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## **A Sense of History Plato in Númenor**

**By Angelica**

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An island in the middle of the ocean whose royal line descends partly from gods partly from mortals, that rises to power and creates an all-powerful maritime empire, becomes excessively ambitious and proud and while its armies are engaged in an expedition overseas is overcome by a huge wave and disappears under the ocean forever. The armies, incidentally, are swallowed by the earth. Familiar, isn't it? Tolkien maybe? No, Plato. And no, he is not talking about Númenor. The name of this island is, of course, Atlantis.

Plato introduces the myth of Atlantis in his Dialogs *Critias* and *Timaeus* (360BC) where he recounts what a mythical Greek traveler had been told in Egypt. According to him, the gods had divided the world at the beginning of time and Poseidon, the god of the sea, had received an island in the middle of the ocean. He went to live there after marrying a mortal woman who gave him ten children (five sets of twin boys) who would be the rulers of Atlantis. The first kings lived and ruled by the laws that Poseidon had laid down and their kingdom was prosperous and peaceful and the people were happy. Their needs were supplied by the wealth of the island's fields and forests and later on they started trading with other islands and even the continent "...for the ocean there was at that time navigable [...] and it was possible for the travelers of that time to cross from it to the other islands, and from the islands to the whole of the continent ..." (1). But as time went by, later kings forgot their origins, abandoned the laws that the gods had given them and became excessively ambitious. They entered into coalitions with evil men and tried to attack and conquer Europe. At first they succeeded occupying territories whose population they turned into slaves but eventually were defeated by a coalition led by Athens. And that was not the end of their misfortunes. Some time later, as Plato says "...there occurred portentous earthquakes and floods, and one grievous day and night befell them, when the whole body of [...] warriors was swallowed up by the earth, and the island of Atlantis in like manner was swallowed up by the sea and vanished; wherefore also the ocean at that spot has now become impassable and unsearchable..." (2).

If this was not enough and in case readers should have any doubt, Tolkien closes the Akallabêth giving the many names of his island:

"(...) Even the name of that land perished, and Men spoke thereafter not of Elenna, nor of Andor the Gift that was taken away, nor of Númenórë on the confines of the world; but the exiles on the shores of the sea, if they turned towards the West in the desire of their hearts, spoke of Mar-nu-Falmar that was whelmed in the waves, Akallabêth the Downfallen, Atalantë in the Eldarin tongue." (3)

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Of course, Tolkien the linguist has a clear explanation for this "coincidence" which he gives in one of his letters:

"It is a curious chance that the stem *talat* used in Q[uenya] for 'slipping, sliding, falling down', of which *atalantie* is a normal (in Q) noun-formation, should so much resemble Atlantis" (4).

### **Works Cited**

1. Plato, *Timaeus* 24e–25a, R. G. Bury translation (Loeb Classical Library).
2. *Ibid.*, 25c–d.
3. Tolkien J.R.R., *The Silmarillion*, "Akallabêth", p.338.
4. Tolkien J.R.R., *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, #257 to Christopher Bretherton, 16 July 1964.