The Search for the First Americans
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Case Studies: Atlantis and Chinese Bestiary

In the introduction, myth was defined as being a statement concerning the natural world that is widely held within a culture and is generally accorded a status of being true, but at the same time is not necessarily (but might be) demonstrable according to the scientific methods of the time. Myth will continue to be used in that manner here to describe theories that are not demonstrable according to the science of our time but may still be believed as true in some quarters. Some may call such discredited notions “pseudoscience,” which means not authentic science despite it possibly appearing science-like. However, once such concepts have been debunked by the scientific method itself, there is no “pseudo” involved; they are simply not science. Racial science no longer even has the trappings of science. To call such theories pseudoscience would inappropriately award them an unmerited status not available to American Indian creation myths. Myths reflect that they are believed by some elements of society without having a confirmed scientific basis. Distinguishing between a scientific theory or a traditional myth becomes easier with the luxury of employing a historical context. Some theories that are held to be scientific in one generation are believed to be mythical, or even falsified, by the next. The first case study examines the evolution of Atlantis from a nineteenth-century science to a twentieth-century myth as a source for the First Americans. The second investigates Chinese mythology as a potential historical source for myths of an original Asian homeland for the First Americans.

Atlantis

One of the more conceptually elastic theories is that the First Americans came from Atlantis. Such flexibility allowed the indigenous origins to intertwine Plato, the bible, geography, anatomy, geology, linguistics, and material artifacts. Genetics and carbon dating were among the few sciences missing from the late nineteenth-century search for the First Americans. The ontological beauty of offering
As an explanation is that a detractor—in an Alice-in-Wonderland application of Popper’s falsifiability postulate—must demonstrate that something that then did not exist, indeed, never existed. How does one scientifically falsify the creative power of the human imagination? Those that espoused the Atlantean theory have included some well-respected intellects employing what appeared to be a scientific methodology accompanied by substantive evidence. As Everett Franklin Bleiler—a scholar of science fiction and pseudoscience—concluded, not only are the originators of enduring myths frequently unknown, a single person is rarely credited with the creation of more than one noteworthy myth. However, Ignatius Donnelly not only has the distinction of having created three of what Bleiler terms “golden” myths, but also did so believing, at the time, that he was carrying out modern science. In addition to the myth of Atlantis as a source of the First Americans, Bleiler credits Donnelly with espousing not only a mathematical proof that Bacon had written Shakespeare’s plays and hidden a cipher message in them, but also that geological features are the result of catastrophes from the sky. Typical of most enduring myths, there is enough of a factual basis in each of these to sustain it in a suggestive imagination.

Although popular belief might contend that one role of science is to debunk myth, Donnelly’s work is interesting as a demonstration that the practice of science itself can be a source of what may one day turn out to be myth widely considered to be of the fantastical type. Of particular interest in the search for the First Americans is that in Atlantis: The Antediluvian World, which Bleiler calls “the most influential pseudo-scientific work of the later nineteenth century,” Donnelly laid the foundation for the belief that Atlantis was the original birthplace of the American Indian. This work is cited by modern archaeologists as a (formerly) scientifically based statement that “the existence of the mid-Atlantic continent of Atlantis was not fable but historical fact.”

Plato’s Timaeus and Critias have generally been credited as providing the first instance of the existence of Atlantis. Donnelly himself declared that there is nothing improbable in Plato’s narrative. “It is a plain and reasonable history of a people.” In searching for a factual basis for Plato’s account, scholars over the last two centuries have attempted to draw parallels between Atlantis and ancient civilizations in Minoan Crete, Egypt, and Persia. In an odd parallel to American Indian myths, Donnelly (among others) believed that Plato’s account could be taken literally, and that there was a matching historical reality. For Donnelly, Atlantis was not a myth, but rather had a substantive association with history. Despite the now-seemingly ludicrous nature of the idea of an Atlantean
colonization of the New World, Donnelly’s mid-nineteenth-century theory did not conflict with the little hard information on pre-Columbian civilizations available at that time.6

Donnelly’s *Atlantis* had much the same appearance typical of other early ethnographic books of the mid-nineteenth century. There are charts, graphs, maps, portraits, alphabetic tables, and architectural drawings. Donnelly believed that the pre-Columbian civilizations of the Americas were the result of colonies launched from Atlantis and were based on the Atlantean culture and language.7 He believed that the “shores of Atlantis were not far distant from the West India Islands; a people possessed of ships could readily pass from island to island until they reached the continent. . . . [A]ll the traditions of Central America and Mexico point to some country in the East, and beyond the sea, as the source of their first civilized people; and this region, known among them as ‘Aztlan.’”8

Although the end result may have been inadvertently to create an enduring myth, Donnelly is credited with using facts, theories, and methodologies that were generally acceptable in his time. His analysis of Atlantis “had a certain low degree of fit within the knowledge of 1880. By 1890 it had far less, and by 1900 it had none at all.”9 Bleiler concluded that Atlantis cannot now be considered serious science and was inaccurate in its major conclusions.10 Yet, Donnelly’s analysis was predicated upon the standards of then-modern science, and contained many of the elements today considered to be scientifically acceptable methodologies.

Donnelly’s first task was to physically position Atlantis to support his theory. If Atlantis were to have existed, he placed it along the Atlantic Ridge, a geologically appropriate location, especially considering that plate tectonics was not accepted by the geological community until seventy-five years later.11 Donnelly also included in his analysis a search for commonality in material artifacts, a practice still central to the scholarship of current First American science. He attributed a common Atlantean cultural source as explaining the similarity in arch construction in Mycenae and Central America. In what might have been an early expression of a central conceptual flaw at the root of social constructivists, it apparently never occurred to Donnelly that the similar approaches to arch construction were attributable to the universal constancy of gravity and compressive/tensile strength of stone, rather than being attributable to a common socially constructed approach to arch building in the two locations.12

As is the case in modern First American science, Donnelly also employed, albeit very rudimentarily, the tools of bioanthropology, specifically craniometry, to support his case for Atlantis. He posited that there was a highly similar cranial
shape between that of the indigenous Central Americans and that of ancient Egyptians. This commonality, he concluded, was a result of their common ancestry in Atlantis.\footnote{\textsuperscript{13}}

Again, prefiguring the approaches used in the current search for the First Americans, Donnelly conducted a detailed linguistic analysis in an attempt to find commonality between modern languages that could be used to support Atlantis as the source for populating the New World. Not surprisingly, Donnelly contended that he had found just such evidence. As James Adovasio characterized it, Donnelly found the linguistic similarity between the words Aztlan and Atlantis too obvious to be coincidental.\footnote{\textsuperscript{14}} Thus, as was the case with the construction of arches, Donnelly had his connection. He believed he had discovered the reputed linguistic commonality between the Dakota Sioux dialect and other languages, including Latin, English, and Sanscrit (\textit{sic}).\footnote{\textsuperscript{15}} He also analyzed alphabets—including Mayan, Irish, Hebrew, and Ethiopian—and again found a basis for Atlantis as a First American source.\footnote{\textsuperscript{16}}

Donnelly exhibited some nimble reasoning in tying together Asiatic migration, Beringia, Atlantis, and assorted catastrophic floods. “It has been the custom to ascribe the recognized similarities between the Indians of America and the Chinese and Japanese to a migration by way of Behring’s (\textit{sic}) Strait from Asia into America; but when we find . . . such distinct recollections of the destruction of Atlantis in the Flood legends of the American races, it seems more reasonable to conclude that the resemblances between the Othomi [a Mexican “race”] and the Chinese are to be accounted for by intercourse through Atlantis.”\footnote{\textsuperscript{17}}

Ignatius Donnelly was not the only scholar in the early development of First American science who addressed the role of Atlantis. In \textit{Prehistoric Races of the United States of America}, in 1873 John Wells Foster, then-president of the Chicago Academy of Sciences, also situated Atlantis as a central part of his thesis for explaining the populating of the New World. Citing the work of Charles-Étienne, Abbé Brasseur de Bourbourg (1814–74), a French archaeologist and ethnographer, to whom he attributed the beginnings of American ethnology, Foster agreed that “the words Atlas and Atlantic have no satisfactory etymology in any language known to Europe. They are not Greek and cannot be referred to any known language of the Old World. But in the Nahuatal (or Toltecan) language we find immediately the radical a, atl, which signifies water, man, and the top of the head.”\footnote{\textsuperscript{18}} Foster did, however, discount assertions by George Catlin (1796–1872) that such ancient cities as Palenque and Uxmal are tied to Atlantis because Catlin contended that the evidence showed that “the ocean has been their bed for thousands of years, and that the earth on which one treads, and the whole face of
the country in which they stand, bear incontestable proofs of the same fact.” It may seem ironic to us that Foster, a leading scientist of the nineteenth century, could accept what now appears to be such specious reasoning with regard to linguistic similarities, yet dismissed an argument that Palenque or Uxmal might have descended from an Atlantean civilization because the geology appeared oceanic, a theory that modern plate tectonic theory might now support.

As a case study, Atlantis demonstrates the full range of issues associated with the search for the First Americans. First, it provides an example of the difficulty, except in retrospect, of distinguishing science from myth. Second, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, reputable scientists could make a case based on acceptable data and methodologies that not only did Atlantis exist, but that it was also a prime candidate for the origin of the First Americans. This, of course, is now considered both dubious science and a specious conclusion. The sciences evolve; what is considered to be acceptable in one generation may well be considered erroneous in the next. Finally, it provides an example as to how myths can endure by co-opting the trappings of scientific authority.

Chinese Bestiary

The focus of the search for the first Americans is physically as well as conceptually centered in the Western Hemisphere. It is an investigation into where people came from—Atlantis, Solutrean-Europe, Asia via Beringia, or Phoenicia. Since many First American scientists believe Beringia was the path for the first migration, looking to Siberia for precursor cultures might prove illuminating. However, as David Meltzer acknowledged, “Siberia is so poorly known archaeologically that there is no reason to believe that the earliest sites there have yet been found. . . . Before we can talk about the peopling of Siberia, Siberia will have to be peopled by archaeologists.”

Outside of the search for genetic or linguistic roots, there is not a substantial core of scholarship that investigates the cultural myths that might lend some insight into Asian people that went to the New World. If American Indians are correct that their myths retain an accurate representation of their existential experience of thousands of years ago, a case might be made that the myths of the possible mother ship cultures may have some bearing on the First Americans; there might be a cultural myth of having sent people to the New World.

The paucity of scholarship is, of course, principally a function of the improbability of examining any artifacts of the Atlantean, Phoenician, or Solutrean cultures; examination of written records is an impossibility. There is, however,
One viable option in the written records of China. The Chinese have the longest continuous record of written history on Earth. While the genetic evidence indicates that modern American Indians are not direct descendants of the Chinese, but rather are descendants of a common ancestor, ancient Chinese records have frequently been consulted by Western scholars as a scientific source of confirmation for otherwise mythic events such as floods and celestial occurrences. Bones and turtle shells with written histories date approximately to 1200 BCE during the Shang Dynasty (c. 1700–1046 BCE). This indicates not only an early and sophisticated system capable of preserving a written system of cultural beliefs, but also that three thousand years ago the Shang culture already had an ancient history that they believed was worth preserving. If the American Indians have an oral tradition of their existential origins that is difficult to document beyond a few generations, but they would have anthropologists believe reaches back thousands of years, the question arises as to what written records might exist in the Chinese culture that would indicate a knowledge that any people, Chinese or otherwise, might have departed toward the northeast of Asia, especially in view of the geneticists’ hypothesizing that, after the initial migration from Asia to the New World via Beringia, there was doubtless a two-way migration of both humans and animals.

In 6 BCE, the Western Han dynasty Emperor Ming was presented with a completed compendium that was a several-hundred-year effort to capture knowledge that Chinese scholars believed was being lost. The *Guideways through Mountains and Seas* (山海经 Shānhăi Jīng), written between the fourth and first centuries BCE, is perhaps the classic ancient history of Chinese beliefs. According to a modern translation by Richard Strassberg, it “is a unique and enduring record of a wide range of beliefs held by the ancient Chinese about their world, encompassing religion, mythology, geography, flora, fauna, minerals, and medicine.” The geographical import of the work is evident in that, while 经 (jīng) may be translated as guideways, classic book, or collection, 山 (shān) and 海 (hăi) are geographical terms meaning mountain(s) and sea(s), respectively. Strassberg calls it an “encyclopedic cosmography.” It is an authoritative cultural statement. As best understood by the Chinese of two thousand years ago, it was ancient history, not myth.

Unlike American Indian myths, which were exclusively oral in nature, the Chinese were not only among the first to use written symbols, but they also then proceeded to make, and retain, extensive records of the monumental as well as the mundane. *Shānhăi Jīng* is a catalogue of the natural world within and surrounding the ancient Chinese homeland. The first part can be considered a map of sorts showing the location of particular mountains, plants, and
minerals. However, as Strassberg indicated, *Shānhăi Jīng* also “identifies some ninety-five foreign lands and tribes. . . . The ethnographic data includes peoples confirmed in historical texts as well as highly fantastic groups located in mythological realms.” The more interesting foreign people are endowed with ears so long that they must use their hands to carry them, and others are variously one-eyed, one-armed, or without intestines.

*Shānhăi Jīng* described China as being surrounded not only by shān, mountains, but also by hăi, seas, that are believed to be both physical oceans and, allegorically, the vast expanses of desert on China’s western borders. Chinese scholar Zhang Huang (章潢) (1527–1608) attempted in *Compendium of Diagrams* (*Túshūbiān*), published in 1613, to capture pictorially the knowledge that had been amassed in ancient China, including that of the *Shānhăi Jīng*. According to Zhang, the existential myth of China was perceived to be of a culture surrounded by vast expanses of deserts and seas. To the northeast of the diagram were the Long Thighs People and the Long Arms People; to the southeast was the Land of the Midgets; to the southwest, the Land of Gentlemen; and to the northwest, the Land of the People without Calves.

Interestingly, there are lands identified beyond the seas with non-Chinese inhabitants, including to the northeast, which would be the direction of Beringia. There is, however, no indication of a migration by the Chinese or by the foreigners of the northeast that might support the Beringian hypothesis. Nor is there any indication of a two-way migration between Asia and the New World as suggested by geneticists.

The absence in Chinese mythology of any indication of a migration, either by sea or across a land bridge, to the New World cannot be considered disproof of either those American Indian oral histories that speak of an existential creation or of modern science that proposes a migration from Asia. It does, perhaps, suggest the unimportance of the peopling of the Western Hemisphere in the myths of the Old World.