It was a beautiful land. Its people, gentle and fair, artistic and intelligent, created the most wonderful society the world has ever known. Their cities were splendid places, interwoven with blue canals and framed by crystal towers gently arching skyward. From its seaports, ships were sent out to the corners of the globe, gathering in abundant raw materials needed by its artisans and giving in return something far more valuable—civilization. The wondrous achievements of the archaic world can be traced to the genius of this singular ancient land. The cultures of the ancient Egyptians and the Maya, the civilizations of China and India, the Inca, the Moundbuilders, and the Sumerians were all derived from this source of civilization (Figure 8.1).

But tragedy was to strike down this great nation. In a cataclysmic upheaval of incomprehensible proportions, this beautiful land and its people were destroyed in a day and a night. Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and tidal waves, with forces never before or since unleashed by nature, shattered the crystal towers, sank the great navy, and created a holocaust of incalculable sorrow.

All that remains are the traces of those derivative cultures that benefited from contact with this most spectacular source of all culture. But ancient Egypt, the Aztecs, the Maya, the Chinese Shang, the Moundbuilders, and the rest, as impressive as they were, could have been only the palest of shadows, the most tepid of imitations of the source of all human civilization.

This is the great irony of prehistoric archaeology; the most important of ancient cultures is beyond the grasp of even those archaeologists who investigate the corpses of great civilizations. The original civilization of which I speak, the source of all human achievement, is Atlantis, the island continent whose people were obliterated beneath the seething waters of the Atlantic more than 11,000 years ago: Atlantis the fair; Atlantis the beautiful; Atlantis the source. But Atlantis the myth. Such a place never actually existed.
I live in a charming, bucolic, and rather woodsy part of Connecticut, tucked into the green and lush Farmington River valley. Along with terrific schools, wonderful people, and The Tulmeadow farm store which sells the best ice cream anywhere, my little town has another thing going for it. West Simsbury, Connecticut, zip code 06092, appears to be almost the only place left on the planet that someone has not claimed is the actual location of the Lost Continent of Atlantis. Or so it seems.

I am exaggerating here a bit, but check it out (Figure 8.2). According to Plato, the lost civilization of Atlantis was located on a continent-size landmass positioned outside of the Straits of Gibraltar, in the Atlantic Ocean, and was destroyed in a natural cataclysm more than 11,000 years ago (Plato in Hutchins 1952). But no, that can’t be right. Atlantis must have been located on the island of Crete in the Mediterranean, and it was destroyed by a volcanic eruption 3,600 years ago (Galanopoulos and Bacon 1969). No, that’s not right either; instead, it was located on the much smaller island of Santorini, also in the Mediterranean, and destroyed by the aforementioned volcanic eruption (Pellegrino 1991). If that doesn’t work for you, how about moving it a bit north and to the east, and make it not an island continent, but a city in western Turkey (James 1998)? No? Maybe it was actually situated in the Antarctic, of course during a time when the climate of the South Pole was far more
hospitable and a lot less “arctic” than it is now (Flem-Ath and Flem-Ath 1995). No, that’s not right either; I’ve it: Atlantis was located on Spartel Island, a tiny, not-so-continent-size landmass, located immediately west of the Straits of Gibraltar, between Morocco and Spain (Collina-Girard 2001). No, forget the island; Atlantis was in Spain proper, right there on the mainland of Europe (Kühne 2004). A recent National Geographic special (Ball 2011) features an archaeologist who believes that Atlantis has been found in a Spanish marsh. Maybe it’s there. How about further north, in Scandinavia as some have claimed (Spanuth 1979). I suppose that would make the Atlanteans Vikings. You don’t like that? Okay, let’s push it to the west and locate Atlantis in the North Atlantic, about 160 kilometers (100 miles) from the coast of Great Britain, on an island just off Cornwall (a claim made by unspecified Russian scientists and reported by the BBC in 1997). No, wrong ocean; the continent of Atlantis was actually situated in the South China Sea (dos Santos 1997). No, it’s not there either. I’ve got it: Atlantis was in North America (Lopez de Gomara back in 1555 as cited in Huddleston 1967). No, not there? How about this: Atlantis was located in South America, specifically, Bolivia (Allen 1999). No, not Bolivia or anywhere in South America, but perhaps farther north, just off the coast of Cuba (Collins 2002). Or was it (or something very much like Atlantis) located off the coast of Japan (Hancock 2003)? Wait. I just found it. Of course, Atlantis is on an island in the Bahamas, just offshore of the island of Bimini (Cayce 1968). No, wait; we can trace it, not to Bimini, but to another island in the Bahamas. I have documentary evidence right here
in this brochure. Whoops; that “Atlantis” is just a modern and rather pricey resort that calls itself Atlantis, but it isn’t really Atlantis. Maybe it’s back in the Mediterranean after all. The spectacular architectural remains of walls, a canal, and even an acropolis have been found beneath the sea, just 97 miles off the coast of Cyprus (as announced in late 2004 by the explorer Robert Sarmast; Hamilton 2004). No; it’s not there either. Hold on! Atlantis has been found by an aeronautical engineer fiddling around on Google Earth (which, okay, might be the coolest thing ever). Check it out for yourself. Type in the following location in the Google Earth search box: 31 15'15.53N 24 15'30.53W (McCarthy 2009). When you get there, set the “eye alt” or “eye altitude” seen on the bottom right of the Google Earth screen to about 200 miles and you will indeed see a pattern of lines all crossing at right angles. Are these the criss-crossing broad avenues of fair Atlantis? The party poopers at Google Earth say no, that the lines aren’t real but an artifact of how the sea floor is mapped (by boats crossing back and forth in a right angle grid).

Assessing assertions about the discovery of Atlantis is like a game of Whac-A-Mole. Claims keep popping up from assorted holes, and historians, geologists, and archaeologists keep whacking them back down, only to have another claim pop up from another hole.

Atlantis isn’t in any of the claimed locations because it wasn’t anywhere. Like Oz, Middle Earth, or Tatooine, it was a mythical place, concocted to tell a story. In fact, Atlantis was simply a literary tool to convey a lesson about the political, social, and economic organization of a well-run society. When looking for Atlantis, it turns out that satellite photographs, sonar, ground-penetrating radar, deep-sea submersibles, and other modern tools of the archaeologist are of no help. Atlantis can’t be traced underwater or under mud or rock or volcanic ash. In fact, Atlantis is traceable to no geographical place at all, but to the mind and imagination of one of the world’s best-known and most highly respected thinkers (Jordan 2001). That mind belonged to the Greek philosopher Plato.

Atlantis: The Source of the Legend

Plato was born in 429 or 428 B.C. He became a disciple of another great philosopher, Socrates, in about 410 B.C. and established his own academy in 387 B.C. He was well known in his own time and is, of course, still studied and considered a great thinker more than 2,000 years after his death.

Plato apparently believed that the best way to teach was to engage his students in dialogues. Plato wrote many of his philosophical treatises in a dialogue format as well. Readers who insist that the entire Atlantean dialogues are genuine history may be unaware, however, that even the context of Plato’s dialogues is fictitious. The dialogues were largely imaginary conversations between Socrates and his students. The actual discussions Plato
reported on never really took place; the published dialogues were not simply stenographic records. They usually included real people, but some of them lived at different times. In fact, the Critias who tells the Atlantis story has been identified as Plato’s maternal great-grandfather (Lee 1965).

The late entertainer and writer Steve Allen once produced a fascinating television show using a similar device. In his *Meeting of Minds*, actors and actresses portraying famous historical figures discussed and debated important philosophical issues. In one episode nineteenth-century evolutionist Charles Darwin, nineteenth-century poet Emily Dickinson, renowned sixteenth- and seventeenth-century scientist Galileo, and fifth-century general and king Attila the Hun sat down together for a chat. And wouldn’t you have liked to have been a fly on the wall when Plato himself showed up to thrash out a few ideas with eighteenth-century French author and philosopher Voltaire, sixteenth-century church reformer Martin Luther, and late-nineteenth-/early-twentieth-century medical pioneer Florence Nightingale? Each of these historical figures was portrayed by an actor or actress well versed in the perspective of the individual he or she was playing. Of course, the real people being depicted never actually had these discussions. The point was to imagine how such conversations might have gone (you can read the transcripts of some of the shows in Allen 1989). Plato used a similar technique to challenge, teach, and entertain his readers.

The story of Atlantis was presented in two of Plato’s dialogues: *Timaeus* and *Critias*, named, respectively, after the major participant in each conversation. We know that Timaeus and Critias were real people; Timaeus was an astronomer from Italy, and Critias was an Athenian poet and teacher. The dialogues that bear their names were written sometime after 355 B.C. and before Plato’s death in 347 B.C. and describe conversations that supposedly occurred in 421 B.C. (Jordan 2001:11). If you have already done the math, you realize that Plato would have been only seven or eight years old at the time; the dialogues certainly could not have been stenographic transcriptions written by an eight-year-old who listened in on a real conversation.

**The Timaeus Dialogue**

The Timaeus dialogue begins, oddly enough, with Socrates taking attendance. Socrates then refers to the previous day’s discussion of the “perfect” society. It is clear in this context that the discourse Plato is referring to is his most famous dialogue, the *Republic*, actually written several years before *Timaeus*. Here, we are being asked by Plato to go along with the fiction that the *Republic* dialogue, where the nature of a perfect society had been discussed in great detail, was the product of yesterday’s conversation.

Socrates next summarizes the characteristics of the conjectural perfect culture presented in the *Republic*. Artisans and husbandmen would be separated from the military; and those in the military would be merciful, would
be trained in “gymnastic” and music, would live communally, and would own no gold or silver or any private property.

Socrates, however, then despairs of hypothetical discussions, like the one presented in the *Republic*, of such a perfect society:

I might compare myself to a person who, on beholding beautiful animals either created by the painter’s art or, better still, alive but at rest, is seized with a desire of seeing them in motion or engaged in some struggle or conflict to which their forms appear suited. (Hutchins 1952:443; all quotations from Plato’s dialogues are from this translation)

Socrates next gives what amounts to an assignment:

I should like to hear some one tell of our own city [his hypothetical perfect society] carrying on a struggle against her neighbors, and how she went out to war in a becoming manner, and when at war showed by the greatness of her actions and the magnanimity of her words, in dealing with other cities a result worthy of her training and education. (p. 443)

Socrates even explicitly instructs his students to engage “our city in a suitable war” to show how the perfect society would perform. One of those present, Hermocrates, tells Socrates that a fellow student, Critias, knows the perfect story. Critias then begins to give the account: “Then listen, Socrates, to a tale which though strange, is certainly true . . .” (p. 444).

Critias says that he heard this “true” story from his grandfather, who related the tale at a public gathering on a holiday called Apatouria that Plato scholar Paul Friedlander refers to as a kind of April Fool’s Day (1969:383) when prizes are awarded for the best narrative. If this is true, doing the math, Critias’s grandfather was 90 when he told the story and our Critias was just 10 years old. Critias’s grandfather (also named Critias) said that he heard it from his father, Dropides, who heard it from the Greek sage Solon, who heard it from some unnamed priests in Egypt when he was there about 590 B.C. (Figure 8.3). So at best, when we read Plato, we are reading a very indirect account of a story that had originated about 240 years earlier.

According to the tale told by Critias, the Egyptian priests tell Solon that the Greeks are little more than “children” and know nothing of the many cataclysms that befell humanity in ancient times. They then go on to tell him of ancient Athens, which “was first in war and in every way the best governed of all cities” (p. 445). In fact, it is this ancient Athens which in Critias’s story will serve as the model of the perfect state.

The priests tell Solon of the most heroic deed of the ancient city of Athens; it defeated in battle “a mighty power which unprovoked made an expedition against the whole of Europe and Asia” (pp. 445–46). They continue by describing and identifying the evil power that so threatened the rest
of the world: “This power came forth out of the Atlantic Ocean . . . an island situated in front of the straits, which are by you called the Pillars of Heracles” (p. 446). (Today they are called the Straits of Gibraltar.) The Egyptian priests told Solon the name of this great power in the Atlantic Ocean: the island nation of Atlantis.

Ancient Athens was able to subdue mighty Atlantis, which had held sway across northern Africa all the way to Egypt. After her defeat in battle, all of Atlantis was destroyed in a tremendous cataclysm of earthquakes and floods. Unfortunately, ancient Athens also was destroyed in the same catastrophe.

After outlining the Atlantis story, Critias remarks to Socrates:

When you were speaking yesterday about your city and citizens, the tale which I have just been repeating to you came into my mind, and I remarked with astonishment how, by some mysterious coincidence, you agreed in almost every particular with the narrative of Solon. (p. 446, emphasis mine)

Of course, it was no coincidence; it was how Plato worked Atlantis and ancient Athens into the dialogue.

Following this brief introduction to the story, Critias cedes the floor to Timaeus, who provides a very detailed discussion of his theory of the origins of the universe. In the next dialogue, Critias, details of the Atlantis story are provided.

The Critias Dialogue

Critias appears to have listened well to his teacher’s description of the perfect society; for in his tale ancient Athens, even in detail, matches precisely the hypothetical society of Socrates. According to the story Critias told, in
ancient Athens, artisans and husbandmen were set apart from the military, military men owned no private property and possessed no gold or silver, and so on.

Only after first describing ancient Athens does Critias describe Atlantis, a 15-mile-wide city of concentric rings of alternating land and water, with palaces, huge canals, towers, and bridges. The Atlanteans produced artworks in silver and gold and traded far and wide. They possessed a great navy of twelve hundred ships and an army with ten thousand chariots. Their empire and their influence expanded exponentially.

After a time, however, the “divine portion” of their ancestry became diluted and the human portion became dominant. As a result, their civilization became decadent, the people depraved and greedy. The dialogue relates that after Athens defeated the Atlanteans in war, Zeus, the chief god in the Greek pantheon, decided to teach the inhabitants of Atlantis a lesson for their avarice and prideful desire to rule the world. Zeus gathered the other gods together to relate his plan. The dialogue ends unfinished at just this point, and Plato never returned to it, dying just a few years later.

The Source and Meaning of Timaeus and Critias

Though briefly summarized here, this is the entire story of Atlantis as related in Plato’s dialogues. All else written about Atlantis is derivative, contrived, extrapolated, imagined, or invented.

It is ironic, however, that this source of the popular myth of Atlantis, while having spawned some two thousand books and articles (de Camp 1970) along with a number of periodicals (Atlantis, the Atlantis Quarterly, and Atlantis Rising), isn’t really about Atlantis at all. The lost continent is little more than a plot device. The story is about an ostensible ancient Athens. Athens is the protagonist, the hero, and the focus of Plato’s tale. Atlantis is the antagonist, the empire gone bad in whose military defeat by Athens the functioning of a perfect society as defined by Socrates can be exemplified.

Now consider the story that Plato tells: A technologically sophisticated but morally bankrupt, evil empire—Atlantis—attempts world domination by force. The only thing standing in its way is a relatively small group of spiritually pure, morally principled, and incorruptible people—the ancient Athenians. Overcoming overwhelming numerical and technological odds, the Athenians are able to defeat their far more powerful adversary simply through the force of their spirit.

Sound familiar? Plato’s Atlantean dialogues are essentially an ancient Greek version of Star Wars! Think about it: Plato placed Atlantis nine thousand years before his time, off in the little-known (to the ancient Greeks) Atlantic Ocean. Star Wars takes place “a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away.” Atlantis, with its sophisticated military and enormous navy,
parallels the Empire with its Stormtroopers and Death Star. The Athenians are the counterparts of the ragtag group of rebels led (eventually) by Luke Skywalker. The rebels and the Athenians both are victorious, certainly not because they are militarily superior, but—why?—because “the Force” is with them both. One more connection can be made; if 9,000 years from now people ask whether the Star Wars saga is actual history, not fiction, it would not be too different from our suggesting today that Plato’s story of Atlantis really happened. Both stories are myths, used to entertain and to convey moral lessons. They are both equally fantastical.

Who Invented Atlantis?

In the Timaeus dialogue, Plato has Critias state that Atlantis was destroyed more than 9,000 years before Solon’s time (590 B.C.). But there are no records of the Atlantis story in Egypt, where Solon is supposed to have been told the tale. It is equally instructive to point out that chroniclers of the history of Athens, including those who discussed that city’s military triumphs in great detail, do not mention a war with a nation called or even vaguely sounding like Atlantis. The best-known Greek historian, Herodotus, who lived 100 years before Plato, never mentions Atlantis. Also in the fifth century B.C., Thucydides provides a detailed discourse on the military and political struggles of ancient Athens in his book Archaeology, yet he is absolutely silent about Atlantis.

Imagine that the War of Independence in the United States had become a dimly remembered event, discussed only occasionally by people, many of whom were skeptical that it had actually occurred. Now, imagine that, many years after that war took place, a respected scholar found an ancient manuscript that focused entirely on that war, providing a wealth of information about the roots of our nation, the heroism of its founders, as well as the nature of the empire that held us in subjugation. In revealing a crucial part of our history and detailing events that formed us as a nation, that manuscript certainly would generate intense discussion after its discovery. Even those who were aware of the “legend” of such a war, but still skeptical it had actually taken place, would be expected to talk or write about the newly discovered document, presenting their arguments for why they were still skeptical about the historicity of the war.

Now consider Plato’s story of a conflict between Athens and Atlantis, which surely would have been viewed as being as singularly formative for Athens as the War of Independence was for the United States. It is inconceivable that there would be no mention of a great military victory by ancient Athens over Atlantis—or anyplace even vaguely like it—in the works of Greek historians who followed Plato (Fears 1978). Yet this is precisely the case. Greek historians didn’t mention Plato’s story of Atlantis because they didn’t view the story as anything more than the fiction Plato intended it to
be. They felt no more need to discuss it in their histories—even to refute it—than a modern historian feels compelled to mention the Evil Empire of the *Star Wars* saga, even to remind readers that it didn’t actually exist. Everyone already knows that; and, it appears, Greek writers of history and their readers already knew that about Atlantis too.

But wait; Plato has Critias assert that the story of Atlantis was true. Isn’t this evidence that Plato believed he was relating genuine history? Absolutely not. As historian William Stiebing, Jr., states, “Virtually every myth Plato relates in his dialogues is introduced by statements claiming it is true” (1984:51). It is not only the Atlantis account but also tales about heaven and hell (Isles of the Blessed and Tartarus) in *Georgias*, immortality and reincarnation in *Meno*, antiquity in *Laws*, and the afterlife in the *Republic* that are prefaced with statements attesting to their truth (Stiebing 1984:52).

Remember also that the story Critias relates here is the direct result of Socrates having asked his students the previous day to come up with a tale in which his hypothetical perfect state is put to the test by warfare. In other words, it’s a homework assignment! Critias relates the story of a civilization conveniently enormously distant from his Athens in both time and space, whose remnants are below the Atlantic, certainly beyond recovery or testing by the Greeks of Plato’s time. He also has ancient Athens, which would not have been beyond the purview of contemporary Athenians to study, conveniently destroyed. Finally, though maintaining it is a true tale, he admits that “by some mysterious coincidence” it matches Socrates’ hypothetical society almost exactly. As A. E. Taylor has said, “We could not be told much more plainly that the whole narrative of Solon’s conversation with the priests and his intention of writing the poem about Atlantis are an invention of Plato’s fancy” (1962:50).

**Where Did Plato Get the Details of the Story?**

*A Minoan Source*

The final question to be asked is, If the Atlantis story was Plato’s invention, did he at least base it on a real event or a series of events? In other words, did Plato construct elements of his story—of a great civilization destroyed by a cataclysm—from historical events, perhaps only dimly remembered by the Greeks at the time he was writing? The answer is almost certainly yes; in a sense, all fiction must be based on fact. All writers begin with knowledge of the real world and construct their literary fantasies with the raw material of that knowledge. Plato was no different, and there were plenty of historical events of which Plato was well aware that he could have used in constructing his Atlantis tale.

For example, as early as 1909, a scholar at Queen’s University in Belfast suggested a connection between historical Minoan Crete and the Atlantis legend (cited in Luce 1969:47).
The spectacular temple at the Minoan capital of Knossos was built beginning about 3,800 years ago (Figure 8.4). At its peak the temple covered an area of some 20,000 square meters (more than 210,000 square feet or about 5 acres), contained about one thousand separate rooms, and had a central courtyard with a pillar-lined hallway, a ceremonial bath, and grand staircases. Some parts of the temple were three and even four stories tall. The walls of some of the living quarters and large halls were covered with artfully produced fresco paintings of dolphins and bulls. Where the Minoans depicted themselves in these paintings, we see a graceful and athletic people. The Greeks of Plato’s time were aware of this even more ancient and impressive culture.

There are, however, many problems in attempting to assign a Minoan source to Atlantis. Crete is far too small and in the wrong place to conform with Plato’s description of Atlantis. Further, it is not nearly as old as Atlantis is purported to be. In addition, there are no elephants on Crete, though Plato maintains that the Atlanteans had a large stock of elephants.

A key element in the argument linking Plato’s fictional Atlantis with the historical Minoan civilization relies on a catastrophe that affected the Mediterranean and its environs specifically and, it is no exaggeration to say, the broader world, generally. I refer here to the massive volcanic eruption on
the island of Santorini (the Greeks called it Thera), 120 kilometers (72 miles) north of Crete (Figure 8.5). The eruption produced enough ash to affect global climate by blocking out the sun’s rays; evidence indicates that as a result of this eruption, there was frost damage to trees in places as far removed geographically as Ireland and California (Friedrich et al. 2006). The explosive force of the eruption was four times as powerful as that of Krakatoa in the Dutch East Indies in 1883 (Marinatos 1972:718), which killed some 36,000 people.
Radiocarbon dating conducted by two separate research projects has provided an accurate indicator of the timing of the eruption. In the research led by William Friedrich (Friedrich et al. 2006), the branch of an olive tree that was killed by the eruption and recovered in an excavation on Santorini produced a calendar date of between 1627 and 1600 B.C. In a project directed by Stuart Manning, twenty-eight samples including seeds and a twig produced a calendar date of between 1639 and 1616 B.C.

It should come as no surprise that the obliteration of Thera did have a significant impact on the Minoan civilization (Marinatos 1972). The eruption itself, accompanied by severe earthquakes, badly damaged many settlements on Crete. Devastating waves, or tsunamis, produced by the eruption of Thera wiped out Minoan port settlements on the north coast of Crete.

The Minoan civilization developed, at least in part, as a result of trade. The loss of ports through which trade items passed and the probable destruction of the Minoan fleet of trading vessels must have had a tremendous impact on the Minoan economy. Also of great significance for the Minoans over the long term was the thick deposit of white volcanic ash that blanketed the rich farmland of Crete, interrupting for a time the agricultural economy of the Minoan people.

Despite being adversely affected by the eruption on Thera, however, Minoan Crete was not destroyed by it. In fact, the Minoan civilization continued to thrive for 100 years after the eruption on Thera—actually, for a time, rising to new heights. It did not collapse until 1320 B.C., about 300 years after the eruption on Thera. As the instantaneous obliteration of Atlantis is a key component of Plato’s story, this alone would seem to rule out Crete as the model for Atlantis in anything but the most general sense.

There is another major problem with identifying Minoan Crete as the single source for Plato’s Atlantis. Significantly, the major theme of Plato’s story, the defeat by Athens of a great military power, remains unexplained here. Minoan Crete did not suffer a major military defeat at the hands of Athens. If Minoan Crete was Plato’s inspiration for the Atlantis story, this key aspect of the tale was entirely fictional.

As long ago as 1872, the French writer Louis Figuier made the correlation between Atlantis and the very impressive Minoan settlement on Santorini/Thera (Castleden 1998). Others have followed (Pellegrino 1991). Though this site better conforms to Plato’s description of Atlantis’s fate, having been utterly destroyed by the volcanic eruption there in 1628 B.C., it is plagued by all of the other objections to any direct correlation between the Minoan civilization and Atlantis. Clearly, Thera is far too small, it is far too recent, and it is still in the wrong location to be Plato’s Atlantis.

Most of the attempts to directly correlate a historical place with Atlantis are afflicted by the same problem; large chunks of Plato’s story must be entirely changed or thoroughly ignored to make a reasonable fit.

This raises a key question: How many alterations does it take to make Critias’s description of Atlantis match Minoan Crete? I attempted to find out
by writing down every specific, materially (in other words, archaeologically) testable piece of information that Critias provides for Atlantis’s appearance: its size and location, what the walls of the city looked like, Atlantean metallurgy, what animals were present there, and so on. I found six specific, testable descriptions in Timmaeus and forty-seven in Critias, for a total of fifty-three details about Atlantis that Minoan Crete should show archaeologically if it were the inspiration for the Atlantis tale (Table 8.1). The results after a comparison to Minoan archaeology: Only one description in Plato clearly matches Minoan Crete, and that one is so general as to be meaningless (Critias describes the palace as being “a marvel to behold for size and beauty”). That’s it. Big deal. Three other of Critias’s descriptions can be made to sort of resemble the real Minoan civilization, but only by special pleading and hand-waving. Even granting those, and counting six specific descriptions that, in fairness, cannot be assessed, this leaves forty-three of fifty-three (more than 80 percent) of Critias’s descriptions of Atlantis that are flatly contradicted by the archaeological record of Minoan Crete. That doesn’t sound like a very good match to me.

Table 8.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Special Pleading</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Timmaeus</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Located in the Atlantic.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Larger than Libya and Asia combined.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3 A boundless continent.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Controlled parts of Europe, Africa (Egypt), and Asia.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Disappeared in a single day and night.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 The sea is “impassable and impenetrable” in the area as a result of shoals left behind by the sinking of the great landmass.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critias</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Happened 9,000 years before Critias’s telling of the story.</td>
<td></td>
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<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Atlantis was the size of Libya and Asia combined.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3 As a result of its destruction, the sea was an “impassable barrier of mud.”</td>
<td></td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 The center of Atlantis was marked by a plain.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 30 stadia (3.28 miles) from the island’s center was a mountain.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Concentric rings of sea and dry land; specifically, two rings of land, three of water (Critias says Poseidon made it that way).</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Great number of elephants on the island.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Valuable metal mined on Atlantis: <em>orichalcum</em> “now only a name.”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>All sorts of other animals lived on the island.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Lots of crops, various plants.</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Bridges built to connect the rings of land separated by rings of sea.</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Palace was a “marvel to behold for size and for beauty.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>A canal was dug from the sea to the central island: 300 feet wide, 100 feet deep, and 50 stadia in length (close to 30,000 feet: nearly 5.5 miles).</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>The central island on which the palace was located was 5 stadia in diameter (about a half a mile).</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>The central island was surrounded by a stone wall on every side, with towers and gates.</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>The masons of Atlantis quarried native stone to build the walls and buildings; the stone was red, black, and white.</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>The exterior wall of the outermost island ring was coated with brass.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>The exterior wall of the central island ring was coated with tin.</td>
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<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>The exterior wall of the inner island on which the palace was located was covered with <em>orichalcum</em>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Holy temple dedicated to Poseidon and Cleito.</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Poseidon’s temple was 1 stadium × .5 stadium (577 feet × 288 feet).</td>
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<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>The walls of Poseidon’s temple were covered in silver.</td>
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Continued
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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Special Pleading</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>The pinnacles of the temple were covered in gold.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>The roof of the temple was made of ivory.</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>Gold, silver, and orichalcum elaborations covered the place.</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Huge statue of Poseidon in the center.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Dolphins statues surrounded Poseidon.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Gold statues of the descendants of the first kings of Atlantis.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Nearby was a palace of fountains.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Cisterns surrounded this temple.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Separate baths for men, women, and for horses and cattle.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Beautiful grove surrounded the fountain temple.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Many smaller temples nearby.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>A stadium for racing horses, a stadium 175 meters (577 feet) in width and length.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Guard towers at intervals along the walls.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Docks filled with triremes.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Whole country “lofty and precipitous.”</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>The flat part of the country was oblong in shape and 3,000 stadia by 2,000 stadia (328 × 218 miles).</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>This part of the island “looked towards the south, and was sheltered from the north.”</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>The plain was artificial and incredible in scope: excavated to a depth of 100 feet, a stadium in breadth, and 10,000 stadia in length (577 feet by nearly 1,100 miles long).</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Canals of 100 feet in width everywhere cut through the plain for water transportation. These canals are placed at intervals of 100 stadia (11 miles).</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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Searching *Critias* for characteristics of Atlantis that closely parallel specific ancient societies almost certainly misses Plato’s primary point. The specifics that Plato has Critias speak are not intended as history but as part of the parable. To make his point, Plato makes Atlantis sound like a nearly insurmountable adversary. Plato’s detailed description of Atlantis was intended to impress the reader with its material wealth, technological sophistication, and military power. That the smaller, materially poorer, technologically less well endowed, and militarily weaker Athenians could defeat the Atlanteans imparts the fundamental message of *Critias*: It is not just wealth or power that is important in history; even more important is the way a people govern themselves. For Plato, the intellectual achievement of a perfect government and society is far more important—and triumphs over—material wealth or power.

**After Plato**

As noted, Plato’s contemporaries knew he was telling a tall tale. It was not until the Age of Exploration and the discovery of the New World that consideration of the veracity of the Atlantis story became popular. For example, as we saw in Chapter 5, Huddleston (1967) points out that in 1552 the Spaniard Lopez de Gomara suggested that American Indians were a remnant population of emigrés from the Lost Continent of Atlantis. Gomara based his
interpretation on a linguistic argument concerning a single word; in the Aztec language of Nahuatl, the word *atl* means water (Huddleston 1967:25).

Later, in 1572, Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa maintained that the great civilizations of the New World were partially derived from Atlantis. In the seventeenth century, maps were drawn placing Atlantis in the Atlantic Ocean (Figure 8.6). Some, like Englishman John Josselyn (1674), even identified the New World as Atlantis.

French scholar Abbé Charles-Étienne Brasseur (called de Bourbourg) “translated” a Maya Indian book, the Troano Codex, in 1864. It was a complete fantasy and contained elements of the Atlantis story, particularly destruction by flood. Using the same delusional alphabet, Augustus Le Plongeon also translated the Codex, coming up with an entirely different story, connecting the Maya to the ancient Egyptians. It was all complete fabrication, but it kept alive the notion that perhaps the civilizations of the Old and New Worlds could somehow be connected and explained by reference to Atlantis.

**Ignatius Donnelly:**

*The Minnesota Congressman*

Speculation concerning the possible reality of Plato’s Atlantis story might have ended in the eighteenth or nineteenth century, as other myths were abandoned when scientific knowledge expanded (see Chapters 5 and 6). We have one man to thank, or blame, for this not happening: Ignatius Donnelly.
Donnelly was born in 1831. He studied law, and at only twenty-eight years of age became the lieutenant governor of Minnesota. He later went on to serve several terms in the federal House of Representatives and twice ran for vice president of the United States.

By all accounts, Donnelly was an exceptional individual. Politically progressive, he was a voracious reader who collected an enormous body of information concerning world history, mythology, and geography. Clearly, however, he was less than selective in his studies and seemingly was incapable in his research of discriminating between the meaningful and the meaningless. Donnelly is the father of modern Atlantis studies; and, as writer Daniel Cohen (1969) has aptly put it, Donnelly’s book *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*, published first in 1882, is the “bible” of belief in the legend.

Donnelly begins by asserting he will prove that the Atlantis story as told by Plato is not legend but “veritable history” (1882:1); that Atlantis “was the region where man first rose from a state of barbarism to civilization” (p. 1); and that it was the source of civilization in Egypt, South America, Mexico, Europe, and North America, where he specifies the Moundbuilder culture (Figure 8.7).

Reasoning based on cultural comparisons is central to Donnelly’s methodology. He maintains: “If then we prove that, on both sides of the Atlantic, civilizations were found substantially identical, we have demonstrated that they must have descended one from the other, or have radiated from some common source” (1882:135).

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**Figure 8.7** Ignatius Donnelly saw all of the world’s ancient civilizations as having been derived from that of Atlantis. Here, Donnelly maps (in white) the extent of Atlantis’s influence, including the cultures of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Mesoamerica, and the Moundbuilders of the United States.
This argument for the significant role of diffusion in cultural development was common in anthropology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Harris 1968). The presumption seems to have been that cultures are basically uninventive and that new ideas are developed in very few or even single places. They then move out or “diffuse” from these source areas. It was fairly common to suggest that Egypt was the source of all civilization, that agriculture, writing, monumental architecture, and the like were all invented only there. These characteristics, it was maintained, diffused from Egypt and were adopted by other groups.

Donnelly was a diffusionist. For him the common source of all civilization was Atlantis, rather than Egypt, Sumer, or some other known culture. In his attempt to prove this, he presents a series of artifacts or practices that he finds to be identical among the civilizations of the Old and New Worlds. In these comparisons, Donnelly presents what he believes is the clearest evidence for the existence of Atlantis. His evidence essentially consists of trait list comparisons of the sort discussed in Chapter 6. Let us look at a few of these and do what Donnelly did not—test the implications of his claims.

1. *Egyptian obelisks and Mesoamerican stelae are derived from the same source* (Donnelly 1882:136).

Donnelly finds that the inscribed obelisks of Egypt are virtually identical to the inscribed stelae of the Maya civilization. He does little more than make this assertion before he is off on his next topic. But it is necessary to examine the claim more closely and to consider the implications. If it were, in fact, the case that Egyptian obelisks and Maya stelae were derived from a common source, we would expect that they possessed similarities both specific and general. Yet, their method of construction is different; they are different in shape, size, and raw materials; and the languages inscribed on them are entirely different (Figure 8.8). They are similar only in that they are upright slabs of inscribed rock. It is not reasonable to claim that they must have been derived from a common source. They are simply too different.

2. *The pyramids of Egypt and the pyramids of Mesoamerica can be traced to the same source* (Donnelly 1882:317–41).

Here again, if this hypothesis were true, we would expect that these pyramids would share many specific features. The pyramids of the Old and New Worlds, however, do not look the same (Figure 8.9). New World pyramids are all truncated with flat tops, whereas the Egyptian monuments are true geometric pyramids with four triangular faces meeting at a common apex. New World pyramids have stairs ascending their faces; Egyptian pyramids do not. New World pyramids served as platforms for temples, and many also were burial
Figure 8.8 Donnelly asserted that Egyptian obelisks and Maya stelae were so similar in form and function, they must have originated in the same place: Atlantis. Yet here it can be seen that obelisks, like this one currently residing in the Piazza del Popolo in Rome and dedicated to the pharaoh Ramses II (top left); were quite tall, inscribed, four-sided columns, whereas Maya stelae (bottom); were far different, being flat blocks of inscribed limestone. Beyond this, though both bear written inscriptions, Egyptian hieroglyphs (see top right for a closer image of the inscription on Ramses II’s obelisk) and Maya hieroglyphs are entirely different. (Top: K. Feder; bottom: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division [LC-USZ62-97814])
Figure 8.9  Egyptian pyramids, like this one from Giza (top); and Mesoamerican pyramids, like this one from Chichén Itzá (bottom) are quite different in construction, form, function, and chronology. Donnelly was thoroughly unjustified in claiming a connection—via Atlantis—between pyramid building in the Old and New Worlds. (Top: M. H. Feder; bottom: K. Feder)
chambers for great leaders. Egyptian pyramids had no temples on their summits, and all were burial chambers for dead pharaohs or their wives. Construction methods were different; most Egyptian pyramids represent a single construction episode, whereas Mesoamerican pyramids usually represent several building episodes, one on top of another. Finally, if Mesoamerican and Egyptian pyramids are hypothesized to have been derived from the same source (Atlantis or elsewhere), they should date from the same period. But Egyptian pyramids were built between about 5,000 and 4,000 years ago. Those in Mesoamerica are all less than 3,000 years old—most are considerably younger, dating to less than 1,500 years ago. All pyramids date to well after the supposed destruction of Atlantis some 11,000 years ago.

3. *Ancient cultures in the Old and New Worlds possessed the arch* (Donnelly 1882:140).

This statement reflects an imprecise use of language. Cultures in the Old World possessed the true arch with a keystone—the supporting wedge of stone at the top of the arch that holds the rest of the stones in place. New World cultures did not have knowledge of the load-bearing keystone, constructing, instead, the entirely different corbelled arch where stones are set in layers (Figure 8.10).

4. *Cultures in the Old and New Worlds both produced bronze* (Donnelly 1882:140).

This is true, but Donnelly does not assess the implications of the claim that Old and New World metallurgies are derived from a common source. For this to be the case, we would expect the technologies to share many features in common. Bronze is an alloy of copper and some other element. Old World bronze is usually an alloy of copper and tin. In the New World, bronze was generally produced by alloying copper and arsenic (though there is some tin bronze). With such a basic difference in the alloys, it is unlikely that there is a common source for Old and New World metallurgy.

5. *Civilizations in both the Old and New Worlds were dependent on agricultural economies for their subsistence. This indicates that these cultures were derived from a common source* (Donnelly 1882:141).

It is almost certainly the case that cultures we would label “civilized” are reliant on agriculture to produce the food surplus necessary to free the number of people required to build pyramids, produce fine artworks, be full-time soldiers, and so on. But again, for this to support the hypothesis of a single, Atlantean source for Old and New World agriculture, we would expect there to be many commonalities, not the least of which would be the same or similar crops. That this was not
Figure 8.10  Though Donnelly claims that the arch was present in ancient buildings in both the Old and New Worlds—and that this architectural feature had a single source on Atlantis and spread out from there—even the first assertion is not true. The true arch with a “keystone” was present in the ancient Old World (left, looking out from the interior of the Colosseum in Rome), but it was unknown in the pre-Columbian New World. Native American architects used a corbelled arch, like this one found at the Maya site, Chichén Itzá, in Mexico (right). (K. Feder)

the case certainly was known to Donnelly. Even during his time, it was established that cultures in the Old World domesticated one set of plants and animals, whereas people in the New World domesticated an entirely different set.

We now know that even within the Old World, different ancient societies relied on different mixtures of agricultural crops for their subsistence. In the Middle East, wheat, barley, chick peas, lentils, and vetch were most significant (Henry 1989; Hole, Flannery, and Neely 1969). In the Far East, foxtail millet and rice were major crops (Crawford 1992; Solheim 1972). In Africa, sorghum, pearl and finger millet, and a host of tropical cultigens like the cereals fonio and tef, as well as the banana-like enset, provided subsistence to agricultural people (Harlan 1992; Phillipson 1993). In the Old World, animals like sheep, goats, cattle, and pigs added meat to these various diets.

The list of crops used aboriginally in the New World is just as varied and is entirely different from the lists of Old World domesticates. In Mesoamerica, maize (corn), beans, and squash were predominant
with crops like tomato, avocado, chili pepper, amaranth (a grain), and even chocolate rounding out the diet (de Tapia 1992; MacNeish 1967). In South America, maize and beans were important, as were a number of other crops including (most significantly to our modern diets) potato, but so were less well-known crops like oca, jícama, and ulluco (Bruhns 1994; Pearsall 1992). In North America, native people produced their own agricultural revolution, domesticating such crops as sunflower, sumpweed, pigweed, goosefoot, and a local variety of squash (Smith 1995). Turkeys were bred by the ancient inhabitants of the American Southwest. In Mesoamerica, turkeys, Muscovy ducks, and dogs were raised for food, and in South America, llamas, alpacas, and guinea pigs were domesticated and provided meat. The llama was also a serviceable pack animal and the alpaca was a source of wool.

It is readily apparent that the agricultural bases of Old and New World cultures were entirely different. This is far more suggestive of separate evolution of their economies than of their having been derived from a common source.

Archaeological investigations have further supported this fact by showing that, in both the Old and New Worlds, agriculture evolved in place over thousands of years. In several world areas after 12,000 years ago—notably in southwestern Asia, southern Europe, eastern Asia, Africa south of the Sahara, Mesoamerica, the North American Midwest and mid-South, and South America—lengthy evolutionary sequences reflect the slow development of agricultural societies. The archaeology in these areas has revealed long periods during which people hunted wild animals and gathered wild plants that later became domesticated staples of the diet.

The physical evidence in these areas in the form of animal bones and carbonized seeds similarly reflects the slow development of domesticated species. Over centuries and millennia, human beings “artificially selected” those members of wild plant communities that produced the biggest, or densest, or quickest-maturing seeds, allowing only those that possessed these advantageous (from a human perspective) characteristics to survive and propagate. Similarly, the ancient people in these regions selected those individuals in an animal species that were the most docile or that produced the thickest wool or the most meat or milk, again allowing only those that possessed these features to survive, breed, and pass these traits down. The continuum through time visible in the archaeological record of increasing seed size, decreasing size of dangerous animal teeth or horns, and so on is clear evidence of the evolutionary process that resulted in fully agricultural people. Agriculture does not simply appear in the archaeological record of the Old and New Worlds. It has deep roots and a lengthy
and distinct history in each. Clearly agriculture was not introduced wholesale from Atlantis; rather, it was developed separately in many world regions (Smith 1995).

By failing to consider the implications of his claims of connections between the cultural practices of Old and New World civilizations, Donnelly was easily led astray by their superficial similarities. Ever hopeful and convinced of the legitimacy of his argument, Donnelly ended *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World* by stating:

> We are on the threshold. Scientific investigation is advancing in great strides. Who shall say that one hundred years from now the great museums of the world may not be adorned with gems, statues, arms, and implements from Atlantis, while the libraries of the world shall contain translations of its inscriptions, throwing new light upon all the past history of the human race, and all the great problems which now perplex the thinkers of our day? (p. 480)

It has been more than 130 years since Donnelly wrote these words, and Atlantis the fair and the beautiful is as distant as it was when Plato constructed it out of the stuff of his imagination more than 2,000 years ago.

### Atlantis After Donnelly

The web of Atlantis speculation and fantasy has continued to be spun in the twentieth century. For example, between 1923 and 1945, the so-called sleeping prophet, Edgar Cayce, gave some 2,500 “life readings” to 1,600 people, of whom, according to him, about 700 had lived past lives on Atlantis (Cayce 1968:27). Reading the published transcripts of Cayce’s Atlantis ramblings is a real chore (there are portions of a bunch of them in the 1968 book written by his son, Edgar Evans Cayce). Much of it consists of spiritual pronouncements, the validity of which it is impossible to assess. His son admits that some of the language is “awkward” and the meaning must be “deciphered” (Cayce 1968:61), but I think that is a great understatement. Be that as it may, the elder Cayce did provide some material details of life on his Atlantis and they are, it must be admitted, extraordinary. He mentions specifically weapons invented by the Atlanteans that were based on “radioactive forces” (nuclear weapons?), others that used “rays from the sun that turned on crystals” (lasers?), and others still that harnessed “the fires of the inner portions of the earth” (Cayce 1968:74). Also, the Atlanteans seem to have traveled around in lighter-than-air vehicles (Cayce 1968:62) and in tubes powered by compressed air and steam (Cayce 1968:68), something like those containers you use to make bank deposits in the drive-through. It should go without saying that there is nothing like any of this in Plato.
Cayce maintained that at least some Atlanteans who survived the destruction of their homeland migrated to Egypt before 10,000 B.C. and there constructed an underground pyramid in which they housed the historical records of their nation. Cayce said that this “Hall of Records” was located near the Great Sphinx. To date, archaeological research has located no such feature.

Indeed, the legend of Atlantis did not die with Plato, nor did it die with Donnelly. It seems constantly to shift, filling the particular needs of each era for a Golden Age when great warriors, ingenious scientists, astral jellyfish, or egg-laying hermaphrodites walked the earth. Ultimately, in trying to convey a rather simple message, one of the great rational minds of the ancient world produced fodder for the fantasies of some of the less-than-great, nonrational minds of the modern world. If only we could trance-channel Plato, I wonder what he would say. I doubt that he would be pleased.

Current Perspectives: Atlantis

According to Plato’s story, Atlantis was defeated in battle by a humble but quite advanced Athenian state some 11,000 years ago. What does modern archaeology tell us about ancient Greece from this period? Is there any physical evidence in the Atlantic Ocean for the civilization of Atlantis? What does modern geology tell us about the possibility of a lost continent in the Atlantic?

Ancient Greece

Simply stated, there was no Athenian state 11,000 years ago. Such a statement is based not on legends and stories but on the material remains of cultures that inhabited Greece. South of Athens, for example, a site has been investigated that dates to around the same time as the claimed Athenian defeat of Atlantis. The site, Franchthi Cave, has been excavated by archaeologist Thomas Jacobsen (1976).

More than 10,000 years ago the inhabitants of the cave were not members of an “advanced” culture. They were simple hunters and gatherers, subsisting on red deer, wild cattle, and pigs. They also collected mollusks, snails, small sea fish, and wild plant foods, including barley and oats. They were a Stone Age people and obtained obsidian—a volcanic glass that can produce extremely sharp tools—from the nearby island of Melos. It is not until 6000 B.C. that there is evidence of the use of domesticated plants and animals by the inhabitants of the cave. Evidence at other sites in Greece conforms to the pattern seen at Franchthi. Cultures that we would label as “civilized” do not appear in Greece for thousands of years. The Greek world of 11,000 years ago is nothing like Plato imagined.
Archaeological Evidence in the Atlantic: The Bimini Wall

Claims have been made that there is archaeological evidence of submerged walls and roads off the coast of Bimini in the Bahamas. Just as Edgar Cayce maintained that the island of Bimini was a remnant of Atlantis, modern Atlantis popularizers have claimed that the features constitute direct empirical evidence for the existence of the lost continent (Berlitz 1984).

In the 1960s divers found tabular limestone blocks that they interpreted as being parts of a road and wall as well as supposed columns from a submerged building (Figure 8.11). They based this interpretation largely on the assumption that these patterned features of the landscape were not natural. In fact, however, the appearance of patterning may mean very little; natural geological forces and processes are capable of producing extraordinarily symmetrical geometric shapes laid out in precise patterns. The surface of the top of the Devils Postpile National Monument in California exhibits a perfect example (Figure 8.12, top). What might appear to be a floor of hexagonal pavers neatly laid out by a flooring contractor turns out to be, instead, the tops of a series of long and entirely natural columns of volcanic rock. Though the geological process is different, the so-called Bimini Wall also is likely the

Figure 8.11  This underwater rock feature, found off the coast of the island of Bimini, has been identified by some believers in the Atlantis tale as material evidence for its existence. But the so-called Bimini Road or Bimini Wall is an entirely natural formation and nowhere near Plato’s Atlantis location. (Courtesy of John Gifford)
Figure 8.12  Devils Postpile National Monument in California (top); The patterned jointing seen at the top of the individual columns of the volcanic rock that formed this feature is entirely natural. Not an artificial construction, these rectangular blocks of stone from the southeastern coast of Tasmania (south of Australia) are the result of natural processes of erosion (bottom). A similar geological feature located off the Bimini coast in the Caribbean has been misidentified by nongeologists as a wall built by inhabitants of Atlantis. (Top: K. Feder; bottom: Courtesy Sonja Gray)
product of natural erosional processes. So-called beachrock erodes as a result of tidal forces, and breaks or joints tend to occur at regular intervals and at right angles to each other. Similarly jointed natural beachrock has been observed off the coast of Australia (Figure 8.12, bottom; Randi 1981).

**The Geology of the Atlantic**

There is no evidence in the Atlantic Ocean for a great submerged continent. In fact, our modern understanding of the geological processes of plate tectonics rules out this possibility.

The earth’s crust is not a solid shell but consists of a number of geologically separate “plates.” The plates move, causing the continents to drift. In fact, we know that the present configuration of the continents was different in the past. More than 200 million years ago, the continents were all part of a single landmass we call Pangaea. By 180 million years ago, the continents of the Northern Hemisphere (Laurasia) parted company with the southern continents (Gondwanaland). The separation of the continents of the Eastern and Western Hemispheres and the formation of the basin of the Atlantic Ocean occurred sometime before 65 million years ago. The Atlantic has been growing ever since, as the European and North American plates have continued to move apart, the result of expansion of the seabed along the intersection of the plates. Movement along the Pacific and North American plates resulted in the destructive earthquake that hit the San Francisco–Oakland area in October 1989.

A ridge of mountains has been building for millions of years at the intersection of the two crustal plates that meet in the Atlantic. Material is coming up out of the plate intersection; landmasses are not being sucked down below the ocean. The geology is clear; there could have been no large land surface that then sank in the area where Plato places Atlantis. Together, modern archaeology and geology provide an unambiguous verdict: There was no Atlantic continent; there was no great civilization called Atlantis.

**FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

1. *Could the legend of Atlantis somehow be connected to the mystery of the Bermuda Triangle?*

The belief that there are mysterious and inexplicable disappearances of boats and planes—and all the people aboard—in a triangular area with Bermuda at its apex and Puerto Rico and the southern tip of Florida as the other two vertices is a myth, just like Atlantis. Writer Lawrence Kusche (1995) has investigated most of the major disappearances in the Triangle and found that all of these supposedly mysterious incidents had rational
explanations. Bad weather, equipment failure, dangerous cargo, and pilot error account for virtually all of the occurrences. There is no evidence that the area enclosed by the Bermuda Triangle has experienced worse nautical or aviation luck than any other similar-size part of the globe. Atlantis was supposed to be nowhere near the Bermuda Triangle anyway. The only connection between Atlantis and the Bermuda Triangle mystery is the fact that both are myths.

2. Is there a “lost continent” in the Pacific?

There is a legend of a lost continent in the Pacific Ocean: Mu, or Lemuria. Mu is entirely mythological; the geology of the Pacific basin shows that there was no—and could not have been any—large landmass that sank below the waters in a cataclysmic upheaval.

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**BEST OF THE WEB**

http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/plato/timaeus.htm
Complete Timaeus dialogue online.

http://www.sacred-texts.com/atl/critias.txt
Complete Critias dialogue online.

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**CRITICAL THINKING EXERCISE**

Using the deductive approach outlined in Chapter 2, how would you test this hypothesis? In other words, what archaeological and biological data must you find to conclude that this hypothetical statement is an accurate assertion, that it describes what actually happened in the ancient human past?

- The civilizations of ancient Egypt and Mexico share many general cultural similarities. This is most likely the result of both of these societies having been influenced by the civilization of the Lost Continent of Atlantis.