

THE METAPHYSICAL CONNOTATIONS
OF THE ATLANTIS MYTH
ACCORDING TO THE NEOPLATONIST PHILOSOPHER PROCLUS

1. Introduction

Almost eight centuries after the Platonic *Timaeus* was written, the philosopher Proclus composed a Neoplatonic interpretation around 430 A.D. While making a commentary on the Atlantis myth, Proclus saw it as a unique opportunity to implement at the same time his own theory about the derivation of the world of sensible experience from the transcendent reality. Thus, he incorporated the myth within the frame of a generalized ontology and, more specifically, within the frame of the relation between the metaphysical being and the natural becoming¹. The myth, as formulated by Plato, offered Proclus not only the philosophical, but also the historical frame, in order to show how a war between human societies can correspond to and depict with remarkable exactness the rivalry, which is evident in the universe as a whole on its various ontological levels. So, what he posits as his own research object is to show how anthropology is connected with cosmology. Here it should be taken into consideration that for Proclus Plato had the spiritual quality of the one man to whom the entire truth about all matters of importance was entrusted by the gods². This is depicted in his works, including, of course, the *Timaeus*. Thus, authentic philosophical activity for Proclus was necessarily identical to the interpretation of Plato, because it was only there that one could find the truth. This means that the doctrine of the founder of the Academy becomes a first class epistemological criterion for any research to follow. Here it should be clarified that a Neoplatonic interpretation of Plato is very different from an analysis on the Athenian philosopher by a historian of philosophy nowadays, because today we aim simply at an interpretation of the Platonic text in its own terms, while for an ancient Neoplatonist commentator the analysis of a text is rather the vehicle for himself to express his own philosophical views. Proclus holds that he respects Plato's texts and that he preserves what would be called Platonic orthodoxy, but the truth is, more or less, far from this declaration. His own presence is more than evident in his own commentary.

¹ Concerning the content of Proclus' commentary on the *Timaeus* in general, see Lernould 2001, Gersh 2003 and Kutash 2011. Also, particularly systematic is the presentation of this commentary by Bastid 1969, 119-207.

² Tarrant 2007, 11.

2. Main text

In his analysis of the *Timaeus*, Proclus moved towards the same direction with the Neoplatonist philosophers Iamblichus (242/5-326) and Syrianus (d. ca. 437), but was in contrast with the views of philosophers like Amelius, Origen, Numenius and Porphyry. Proclus, who seems to have collected the extensive works of many previous commentators on the *Timaeus*, is a very reliable source for the reconstruction of the interpretations of Porphyry, Iamblichus and Syrianus³. Thus, about Iamblichus he says that he was the first to accept the Atlantis myth as a historical fact, which shows, if interpreted properly, the eternal rivalry that is fundamentally embedded in the universe. This rivalry is initially found in the metaphysical field and when it is transferred on the level of human history, it appears in a temporary fashion that can be spelled out in Plato's narrative. Iamblichus accuses the earlier interpreters of the myth that they were restricted to the literal understanding of the Platonic narrative, as they could not realize that Plato described a true story, but in a way, which reveals a reality pertaining to the whole universe. We could say that for Iamblichus the Atlantis myth is an episode in the universe, which, by means of the necessary reductions, can lead to the comprehension of totality. He was original, as he saw that it was time to be proven that the symbolism of the myth conforms with its literal content⁴. Therefore, whatever is contained in the Atlantis myth has a certain aim in the frame of understanding the world in general. Syrianus, who was Proclus' respected teacher, moved beyond these considerations and saw that all this has a theological dimension as well, since he believed that various deities play a vital role concerning everything, which takes place in the natural world.

Given all these, Proclus' approach to the Platonic text of the Atlantis myth seems to take place on four different levels: The first level is that of linguistics, as he wished to explain various topics by means of grammatical and historical parameters. In this case he attempts to give a scientific character to his own analysis, by proving it to have the highest possible degree of objectivity. On a second level he approaches the text from the point of view of ethics, in order to show that Plato did not have primarily in mind to deal with morality, as was mistakenly, in his own view, believed by

³ The fragments of Porphyry's commentary on the *Timaeus* were edited by Sodano 1964 and Smith 1993. Proclus and Simplicius preserved ninety fragments of Iamblichus' commentary on the *Timaeus*, nineteen of which (frs. 7-25 Dillon) refer to the Atlantis myth. For a detailed analysis of these fragments, see Dillon's edition (1973, 110-129 and 268-295). On the other hand, Proclus preserved twenty-five fragments of Syrianus' teaching on the *Timaeus*, one of which (fr. 3 Wear) refers to the Atlantis myth. For a detailed analysis of this fragment, see Wear 2011, 52-59.

⁴ Cf. Tarrant 2007, 82.

previous interpreters. A third approach is through natural science, and this was what Iamblichus had attempted. Finally, he interprets the myth from the point of view of theology, the most important approach in his view, as Syrianus had shown. In this respect, in Proclus' commentary all previous interpretations of the Atlantis myth are included and evaluated, while at the same time all dimensions of this narrative are presented by means of a lively and innovative discussion⁵.

Proclus himself argues that the Atlantis myth generally corresponds to historical reality, no matter if Plato gave a certain shape to some details according to his own way of narrating. Thus, using material from geographical treatises, as well, the Neoplatonist philosopher argued that Atlantis really existed, and was approximately as Plato described it. But Proclus was primarily interested in using some points in the Platonic narrative in order to proceed to lengthy digressions and thus prove his theory about the derivation of the world of sense experience from the supernatural one and the reciprocal relations between the two, depending, of course, on the analogies defined by the ontological level of each one. Given that the Platonic *Timaeus* was part of the very advanced Neoplatonic curriculum, Proclus consciously had in mind a certain audience, which was familiar with, and convinced of, the fundamental correctness of the basic principles of Neoplatonic metaphysics⁶. In this paper we will not describe the complex structure of such a system, nor will we discuss the views of earlier interpreters of the Platonic myth, which Proclus rejects. We will focus on the main symbolisms, which he identifies when he comes upon particular elements of the Platonic narrative. In order to denote these symbolisms, Proclus implements the following method: He often takes up problems that are traditionally asked about particular phrases or the meaning of the whole passage under discussion. His general interpretation is often reinforced when he invites the audience to consider the facts themselves independent of any connection with Plato's text⁷. It is there where he presents the symbolisms of the elements of the myth concerning metaphysical reality.

Proclus first holds that this myth takes place in the natural world, which came out from the manifestation of the unitary metaphysical principle through multiplicity and division. It should be noted that according to Proclus' standard theory, the last two states are not inherent properties of the supreme principle, but ways of external projection, aiming at the production

⁵ For a comprehensive examination of the ancient debate concerning the meaning of the Atlantis myth from Crantor till Proclus, see Tarrant 2007, 60-84.

⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 13.

⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 16.

of the natural world, which is characterized by multiplicity and specializations. The story of Critias is a description of facts concerning the history of the world of generation and destruction, where it is seen that behind the phenomena, the deities, who belong to different levels of metaphysical reality, confront each other. Here it is clear that Proclus preserves motifs of the primordial mythical period, since at a later historical phase the relations among the gods were shown to be absolutely friendly. Proclus sees symbolisms from the moment Critias in the Platonic work talks about the organization of the well-constructed prehistoric Athens and its war against Atlantis, as he came to know it through a chain of oral and written traditions. Parts of this chain are his grandfather Critias, Solon, the Egyptian priests and the archives of Sais. The people who belonged to Critias' family tree symbolize, for Proclus, the fact that from the one transcendent cause of the universe starts a series of successive coordinate demiurgic causes⁸. These are of course intelligible, but the existence of the material world is due to their creative activity. The relation "One - Many" is evident here in the field of the metaphysical world. The material world contains also human beings, the souls of which have forgotten the eternal truths concerning these causes, but through the process of recollection, they can once again acquire knowledge of them. In all respects the dialogues *Meno* and *Phaedo* are evidently recalled here. The fact that Solon, the first to listen to this story from the Egyptians, was extremely wise and the most free-spirited man, shows his correspondence to the primary metaphysical principle, which is transcendent, founded in itself and fills all things in an absolute way. In addition, given that Solon is only the primary source for this myth in the Greek world, a question that seeks to go back to his sources in a different world corresponds to questions that the scientists ask about the intelligible and archetypal world⁹. Critias the elder symbolizes a secondary metaphysical cause, the various creative principles, which harmonize the pairs of opposites, with reference to their immanent presence in the phenomenal world. It should be noted that for the Neoplatonist philosopher there is a hierarchy among the divine entities based on the degree of unity each one possesses.

For Proclus, Egypt corresponds to the invisible order, which pertains the universe and is the source of all visible things¹⁰. The fact that the goddess Athena is the "city-holding" goddess of both Athens and Sais, means that the people of these cities are in some way related, since they derived from the same metaphysical cause. The inhabitants of Sais, even though their city is

⁸ Proclus, *In Tim.* I, 81.20-83.14.

⁹ Tarrant 2007, 188 n. 401.

¹⁰ Proclus, *In Tim.* I, 96.3-97.9.

not as old as Athens, acquired a kind of superiority over the Athenians, since they were not destroyed either by flood or by fire. Therefore, until the time Solon visited them their generations enjoyed an uninterrupted continuity and were able to preserve in their collective memory the war between the prehistoric Athenians against the army of Atlantis. On the contrary, the Greeks, due to the natural disasters, which have caused whole generations to disappear, have preserved in their collective memory different versions of their local history at a time. Thus, the Egyptian priest can easily have knowledge of the most universal causes, which were responsible for the generation of the universe. He, too, corresponds to them, as well. In addition, thanks to the Nile, who symbolizes the single life-generating source of the divine and the divine providence, the Egyptians were also characterized by some sort of continuity in time.

On the contrary, Solon is of course himself wise, but he also belongs to the Greeks who have always been children¹¹. Therefore, he can only talk about change, generation and destruction, i.e. the metaphysical causes of the cyclic phenomena of life, which he himself symbolizes as well. Correspondingly, throughout the geographical area of Greece many disasters take place in a cyclic way after long intervals of time. This corresponds to the fact that the particular souls and their relevant deities deviate from their normal course and thus they are influenced by the instability of matter and of natural elements. This can cause both local and general processes of destruction and dissolution¹².

Proclus uses here the myth of Phaethon, who veered off course when driving his father's chariot and was struck by Zeus with a thunderbolt¹³. Being struck he fell down upon Eridanus, where the fire coming from him, fuelling itself on the ground, set everything alight. This myth involves for Proclus detailed studies of various kinds on three distinct levels: from the historical point of view, from the physical one and, finally, from the philosophical, or rather the theological one. According to the last and more substantial approach, if one wishes to see things behind the phenomena, one would be led to the conclusion that such natural disasters are identical to purifications, as they are caused by the divine aiming at something truly good, i.e. the revival of the material world from time to time. These disasters take place in the form of cosmic cycles, which are interconnected and prove that there is some kind of continuity in the material world. Because of them,

¹¹ Ibid., I, 102.1 ff.

¹² Ibid., I, 104.18-108.7. Concerning Proclus' views about history and its cyclical process of generation and redemption, see Kutash 2011, 57-60.

¹³ Proclus, *In Tim.* I, 108.8-114.21.

however, the Greeks were not able to have a reliable collective memory, nor ways to preserve information about facts, which belong to the remote past. According to Proclus, one could say that the situation of the Greeks is analogous to those souls, which have descended to the world of generation, having forgotten the knowledge they had with reference to the transcendent world. This fact makes Solon's narrative similar to a children's tale, while the narrative on behalf of the Egyptian priest corresponds to scientific knowledge. Therefore, Solon would need some corrections, which would offer historical data and the terms of objectivity to his wisdom.

The fact that the narrative about Atlantis includes a hymn in honor of the goddess Athena has its own meaning, since this goddess symbolizes the unificatory power which manages all cosmic oppositions. The creation associated with Athens is twofold, as it has to do with the universal and the particular things, but also with the intelligible and the sensible world. The description of the victory of the Athenians over the army of Atlantis is a fair and true hymn dedicated to the goddess Athena: Fair because it is fair that all that proceeds should revert to its own origin, and true because the hymn has been drawn from the real world via actual happenings and the works of the Athenians¹⁴. Thus we learn that Athens was once first in the war and the city with the most qualitative legislation. Both these properties are due to the goddess Athena, whose love of war and love of wisdom are depicted in this city¹⁵. This means that Athena represents knowledge both of the encosmic and the transcendent reality. Athens was distinguished for its excellent organization in all aspects of life, just like the order of the universe embraces in many aspects the order on all levels of reality. Through the story of the Egyptian priest, Solon is led to the praise of the goddess Athena, who corresponds here to an intermediate condition, necessary for the contemplation of the divine cause of all things. So, everything in Athens is mainly reduced to Athena, but secondarily to Hephaestus. This clearly proves the continuous presence of the divine element both in the sensible world and the human history. In the Platonic myth we read that Athena received the seed of the prehistoric Athenians from the earth and Hephaestus. For Proclus, Hephaestus here clearly symbolizes the final phase of the procession of reality in the material world¹⁶. This god is the maker of all material things and his contribution to the harmony of the world is decisive. He is the transcendent cause, who sets nature in motion and uses it as a tool for his

¹⁴ Ibid., I, 83.15-85.30.

¹⁵ Concerning Proclus' treatment of the relation between Athens and her goddess, see Kutash 2011, 60-62.

¹⁶ Proclus, *In Tim.* I, 142.11-144.18.

own creative activity. What he works with is matter and this is exactly what is symbolized in the Platonic myth by means of the earth. This is the material cause, which, though cold and lifeless in itself, thanks to Hephaestus is set in motion by fire and generates life. Being eternally and completely in love with Athena, Hephaestus imitates her intellectual character in sensible works. In this sense, the prehistoric Athenians had a perfectly divine origin, as they were the first people who derived from the relation of Hephaestus with Athena. The appearance of the Athenians completes in a most remarkable way the plan of creation of the material world by metaphysical principles through the process of division, the result of which depicted the principles of the enmattered world. Thus, through these mythical characters, Proclus formulates his general cosmology.

The prehistoric Athenians were not only ontologically superior, but also prior in time, in relation to the inhabitants of the Egyptian city of Sais, who first appeared one thousand years after the Athenians. So, the Saitic people participated in a secondary way in those properties in which the prehistoric Athenians participated primarily. This also means that the legislation and the overall organization of Athens reflects more than anything else the order of the universe, given that Athena contributed to their construction. Something similar goes for the organization of Sais, where the members of this society were priests, warriors, craftsmen, farmers, shepherds and hunters. In this case, Proclus accepts Syrianus' interpretation, according to which these social classes correspond to deities. The priestly class corresponds to the gods who lift humans up to the supreme metaphysical principle, the warriors to the protective gods, the craftsmen to those gods who distinguish all the forms and formal principles among the encosmic things, the farmers to those who set nature in motion from above and disseminate souls around the world of generation, the shepherds to the powers that are in charge of the various forms of created life and the hunters to those that organize all the spirits placed in matter¹⁷. Not only the social classes, but also the corresponding

¹⁷ Ibid., I, 153.28-155.2 (= Syrianus, *In Tim.* fr. 3 Wear). The aforementioned correspondence of the Egyptian civic classes with a level of god exercised considerable influence on Proclus' metaphysical system. Cf. Wear 2011, 57-58: "Syrianus' interpretation can be understood in the light of Proclus' theory of divine series, which seems to be an adaptation of the Syrianic principle of divine series elucidated here. Divine series, as they appear in Proclus, are based on the premise that immediate effects of the unparticipated One are a series of gods (or henads), unities that contain aspects of the One but are plural. Each henad embraces (or "possesses") a particular quality of the unparticipated One. The henads, moreover, are themselves each subdivided into vertical series, so that higher gods are said to possess a quality, which is passed to the lower gods, who possess a less intense version of that quality". Cf. Smith 2000, 179-180.

deities are unified, but at the same time they are distinct, each one contributing to the order of the whole. We could easily argue that, within the frame of the metaphysics of immanence, the dialectic relation between identity and otherness is evident here.

Even the temperate climate of the geographical area of prehistoric Athens has its own symbolical meaning for Proclus. He believes that the whole of space was divided up by the gods according to the creational order, so that every sector of space received souls that were applicable to it. Thus, Athens was selected by Athena since this was the sector of extended space continually kept by the Seasons well attuned for the reception of wise souls¹⁸. In his commentary Proclus makes an exhaustive description of the properties of the goddess Athena in order to praise her, thus stressing her eminent role among the other gods and her particular contribution to the creation of the world of sense experience, which is characterized by rationality and coherence¹⁹.

Athens was known for many marvelous deeds, but her victory against the army of Atlantis was the most important one, not only regarding its universal character, but also concerning the fact that it highlighted the superiority of the Athenian intellect. This explains the victory against the army of Atlantis, which symbolizes the ontologically inferior material world. The Athenians and generally all those who live in the habitable regions within the Pillars of Hercules, correspond to Athena and the Olympian gods, while the Atlantines, and generally all those who inhabit outside the Pillars of Hercules correspond to the opponents of the goddess, i.e. the Titans, the Giants and even Poseidon himself. The Pillars of Hercules symbolize the stable borderline between the metaphysical world and the material world. So, the war between the aforementioned deities corresponds to the cosmic rivalry between the identity of the intellect, which is symbolized by Athena, and the otherness of matter, which is symbolized by the Atlantic Ocean. This war begins with the tendency of matter to expand by means of multiplicity and division, which derive from the metaphysical principle of the Dyad. As is known, from the point of view of history of philosophy, the latter has its sources in Plato's unwritten doctrines. Consequently, within the frame of Neoplatonic philosophy, the Atlantis myth symbolizes the conflict between the metaphysical principle of unity and the metaphysical principle of multiplicity, which is eternally seen in the whole universe, but, finally, plays a decisive role concerning the preservation of its coherence and its harmony. In other words, this conflict does not cause a constant chaos, but leads to a

¹⁸ Proclus, *In Tim.* I, 162.31-164.21.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, I, 165.30-168.27.

composition of the opposites, in the rational way Heraclitus described it²⁰. Thus the multiplicity, i.e. the Atlantines, has the tendency to pervade everything, but at some time it is controlled effectively by unity, i.e. the Athenians, which finally dominates as the unifying power in the universe. Therefore, the conflict between the Athenians and the Atlantines is a historical event, with its own specific character, as it regards particular phenomena, but in fact it is an image of a general process on the levels of sensible and metaphysical reality. Proclus mentions the fact that there were ten kings in Atlantis born as five sets of twins. According to his interpretation this should be connected with the five pairs of opposites in the Pythagorean theory, which explains the multiplicity in the universe²¹. Another proof of the validity of this correspondence is that the kings of Atlantis stem from Poseidon, who is also responsible for all kinds of opposition, generation, motion and destruction in the universe. Anyway, the fact that the Athenians generously freed all those who lived within the Pillars of Hercules, on the level of the Olympian gods, has to do with their domination over the Titans and, more than that, shows that the divine pervades the universe.

The destruction of Atlantis through earthquakes and floods for Proclus is easily explained, because with some knowledge of natural science one can connect this disaster with others, which have taken place elsewhere. At the same time, the destruction of Atlantis is an important event, which reminds of the Orphic "entartarization"²². This kind of disaster is devised by Poseidon. The disappearance of the Atlantines as a whole and of the prehistoric Athenians on a first level only seems to be disastrous, but in fact it is not, because thus the plan of divine providence was realized. According to this plan and due to metaphysical necessity the order, which was imposed on the surface of the wider geographical area inside and outside the Pillars of Hercules, should also be imposed beneath the earth. More specifically, the generation of the Athenians, which symbolizes continuity and stability, was lost deep in the earth, which is also relatively stable and compact. On the other hand, the island of Atlantis, denoting continuous flux, was sunk in the sea, which is mutable and unstable. Consequently, the same order is imposed not only to the visible creation but also to the invisible part of it, and at the same time this completes an immense and powerful cosmic process. Whatever exists in the natural universe is subject to the same necessities.

²⁰ Ibid., I, 171.24-175.2.

²¹ Ibid., I, 182.2-183.20. Cf. D'Ancona 2000, 216.

²² Orphici, fr. 234(I) Bernabé ; Proclus, *In Tim.*, I, 188.24 ff. Concerning the presence of the Orphic thought in the works of Syrianus and Proclus, see Luna 2000, 235 and 268-277.

3. Conclusions

Through this interpretation of Proclus we have a totally different explanation of the myth comparing to the way Plato used it. By presenting the rise and fall of the strong Atlantines, at the time they strived to become the leaders of the world, the Athenian philosopher wanted to imply that arrogance and greed are major immoralities, which can lead even an ideal state to disaster. Proclus, on the contrary, held that the sinking of Atlantis and the extinction of a whole generation of Athenians, at the same time, were parts of the plan of divine providence aiming at the transfer of the composition of the opposites on a different level, i.e. beneath the earth. Anyway, in Proclus' commentary the arrogance or greed of the Atlantines is not something for which they were mainly responsible. Both the Athenians and the Atlantines had the characteristics, which were bestowed to them by their derivation from Athena and Poseidon respectively. This means that in essence the two gods used the two peoples within the frame of the rivalry between themselves. But of course on a metaphysical level this war was in miniature the cosmic rivalry of opposing metaphysical principles. As we have seen above, the same process of natural disasters and the extinction of generations in the geographical area of Greece, i.e. on a smaller scale and with less tension, was repeated many times and aimed at the purification of the natural environment in certain places. Through these cosmic events a moral order with universal norms is implemented. This order is *a priori* valid and is based on an ultimate divine plan. But here it is necessary to observe that for Proclus the rivalry among the gods is only something occasional. He proceeds to a clear reconstruction of mythology, in order to show that states expressed by gods like Poseidon have no place in the metaphysical world. By definition they must be excluded and this view is well attested by all that takes place in the natural universe.

Proclus' analysis on this myth is of course a difficult text, but at the same time very rich in philosophical content and with clear references to religion and mythology. Until now it has not received proper attention on behalf of the scientists with particular interest in the treatment of the myth. It is, of course, important that the text of the Neoplatonist philosopher has already been translated twice in English²³ and once in French²⁴, but it is essential for

²³ Taylor 1820 and Tarrant 2007. Tarrant's new English translation of Proclus' commentary on the Atlantis myth (*In Tim.* I, 75.26-191.11) and his closing considerations (*ibid.* I, 191.12-204.29), builds on significant recent advances in scholarship on Neoplatonist commentators and implements contemporary ways of discussing and translating ancient philosophy.

²⁴ Festugière 1966.

it to become a subject of an interdisciplinary study, so that we can understand its importance in the history of ideas in late antiquity. Our ambition in this research was to give a concise description of the main symbolisms and metaphysical connotations of the Atlantis myth, concerning which Proclus thought that they are addressed to people who wish to find answers to major cosmological and theological issues. Within the perspective of a new interpretation, however, the metaphysical world should be approached in terms, which reflect rationalistic views. Since it is exactly the world of the absolute, it should not be reduced to the relativity of human reactions or to naïve explanations of another era. Consequently, the Neoplatonist philosopher proposed a new reading of myths, as a product of a mature perception, which was shaped through historical evolution and could be characterized as enlightening, with the technical meaning of this term in mind.

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ABSTRACT:

In his interpretation of the Platonic *Timaeus*, the Neoplatonist philosopher Proclus (412-485) used the Atlantis myth in order to implement his theory concerning the derivation of the sensible world from a certain transcendent reality on the basis of the monistic orientation of his philosophical system. This myth offered Proclus the philosophical and the historical frame so as to show that a war between human societies can correspond to and depict with remarkable exactness the rivalry, which is evident in the universe.

KEYWORDS:

Proclus, Plato, *Timaeus*, Atlantis myth, metaphysics.