245-247, Pradeau 1997: 18) though their opposition had no consequences on mainstream science. Thus the question arises: Who brought up the idea of Aristotle's authorship of the negative judgement on Plato's Atlantis in Strabo 2.3.6 and what was the argument behind this idea? Without a sound argument Aristotle's authorship is rather unlikely. When tracing back in time the references from footnote to footnote starting from modern academic literature on Plato's Atlantis like Vidal-Naquet or Christopher Gill it was revealed that no researcher ever presented a sufficient argument on the question, but all without exception presented

references to works of other authors, sometimes accompanied by a short insufficient argument and some qualifying words such as "seems" or "entirely hypothetical". And there was more: The chain of references from author to author converged always at one and the same initial author: the French astronomer Jean-Baptiste Joseph Delambre, in 1816. And Delambre revealed his argument: He allegedly read about Aristotle's authorship in Casaubon's commentary on Strabo's *Geographica* from 1587 – but Casaubon's commentary does not say this! So we have to face a surprising fact: A mistake crept into academic literature step by step over the last 200 years. Even more surprising is that all collections of Aristotle's works and fragments never incorporated the negative judgement from Strabo 2.3.6 as Aristotelian. Do researchers on Plato and Aristotle not talk to each other?

### **What did Aristotle think, then?**

Before the idea of Aristotle's authorship of the negative judgement on Plato's Atlantis in Strabo 2.3.6 found more and more followers, academic literature presented the opposite case: Aristotle was thought to be in favour of the existence of Plato's Atlantis because of his geological considerations (cf. e.g. Paulys Realencyclopaedie 1866: *s.v. Atlantis insula*). Already Proclus argued for the reality of Plato's Atlantis using passages from Aristotle's works. This is of course no sufficient argument. More fruitful is a look at Aristotle's followers in antiquity. Posidonius, who is known to usually have kept close to Aristotle's views, was uncertain but rather inclined to assume the existence of Atlantis, what can be seen in Strabo 2.3.6: "... and Posidonius thinks that it is better to put the matter in that way than to say of Atlantis: 'Its inventor caused it to disappear, just as did the Poet the wall of the Achaeans.'" From Theophrastus who was direct successor to Aristotle as head of the Peripatetic school we have a fragment in Philo's *De aeternitate mundi* talking of Plato's Atlantis as a reality. David T. Runia (1986: 85) suspects that maybe Philo inserted the passage on Atlantis into Theophrastus' text but at the same time he expresses awareness that his argument is weak: Runia's only argument is that Theophrastus' teacher Aristotle allegedly showed opposition to the existence of Atlantis in Strabo 2.3.6. Now, this is an invalid argument bearing the danger to create a vicious circular argument. – Very often it is claimed that Aristotle opposed the existence of Plato's Atlantis because he never wrote about it. But in fact Aristotle never was reluctant to present his opposition to Plato. Silence usually indicated consensus, not dissent. Maybe in this case, silence indicates uncertainty

as was already expressed by Posidonius – but dissent with Plato is not a matter of silence in Aristotle's works. Many passages in Aristotle's works on geological, political and cultural issues rather support Plato's views expressed in *Timaeus* and *Critias* than to oppose them, such as cyclical catastrophism and repeated rebirth of culture. Putting it all together we find Posidonius' opinion to fit best to the conditions determining the possibilities for Aristotle's opinion on Plato's Atlantis: Not knowing, i.e. uncertainty, but leaning towards the existence of Plato's Atlantis ("it is better to put the matter in that way"). This is a subtle attitude towards Plato's Atlantis which is worthy of and suited to the great thinker Aristotle. And maybe Posidonius' judgement in Strabo 2.3.6 is relying on Aristotle's own words as so many other of Posidonius' judgements?

## Conclusion

As was clear from the beginning, with our results no pseudo-scientific "lost continent" did surface from beneath the waves of the Atlantic Ocean – but our results are still considerable: The question how Plato's Atlantis was judged in antiquity was enriched by a new aspect worth of discussion. The debate on Aristotle's opinion is open again. Other issues are the question of quality of research in classical studies considering an amazing and long-lasting mistake, and the communication of researchers on Plato and Aristotle. Find detailed research, argument, result, discussion and bibliography in Franke 2012.

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