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Númenor and the “Devouring Wave”: Literary, Historical, and Psychological Sources for Tolkien’s Self-Described “Atlantis Complex”

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Invited talk delivered to the Hobbit Society at the Honors College of the University of New Mexico on February 10, 2016, expanded from a keynote address delivered at the Tolkien Conference of the University of Vermont on April 15, 2014.

- December 26, 2004: a 9.1 magnitude earthquake in the Indian Ocean generates a catastrophic tsunami that kills a quarter million people in Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, India, Somalia, Myanmar, Malaysia, and the Maldivian Islands (USGS).
- October 29, 2012: Superstorm Sandy devastates the coastline of New Jersey, its storm surge flooding New York streets, tunnels and subway lines (Kenyon).
- September 9th to 16th, 2013: areas of Colorado experience nearly 20 inches of rain, including 9 inches in a single day. The resulting floods kill at least eight people, wash out over a hundred miles of roads, and destroyed nearly 400 homes (Aguilar and Brennan).
- August 2011: Hurricane Irene dumps up to 11 inches of rain on Vermont, killing six and damaging over 3,500 homes and businesses, 500 miles of state roads, and 200 bridges, including the historic Bartonsville covered bridge, which I had personally traveled over for many years (Ring).

Over the past few centuries, it has been argued by a segment of geologists, theologians, anthropologists and historians that the wide variety of flood myths crafted by cultures around the world is evidence of a historical global or nearly global catastrophe. But there is a far simpler explanation: given the awe-inspiring destructive power of large volumes of water, and the fact that many civilizations were founded in the unpredictable regions where water-borne disasters are likely (i.e. coastlines and river floodplains), it would be surprising if flood myths were *not* ubiquitous. For even regions that are hundreds of miles from the nearest floodplain or ocean front, like Colorado, can be crippled by sudden downpours in severe storms.

Historically the flood of *The Book of Genesis* and the fall of Atlantis have been held up as archetypes for global flood events. Some scientists have contributed to the persistent claims that there is incontrovertible evidence for either event in the geological and/or archaeological record, the most famous case being the work of marine geologists William Ryan and Walter Pittman. In the 1990s they presented evidence that they suggested demonstrated that there had been a catastrophic flooding of the then freshwater Black Sea 9500 years ago by seawater rushing in from the Mediterranean. The ensuing widespread floods, they argued, would have displaced Neolithic settlements across the area, explaining the wide variety of ancient flood myths in this part of the world. However, later studies (Gramling 10) demonstrated that the inrush of seawater would have been slow rather than catastrophic, and as is often the case, the initial and often fervent claims of evidence are loudly and repeatedly proclaimed, while the later retractions, corrections, or refutations are conveniently ignored by proponents for a scientific basis for Atlantis or the Biblical Flood. This is unfortunate for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that the process of discovery (the so-called scientific method) leads us to

far more interesting results than blind dogma. A case in point can be found no further afield than the place I call home, the Connecticut River Valley of New England.

In the early 1800s, a number of British geologists and theologians sought explanations for the so-called diluvial strata in Europe (rock layers that featured the fossils of mammoths and other ancient creatures, and distinctive rock fragments and deposits such as rounded pebbles and large boulders that had obviously been moved a large distance from their original locations). Some scientists interpreted the diluvia as proof of the Great Biblical Flood. However, most of these features were eventually shown to have been caused by glaciers, and in the 1830s and 1840s led to the discovery of previous ice ages. The transition from the geological mindsets of Catastrophism and Neptunism (the hypotheses that geological features are mainly shaped by sudden catastrophes largely involving water) to Uniformitarianism and Plutonism (geology works through slow, steady changes that often involve heat beneath the earth's surface as well as volcanic activity) occurred rather quickly in Europe, but took longer among the God-fearing geologists of New England, including Yale University trained Massachusetts native and Amherst College geology professor Reverend Edward Hitchcock.

Hitchcock began his career arguing that the diluvial deposits of New England proved the existence of a worldwide flood (which he identified with the flood of the Bible), but as he examined the geological evidence more closely, he came to the realization that the rocks of the Connecticut River Valley were telling him a far different story, which he called a "Glacio-aqueous theory" (218). In the 1841 edition of his textbook *Elementary Geology*, he argued that the European hypotheses of ice ages was correct, and that the rocky, flat farmland of the Amherst area was created by the melting of glaciers at the end of the last ice age. Four years later, Hitchcock became president of Amherst College, and in 1939 Dartmouth College geologist Richard Lougee coined the name Lake Hitchcock to describe the string of ancient lakes now known to have formed along the Connecticut River Valley at the end of the last ice age, circa 15,000-18,000 years ago (Little 94). It was upon these very same glacial lakebeds that Amherst College was founded.

So what does this have to do with Tolkien? On one level, Tolkien Studies is thriving today because we have embraced a similar ethos of evidence-based discovery, exploring with open, interdisciplinary minds the totality of writings Tolkien left behind, leading us to a deeper understanding of, and greater respect for, the vast subcreation of this philology professor and myth maker. But, of course, at the most concrete level, I'm referring to Tolkien's use of the flood archetype in the story of Númenor and the Second Age of Middle-earth.

The portion of *The Silmarillion* called "Akallabêth" details the tragic tale of Númenor. In a nutshell, after the defeat of Melkor at the end of the First Age, the faithful among humans were rewarded by the Valar with a specially created, star-shaped island in the sea between Middle-earth and the Blessed Lands. Ruled by Elros, twin brother of Elrond, the Númenóreans were granted long life (hundreds of years) and the ability to remain healthy in mind and body until near the end (at which point they would willingly receive death, the gift of Ilúvatar). Shipbuilding was taught to the Númenóreans, and they were encouraged to sail wherever they would, except West toward the Blessed Lands, lest they be tempted by the immortality that was not their fate. For generations, all was well, and the Númenóreans sailed to Middle-earth often, befriending the elves who remained there and aiding the more primitive human settlements (where they were received as almost gods).

But as time went on, the Númenóreans, especially the rulers, began to resent their mortality and began to question why they were not permitted to sail to the Blessed Lands. The kings began to cling to life, waiting until they were infirm to grudgingly die, and scientists were tasked with trying to discover the secrets of eternal life. The Númenóreans rejected all things Elvish, except for a group of ‘Faithful’ (some of whom were also descendants of Elros). One particularly egotistical king, Ar-Pharazôn, decided to challenge Sauron for rulership of Middle-earth, but was surprised when Sauron instead surrendered and was willingly brought back to the island as a prisoner. Over time, Sauron gained the ear of the king, and promised to aid him in his search for immortality. Thus, the Númenóreans fell into pride and Melkor worship, and decided to invade Valinor, sailing West to claim what they thought to be their birthright. Manwë called to Ilúvatar for help, and in one of the few direct interventions of Ilúvatar in Middle-earth, he opened up a chasm in the ocean and swallowed up the fleet. A huge wave enveloped Númenor, swallowing the island and its inhabitants in a catastrophe described in gory detail in *The Silmarillion* (278-80).

Elendil and his sons Anárion and Isildur, with their families, had prepared ships beforehand. In a scene ripped from the Biblical tale of Noah, all but Elendil himself survived the chaos of the “devouring wave” (*Sil* 279) to arrive safely on the shore of a Middle-earth that had been forever transformed by the catastrophic sinking of Númenor. For in addition to the permanent changes in the landmasses, the Blessed Lands were removed from the world, and could only be reached by the mythical Straight Road that only the elves could find. The world was also made spherical rather than flat. From Elendil’s sons arose the rulers of the kingdom of Gondor, and eventually Aragorn. Númenor became known as Atalantë in Elvish, Akallabêth in the Númenorean tongue, meaning “the Downfallen” (*Sil* 281).

Atalantë is an obvious nod to the mythical Atlantis, and in a number of letters Tolkien refers to the island as Númenor-Atlantis, explaining the story of Númenor as his personal adaptation of the Atlantis story (*Letters* 151; 186; 206; 342). Most interesting is that in letters from 1956, 1964, and 1965 he explains that he had had dreams about a huge wave engulfing a landscape for many years, his “complex” or “Atlantis haunting,” as he called it (*Letters* 232; 347). He exorcized this demon by writing about it, including transferring the dream to Faramir in *The Return of the King* (*Letters* 213). As Faramir and Éowyn watch the downfall of Mordor from afar, Faramir compares the lightning, earthquakes, and dying of the sunlight to the downfall of Númenor: “It reminds me of Númenor... of the land of Westnesse that foundered, and of the great dark wave climbing over the green lands and above the hills, and coming on, darkness unescapable. I often dream of it” (*ROTK* 240).

Tolkien began writing about Númenor around 1936, at the same time that he began crafting a story called *The Lost Road*. He and C.S. Lewis had complained to each other about the quality of available fiction, and each decided to write a science fiction tale, Lewis a space travel tale (which became the trilogy *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*) and Tolkien a time travel story that was never finished (*LR* 7-9). In 1945-46 he worked on a new version of the time travel tale, called “The Notion Club Papers,” which was likewise abandoned before completion (*SD* 145-7). In both tales travel into the past was done mentally, through special dreams or visions, in “The Lost Road” accomplished by generations of father-son pairs who could share their experiences across time, and in “The Notion Club Papers” by a group of academics loosely based on Tolkien’s social group, the Inklings. In both works, the destruction

of Númenor was a central focus of the past-directed time travel, and Tolkien eventually came to realize that he was really only interested in writing the story of Númenor itself. There are several versions of that tale, which he worked on over the decades, “The Fall of Númenor” (circa 1936), “The Drowning of Andûnê” (circa 1946 [SD 340]), and the post *Lord of the Rings* work “Akallabêth” (POME 140). There is also a detailed description of the island itself, written about 1960 and included in *Unfinished Tales* (POME 163).

In *A Question of Time*, Verlyn Flieger traces the “dream-travel” (138) of “The Lost Road” and “The Notion Club Papers” to the pseudoscientific writings of engineer J.W. Dunne in the 1920s and 1930s, popular works that also influenced science fiction writer Olaf Stapledon (whose novel *Last Men in London* is mentioned by name in “The Notion Club Papers”). Interestingly, Gerhart Johann Robert Hauptmann’s 1913 novel *Atlantis* uses the name of the mythical continent to refer to a “dream world” that the main character accesses during sleep and trances or seizures (Tevis 120).

While most people have heard of Atlantis, only a fraction know the origin of the story, and fewer have actually read the primary sources themselves. The famed ancient Greek philosopher Plato invented the fictional civilization for two of his dialogues, *Timaeus* and *Critias*, written a few years before his death in 347 BC. The two works are follow-ups to his most famous dialogue, *The Republic*, and read like a day in the life of any college classroom (well, one set in ancient Greece). After referring back to his previous lecture (i.e. *The Republic*), Socrates (the professor) asks his students if they have done their homework of coming up with a concrete example of how their perfect society would behave when faced with the possibility of war. Critias is set up by his fellow students to answer the question and recounts a story that was supposedly passed down over several centuries from Egyptian priests. According to the tale, about 9000 years before, the perfect society – the ancient Athenians – had “stayed the course of a mighty host, which, starting from a distant point in the Atlantic Ocean, was insolently advancing to attack the whole of Europe, and Asia to boot” (Bury 41). This host came from the island nation of Atlantis, and sought to enslave Athens, Egypt, and all nations within the Straits of Gibraltar. It was in this desperate hour that the Athenian state “showed itself conspicuous for valour and might in the sight of the world” (Bury 43). However, Atlantis was not destroyed by the Athenians, but by the gods:

at a later time there occurred portentous earthquakes and floods, and one grievous day and night befell them, when the whole body of your warriors was swallowed up by the earth, and the island of Atlantis in like manner was swallowed up by the sea and vanished (Bury 43).

The *Critias* afterwards describes both the ancient Athenian and Atlantean civilizations in greater detail, painting the ancient Athenians as noble and just, and the rival Atlanteans as corrupt and evil. Atlantis was founded by Poseidon, God of the Sea, who begat five pairs of twin sons on a mortal woman. The island continent was divided up amongst them, with the eldest son as the supreme ruler.

A close reading of “A Description of the Island of Númenor” in *Unfinished Tales* in concert with Plato’s *Critias* leads one to realize that the two island nations share more than just their fate. Númenor has five geographic ‘arms,’ analogous to the five pairs of twin sons of

Poseidon. Both had a holy mountain at their center, springs created by the gods, both enjoyed wonderful weather and fertile soil, sharp cliff sides along their coasts, and had an abundance of natural resources (including trees that were harvested to build ships). Both the Númenóreans and Atlanteans engaged in trade with the lands to their east and grew wealthy and corrupt. Zeus, like Manwë (the sky gods of the Olympians and Valar respectively), recognizes the level of corruption in the hearts of the island men, and decides to send a final message to the island nation to turn back to the gods and away from their evil ways. Here the *Critias* ends, unfinished, while the ultimate fate of the Númenóreans, including the sailing of the survivors eastward and the establishment of the kingdom of Gondor, is clearly described in Tolkien’s works.

It is not surprising that Tolkien would use an Atlantean tale as part of his aborted science fiction tale, given that *Timaeus* and *Critius* are sometimes termed proto-science fiction. But as University of Oklahoma Classics professor Jesse Rufus Fears (395) wrote in a 2002 review, “Must it be said again? The story of Atlantis is an invention of Plato himself. There is no historical kernel to it.” Despite this, beginning in the mid-1800s a variety of authors explored the possibility that there might be evidence for the existence of what became known as ‘Lost Continents,’ including Mu and Lemuria in the Pacific and Atlantis in the Atlantic.

The suggestions actually came from at least two areas of science, geologists who were looking for an explanation for similarities between extinct fossils species found on different continents, and a particular subset of archeologists who were examining the Mayan culture. The claims of these ‘Mayanists’ raise alarm bells of racism, as they apparently found it more reasonable that survivors of a technologically advanced lost continent brought agriculture, writing, architecture, and various cultural practices to the ‘savages’ of Mesoamerica than accept that these people could develop their own highly successful civilization independent of outside aid. The father of Victorian Mayanism was French historian and priest Charles Etienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, who began publishing his claims about an Atlantean influence on the Maya in 1862. Although his writings were embraced by some individuals, the scientific community largely criticized his work. For example, in an 1874 article in *Appleton’s Journal*, writer George S. Jones offered “Looking back over the whole of this work... one is nearly at a loss what view to take of it.... The preferable view – certainly the most charitable one – is that it was never intended as a serious work, but was merely an elaborate jeu d’esprit” (820). Note that in this modern interpretation of Atlantis, the Atlanteans were not evil and corrupt, and instead acted to better humanity, as the survivors sailed to the four corners of the world and shared their superior knowledge and technology with the primitive residents with whom they found refuge.

The use of a ‘lost continent’ to explain similarities between fossils found on opposite sides of the Atlantic had also been largely discounted by the late 1800s, due to studies of the ocean floor. The similarities in fossils were instead explained by the existence of a Bering Strait land bridge, and later by Alfred Wegener’s theory of continental drift. However, there were isolated individuals who continued to interpret the data otherwise. For example, in his 1912 lecture reviewing the volcanic activity of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, Pierre Termier, Director of Service of the Geologic Chart of France, offered “See how much there is to encourage those who still hold out for Plato’s narrative. Geologically speaking, the Platonian history of Atlantis is highly probable” (231). The 1908 edition of *Chambers’s Wonder Book of Volcanoes and Earthquakes* has a chapter on “The Fabled Continent of Atlantis” and claims that the evidence

points “unquestionably to the existence of some large land mass between the two continents, and to this extent throw light on the probable existence of prehistoric Atlantis” (Houston 343).

The influence of the Atlantis revival can be seen in the popular culture of the time, such as Jules Verne’s 1870 novel *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. Former Minnesota politician Ignatius Donnelly capitalized on public interest in Atlantis, merging Mayanism and geological hypotheses of a lost continent into two popular-level books, *Atlantis, The Antediluvian World* (1882) and *Ragnarok: The Age of Fire and Gravel* (1883). These works are still cited by Atlantis believers today, despite the fact that scientists (and indeed, anyone with basic critical thinking skills) can thoroughly debunk Donnelly’s claims. For example, he asserts that the hieroglyphs of the Egyptians are the same as those of the Maya and both cultures built the “same mounds, pyramids, obelisks, and temples” (Donnelly *Atlantis* 120; 93), claims that a simple Google search of relevant images can discredit. Perhaps his wildest claim is that Atlantis was destroyed when a comet passed too close to the earth, pummeling our planet with both a flood and a deluge of gravel, his out-of-this-world explanation for the diluvia we had previously discussed (Donnelly *Ragnarok* 63). Much of this Mayanist pseudoscience was repackaged by Erich von Däniken beginning in the 1960s in his *Chariots of the Gods* and myriad sequels, merely replacing Atlanteans with extraterrestrials as the saviors of the ‘savages’ of the New World.

Donnelly’s interpretation of Atlantis as the source of all technological human knowledge resonated with the Theosophical Society teachings of Russian mystic Helena Blavatsky, including *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), which was supposedly based on information derived from Atlantis itself (53). Theosophist Rudolf Steiner also wrote extensively on Atlantis. In the theosophical interpretation, Atlantis was the fourth of five “Root Races” (the Aryans being the culminating race), and reached its peak about a million years ago before suffering a number of disasters caused by the misuse of psychic and supernatural powers (Steiner 43). According to theosophist W. Scott-Elliot’s book *The Story of Atlantis* (1896), there were four catastrophes in total: 800,000 years ago, 200,000 years ago, 80,000 years ago (which transformed the continent of Atlantis into the island that Plato spoke of) and the destruction of that island (as described by Plato) in 9564 BC (3). Scott-Elliot describes the Atlanteans’ fall into sorcery and the Black Arts (28-30), similar to the Melkor worship brought to Númenor by Sauron: the Atlanteans “became tall with pride. We are the kings, it was said; we are the Gods” (Scott-Eliot 65).

A fascinating detail in Scott-Elliot’s work is the description of Atlantean “battle ships that could navigate the air” (52). In the original outline of “The Fall of Númenor” we read that after the fall of Númenor and the creation of the Straight Road that only the elves could follow to Valinor, “many of the Númenórië could see it or faintly see it; and tried to devise ships to sail on it. But they achieved only ships that would sail in Wilwa or lower air. Whereas the Plain of the Gods cut through and traversed Ilmen [in] which which even the birds cannot fly, save the eagles and hawks of Manwe” (*LR* 12). Another reference to the Atlantean airships occurs in the 1911 theosophical work *Atlantis and Lemuria* by Rudolph Steiner, where it is said that they are propelled by the “life force” of plant seeds, producing enough energy to raise the air ships “a little above the earth. These air-ships sailed at a height rather below that of the mountains of Atlantean times, and they had steering appliances, by means of which they could be raised above these mountains” (16). However, Steiner notes that such a technology would be quite useless today, since our atmosphere is far less dense than it was in the past. Note that, like Tolkien, Steiner had his airships limited to the lower atmosphere.

Whether Tolkien, a devote Catholic, would ever have read the mysticism of the theosophists is a point of debate, but it must be pointed out that Owen Barfield, one of the Inklings and a longtime friend of C.S. Lewis, was heavily influenced by Steiner, beginning in the late 1920s (Tait 47). Therefore, even if Tolkien did not read theosophist materials himself, he would have probably been exposed to them on more than one occasion, perhaps over a pint at the Eagle and Child.

About the same time, Scottish folklorist and journalist Lewis Spence published a series of books about a supposedly historical Atlantis, including *The Problem of Atlantis* (1924), *Atlantis in America* (1925), and *The History of Atlantis* (1926). To his credit, he freely admitted in this last volume that his writings about Atlantis were not based on “mere scholarship” (2) but rather on his interpretation of prehistoric European history. In his mind, the Atlanteans were not an advanced civilization, but rather Cro Magnons who emigrated to Europe and, with their superior stone tools and cave paintings, displaced the inferior and brutish Neanderthals (85).

Fortunately, Atlantis’ status as a “real” place did not play a deciding role in Tolkien’s inclusion of it in his mythology. In a September 25, 1954 letter to Naomi Mitchison, Tolkien explained that the Atlantis myth is “so fundamental to ‘mythical history’ – whether it has any kind of basis in real history, pace Saurat and others, is not relevant – that some version of it would have to come in” (*Letters* 198). Denis Saurat taught French at King’s College London from 1920 to World War II, and penned two books about Atlantis, one in the same year as Tolkien’s letter, called *Atlantis and the Giants*. The reference to Saurat certainly proves that Tolkien was aware of at least some of the popular literature concerning Atlantis, but he would have had to have been completely oblivious to have missed the debate in the literature of his time.

So what are we to make of Tolkien’s Atlantis-haunting, his repeating dreams about a destructive, devouring wave? First of all, it is important to note that this type of unconscious fear is not uncommon. For example, Carl Jung described how in October 1913 he was “seized by an overpowering vision: I saw a monstrous flood covering all the northern and low-lying areas between the North Sea and the Alps. When it came to Switzerland I saw that the mountains grew higher and higher to protect our country. I realized that a frightful catastrophe was in progress. I saw the mighty yellow waves, the floating rubble of civilization, and the drowned bodies of uncounted thousands. Then the whole sea turned to blood” (24). According to various dream interpretation sites on the internet, dreaming of a tsunami means you are dealing with overwhelming feelings in your life that you are trying to keep bottled up, either consciously or subconsciously. More scientifically, a study of 880 dreams experienced in the wake of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Towers found that none included images of the actual event. Instead, the respondents noted dreaming of a variety of natural disasters, including tsunamis. The researchers observe that tsunami dreams are common in people who “have recently experienced a trauma, such as a fire, rape, or an attack” (Hartmann and Brezler 213). Since we do not know exactly when Tolkien first dreamed of the “ineluctable wave” (*Letters* 361) we cannot tie it to a single event, although one could argue that it could very well be connected to the traumas he experienced in World War I, including the deaths of two of his closest friends.

If we take a more literal approach, there are a number significant flooding events that occurred during Tolkien’s life that could have fed his subconscious. For example, the May 31, 1911 running of the Derby Downs turned tragic as violent thunderstorms occurred in many

parts of south-eastern England, resulting in local flooding and landslides. Seventeen people and four horses were killed (McWilliams). On May 29, 1920 thunderstorms in central and northern England drowned people in their homes. In some areas nearly 5 inches of rain fell in two to three hours. In the Lincolnshire Wolds, the River Lud rose by 6 feet in 10 minutes, destroying bridges and drowning 23 people in the village of Louth (Meteorological Committee 64-8). Catastrophes outside of England were also widely reported by the world press. For example, on September 8, 1900, the island town of Galveston, Texas was decimated by a 15 foot storm surge from a Category 4 hurricane, killing an estimated 6000-12,000 people (Wildmoon), and on December 28, 1908 a 6.7-7.2 earthquake struck the Italian cities of Messina and Reggio Calabria, damaging 90% of the buildings and creating a 25 foot high tsunami that, by itself, killed nearly 2000 people (Brennan).

The area surrounding the Mediterranean Sea is well known for its geologic activity, not only earthquakes but volcanic activity. Witness, for example, the destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum by a catastrophic eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD. But an earlier volcanic eruption has often been cited as a potential source for Plato's fictitious doomed civilization. At some point around 1500 BC, a huge volcano on the island of Thera exploded with five times the force of Krakatoa (or several hundred atomic bombs exploding simultaneously), making it the second largest volcanic eruption in recorded history (Whipps). A mere few dozen miles away lay the island of Crete, home of the mighty Minoan civilization. Despite their success, their civilization declined over about a century, the first blow possibly struck by a tsunami generated in Thera's paroxysm (Antonopoulos 153). Crete was initially suggested as Atlantis by K.T. Frost in an article in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies* in 1913, not long after the first archaeological evidence for the Minoan civilization had been unearthed. The first to connect a tsunami generated by the eruption of what today is the island archipelago of Santorini with the downfall of the Minoans was probably Greek archaeologist Spyridon Marinatos.

While Tolkien wrote his first Atlantean myths about Númenor a few years before Marinatos' 1939 paper in the journal *Antiquity*, it very well could have influenced his revisions and expansions of the story over the next few decades. For example, in the "Akallabeth" we read how "suddenly fire burst from the Meneltarma, and there came a mighty wind and a tumult of the earth, and the sky reeled, and the hills slid, and Númenor went down into the sea... And last of all the mounting wave, green and cold and plumed with foam, climbing over the land, took to its bosom Tar-Miriel the Queen" (*Sil* 279). Interestingly it is not only the island of Númenor itself that is destroyed in this tale, but "all the coasts and seaward regions of the western world suffered great change and ruin in that time; for the seas invaded the lands, and shores foundered, and ancient isles were drowned" (*Sil* 280). Some scholars also see an echo of the eruption of Thera in the ancient Greek myth of Deucalion's flood (de Boer and Sanders 49). The son of Prometheus, Deucalion, the king of Thessaly, and his wife were the sole survivors of the flood sent by Zeus to kill the largely wicked masses of humanity. As in the case of Noah, they had been warned of the coming disaster, and had built a ship, which came to rest on the top of Mount Parnassus after a nine-day deluge engulfed the earth. Noah, Deucalion, Elendil. Coincidence? Doubtful.

But as is the case with many other facets of Tolkien's *legendarium*, we should also look to the folklore of the British Isles for the source of his inspiration/obsession. In *Interrupted Music*, Verlyn Flieger connects the fate of Númenor with a variety of Welsh, Irish, Cornish, and

Breton tales of submerged lands, tales that are to be expected in the folklore of islands and low-lying coastlines. Examples include the Breton stories of Ker-Is, a “city drowned by God in punishment for its heathen behavior” and the “Irish legends of the *tonn*, the tale or tales of a great wave believed to wash periodically over Ireland” (Flieger *Interrupted* 126; 128). Another example is Lyonesse, the homeland of Tristan in the Arthurian mythos. Later traditions recount how it sank beneath the waves after the time of Arthur. For example, we see this in Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* (“The Passing of Arthur,” ll. 82-4), where it is called “A land of old upheaven from the abyss/By fire, to sink into the abyss again;/Where fragments of forgotten peoples dwelt.” Tolkien mentions Lyonesse in his notes to his own fragmentary lay, *The Fall of Arthur* (126), but does not explicitly refer to its legendary fate.

There is also the Welsh legend of the drowned kingdom of Cantre’r Gwaelod. According to the local mythology, the land was flooded when an inebriated dike-keeper failed at his duties (Edwards 7). Known as the ‘Welsh Atlantis,’ the kingdom was supposed to have been located in what is now Cardigan Bay. Interestingly, an ancient forest is known to have been buried 4500-6000 years ago in the sand deposits of that area, entombed due to rising sea levels. As modern storms remove some of the sand, more and more of the ancient pine, alder, oak, and birch carcasses are exposed (French 367). Therefore, we see that this particular legend may indeed have its roots in science fact (no pun intended).

I conclude with two other nods to Atlantis in Tolkien’s writings, one perhaps more subtle than the other. In *Roverandom*, the charming tale of the adventures of a mischievous dog that had been enchanted by a sorcerer, the titular character finds himself in the palace of the Mer-king at the bottom of the ocean. The dog disturbs a giant Sea-serpent who was known to cause all manner of mayhem (including tsunamis) and could not be controlled. It is said that the last time a sorcerer had tried to contain the beast using a spell “at least one continent fell into the sea as a result” (76). A more subtle nod can be seen in the post *Lord of the Rings* revisions to the *legendarium* contained in *Morgoth’s Ring*. Among Tolkien’s writings in the late 1950s are found revisions to the mythology that tried to align it more with science. Notably, there is a draft in which the sun and moon were created at the same time as the earth (rather than much later as the last fruit and flower of the dying Two Trees of Valinor). However, as Tolkien himself noted, if the great lights of heaven were blazing overhead at the awakening of the Elves, “how can, nonetheless, the Eldar be called the ‘Star-folk’?” (MR 375). Rather than simply have the Elves awaken at a time of New Moon, he concocts a rather contrived tale in which Melkor’s machinations cover the sky with clouds, and after Manwë’s winds conveniently clear the sky, Varda’s stars emerge just in time for the elves to awaken and glance upward. However, the clouds soon cover the sky again, and despite the fact that the clouds eventually dissipate after a series of battles between Melkor and the Valar, the volcanic mountain of Utumno, Melkor’s stronghold, continues to belch forth. Tolkien then gives us the following tantalizing scenario: “The March of the Eldar is through great Rains? Men awake in an Isle amid the floods and therefore welcome the Sun which seems to come out of the East. Only when the world is drier do they leave the Isle and spread abroad” (MR 378). Floods mark the birth of men, and later lead to the deaths of many others. An interesting symmetry that was never included in the *legendarium*.

In his 1871 translation of Plato’s *Dialogues*, Benjamin Jowett (594) noted “No one knew better than Plato how to invent ‘a noble lie’.... The world, like a child, has readily, and for the

most part, unhesitatingly accepted the tale of the Island of Atlantis.” What is it about Plato’s tale about a militarily superior empire that succumbs to its own evil and bloated pride that speaks so clearly to the human psyche, even in modern times? George Lucas certainly figured it out, for as my former colleague Ken Feder (184) loves to point out, “Plato’s Atlantean dialogues are essentially an ancient Greek Version of *Star Wars*.” The implications for Tolkien’s Númenor will be left to the audience to consider.

As Richard Ellis (261) explains in *Imagining Atlantis*, “The tenacity of the Atlantean story suggests that we need our fantasies; we have maintained the tale over time because it fills a need. It is an account of power and wealth, of greed and retribution, of natural disaster and mystery – everything that makes a good yarn.” Jesse Rufus Fears adds that popular books on Atlantis offer “compelling proof of the mythopoetic power of Atlantis.... It is a mechanism by which succeeding generations express their hopes and aspirations, their fears and failures” (395). Tolkien himself reminded us in a 1951 letter to Milton Waldman that “There cannot be any ‘story’ without a fall – all stories are ultimately about the fall – at least not for human minds as we know them and have them” (*Letters* 147) It has also been suggested that Atlantis specifically stands as an archetype for one of the most deeply ingrained fears of the second half of the twentieth century: nuclear war (Coppolino). So if Atlantis haunts your dreams, it appears that at least you’re in good company.

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