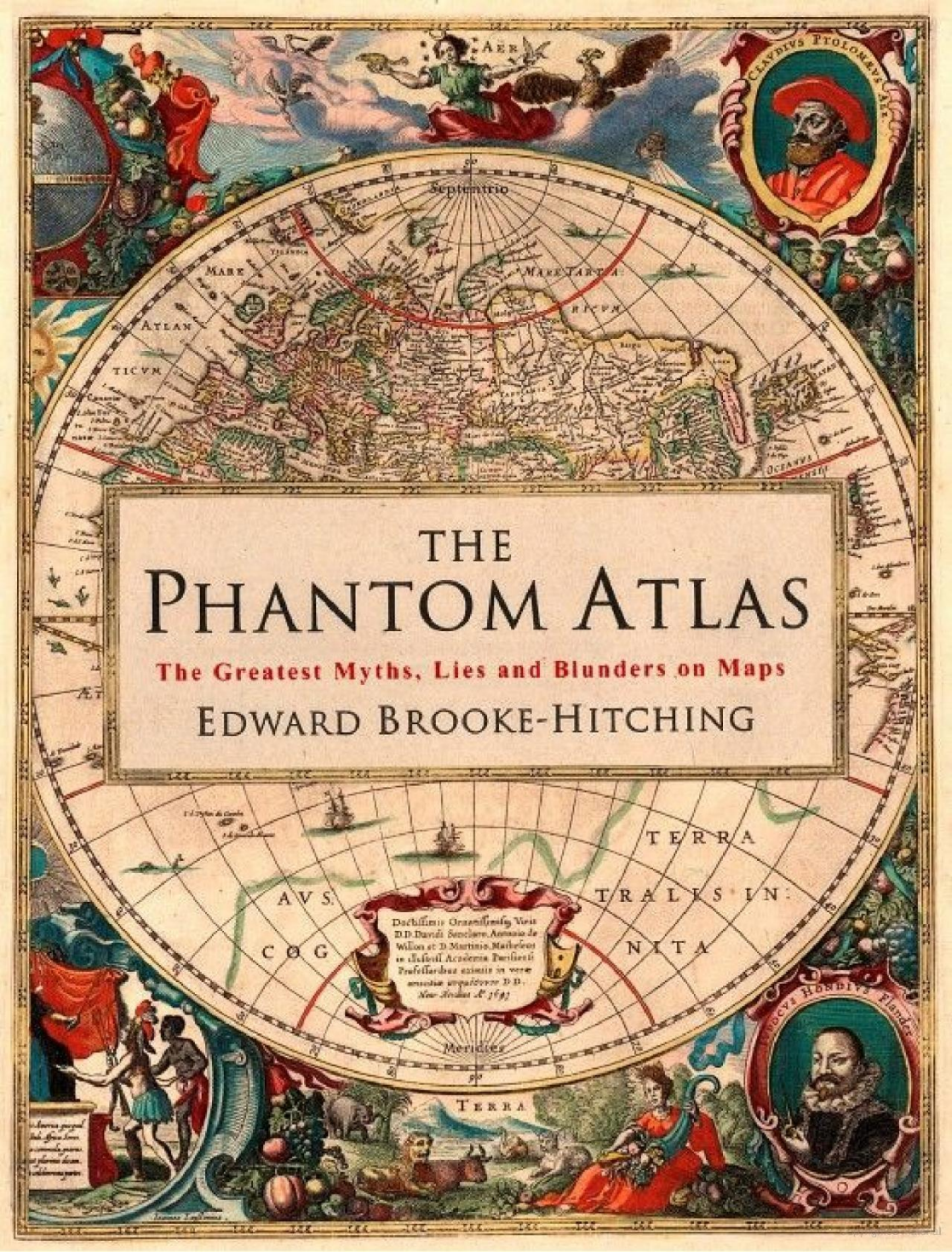

THE PHANTOM ATLAS

The Greatest Myths, Lies and Blunders on Maps

EDWARD BROOKE-HITCHING

CONTENTS

Dougherty Island
Earthly Paradise
El Dorado
Flat Earth
Fonseca
Formosa (of George Psalmanazar)
Fusang
Gamaland and Compagnies Land
Great Ireland
Great River of the West
Groclant
Hy Brasil
Java La Grande
Juan de Lisboa
Lost City of the Kalahari
Mountains of Kong
Korea as an Island
Lost Continents of Lemuria and Mu
Maria Theresa Reef
Mayda
Mountains of the Moon
Lands of Benjamin Morrell

Acknowledgements and Credits

INTRODUCTION

So Geographers in Afric-maps
With Savage-Pictures fill their Gaps;
And o'er uninhabitable Downs
Place Elephants for want of Towns.

Jonathan Swift

As the sun climbed the June sky, the vessel *Justo Sierra* cast off. Its mission: to scour the Gulf of Mexico for the elusive 31-sq. mile (80-sq. km) island known as 'Bermeja'. The crew were following the guidance of, among others, the cartographer Alonso de Santa Cruz, who charted the island in his 1539 map *El Yucatán e Islas Adyacentes*; and the more precise positioning provided by Alonso de Chaves in 1540, in which the writer described the land mass as 'blondish or reddish'.

Finally, they reached the given coordinates – and there they found nothing. Only open, unbroken water, as far as the eye could see. There was no trace of an island certified on countless navigational charts. The mariners were thorough and swept the area, taking extensive measurements and soundings, but to no avail. Bermeja, it turned out, was a phantom. Just like that, an established fact became fiction. But what is particularly surprising about this sixteenth-century ghost territory is the lifespan it enjoyed –

because the *Justo Sierra* wasn't a ship from antiquity – the crew was a multidisciplinary team of scientists put together by the National Autonomous University of Mexico. The year was 2009.

This is an atlas of the world – not as it ever existed, but as it was thought to be. The countries, islands, cities, mountains, rivers, continents and races collected in this book are all entirely fictitious; and yet each was for a time – sometimes for centuries – real. How? Because they existed on maps.

Historically, cartographic misconceptions have commonly been disregarded. Perhaps this is because, viewed as mere errors, there is a tendency to dismiss them as insubstantial. But one need only glance at, say, the charts confidently proclaiming California to be an island, the mysterious, black magnetic mountain of Rupes Nigra at the North Pole or the depictions of Patagonia as a region of 9ft (2.7m) giants to realize that these invented lands are crying out for exploration. How did these ideas come about? Why were they believed so widely? And how many other equally strange examples are there to find?

One might assume that these ghosts have little bearing today, but, as the story of Bermeja demonstrates, a fascinating characteristic of many of these misbeliefs is their remarkable durability. Indeed, there are those that survived into the nineteenth century and beyond: Sandy Island, for example, in the eastern Coral Sea, was first recorded by a whaling ship in 1876 and thenceforth marked on official charts for more than a century. It finally had its nonexistence established in November 2012 – 136 years after it was first 'sighted' (and a whole seven years after Google Maps was launched). These phantoms were considered a plague on navigational charts, frequently leading ships astray on fruitless confirmation missions. It was only as the ocean highways grew busier, and global positioning more accurate, that the methodical purging of these anomalies increased in efficiency. In 1875, for example, no fewer than 123 nonexistent islands (marked E.D., or 'Existence Doubtful') were cleared from the British Royal Navy's chart of the North Pacific.

But what caused the recording of these nonexistents in the first place? Naturally, the further back we go the more superstitions, classical mythology and careful adherence to religious dogma have a role to play. The complex *mappae mundi* of Medieval Europe, for example, of which the *Hereford Mappa Mundi* (*c.* 1290) is the largest extant example, serve as giant curiosity cabinets of history and popular belief. These immense, intricate collages were for the benefit of visiting pilgrims unable to read. Usually Jerusalem-centric, the maps were more to illustrate the scale of God's works, with transcription errors abounding, as well as depicting the more outrageous phenomena reported by Pliny, such as the Sciapodes – a species of man said to exist in the land of Taprobana, who used their one giant foot to shade themselves from the midday sun.

Mirages and other visual phenomena have also proven instrumental in manifesting the immaterial on maps. At sea, formations of low clouds were mistaken for land so often that sailors took to referring to them as 'Dutch Capes'. The Fata Morgana in particular is a complex form of superior mirage that, from a ship's bow, appears as a band of territory on the horizon. The name gives some indication of how contemptuously, and fearfully, it was held by mariners: the term comes from the Italian for Morgan le Fay, the Arthurian trickster enchantress. Most often seen in polar regions, the optical illusion is a prolific culprit in the perpetration of false land sightings – it is accused, for example, of being the implement of disaster in Baron von Toll's 1902 expedition to find Sannikov Land in the Arctic Ocean.

And then, of course, there is the honest error, which is usually rooted in educated guesses of 'wishful mapping' or the limited ability of contemporary measurement systems. Coordinates were rough and imprecise, until John Harrison's invention of an accurate marine chronometer in the eighteenth century provided a long-sought solution to the problem of measuring longitude. Errors were copied, and discoveries even frequently 'remade'. Lieutenant Charles Wilkes, for example, during an 1838 survey of the Tuamotos, discovered an island at 15°44'S, 144°36'W. He named it King Island, in honour of the lookout who had spotted it. It wasn't

until later that it was learnt the island had, in fact, been sighted several years earlier, in 1835, by Captain Robert Fitzroy of the *Beagle*, and named Tairaro.

Sometimes, phantoms even appear out of sheer whimsy. In his *Cosmography* (1659), Peter Heylyn tells the story of Pedro Sarmiento's capture by Sir Walter Raleigh, who subsequently interviewed the Spanish explorer about curious entries on his maps of the Strait of Magellan. Raleigh questioned his prisoner about one particular island, which seemed to offer potential tactical advantage. Sarmiento merrily replied:

that it was to be called the Painter's Wife's Island, saying that, whilst the Painter drew that Map, his Wife sitting by, desired him to put in one Countrey for her, that she in her imagination might have an island of her own. His meaning was, that there was no such Island as the Map pretended. And I fear the Painter's Wife hath many Islands and some Countreys too upon the Continent in our common Maps, which are not really to be found on the strictest search.

Also to blame are the low-down, dirty liars: those who make the calculated and committed decision to invent an entire island or country for dishonourable and self-serving purposes. The impostor George Psalmanazar, for example, was a Frenchman on a mission to hoodwink the eighteenth century. He pretended to be a resident of Formosa (Taiwan) in a deception of depth and detail that fooled many. His book, *An Historical and Geographical Description of Formosa*, was filled almost entirely with fantastic details pulled straight from his fertile imagination.

Wild tales sold books and earned popularity. Adventurers cast themselves in heroic light, seducing funds from backers for future expeditions. Benjamin Morrell, known commonly as 'the biggest liar in the Pacific', returned from voyages breathless with tales of newly discovered lands (emblazoned with his name wherever possible) that no one else could find, with travel accounts that are clearly and liberally plagiarized. But lord of liars has to be the Scotsman Gregor MacGregor, an exaggerator and fantasist of breathtaking audacity. The corvine-eyed con-artist strode into

London presenting himself as the 'Cazique of the Territory of Poyais', and proceeded to commit the greatest fraud of the nineteenth century, if not of all time.

Cartographers themselves have even indulged in minor deceptions for protection, devising their own fictitious geographies to use as copyright 'traps' in the same way as lexicographers have included fictitious entries to prove rivals have stolen their material. This isn't a solely antiquated practice, either. In 2005, a representative of the Geographers' *A–Z Street Atlas* revealed to the BBC that the London edition of their map book at that time contained more than 100 fabricated streets.

Investigating geographic ghosts can also lead to the discovery that their labelling as such can be too hastily applied: in volcanically active regions, the sudden creation and destruction of islands can be relatively common occurrences. Among cultures in these areas there are stories passed down out of oral tradition that act as records of such islands' existence: in Fiji, for example, there is the story of the inhabited island of Vuniivilevu, which one day vanished into the depths of the Pacific Ocean. To this day, when fishing boats pass over its supposed former location, the custom is to fall respectfully silent. Sometimes, the record of such disaster is a map: in the Icelandic waters there were Gunnbjörn's skerries, a group of islands home to eighteen farms that, according to a note on Johannes Ruysch's 1507 map, were 'completely burned up' by volcanic action in 1456.

However certain we are of the world around us, it seems there is always more to the story. How many other phantoms, I wonder, are hiding in plain sight, printed so assuredly on wall maps around the world? What island, what mountain, what work of imagined nation is masquerading as fact, enjoying its quiet nonexistence, just waiting to be undiscovered?

STRAIT OF ANIAN

48°29'N, 124°50'W

Also known as Strete of Anian

Willem Barentsz's landmark 1598 map of the Arctic region, drawn from his observations made during his 1596 voyage. It is decorated with sea monsters, ships, whales and the mythical 'Estrecho de Anian' in the top right corner.

One of the greatest obsessions in the history of European exploration was the search for the Northwest Passage. Uncovering a trade route through the crushing pack ice of the Arctic to reach Asia and her endless riches – as an alternative to the gruelling and dangerous route around South America – would bring incalculable wealth to the nation that found the way. For centuries such a way was purely theoretical, willed into mythical existence through sheer mercenary desire. It wasn't until 1850 that a true Northwest Passage was discovered by Robert McClure, and until 1906 that the sea route was successfully navigated by the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen. But, in the centuries before this, a variety of legendary inlets and waterways potentially leading to this crossing were rumoured, depicted and pursued at great cost. The grandest of these was the Strait of Anian.

Rumours of this strait between northwestern North America and northeastern Asia (similar to the Bering Strait) that could possibly be the western end of an Arctic passage began to appear on maps in the mid-to late fourteenth century, and inspired voyages by explorers including John Cabot, Sir Francis Drake, Gaspar Corte-Real, Jacques Cartier and Sir Humphrey Gilbert. The name 'Anian' is thought to originate from the thirteenth-century stories of Marco Polo: in Chapter 5, Book 3 of his *Travels*, the explorer mentions a gulf that 'extends to a distance of two months' navigation along its northern shore, where it bounds the southern part of the province of Manji, and from thence to where it approaches the countries of Ania, Tolman and many others already mentioned'. He describes its geography in detail, before concluding: 'This gulf is so extensive and the inhabitants so numerous, that it appears like another world.'

The earliest printed map to focus solely on North America, and the first to show the Strait of Anian (Streto de Anian), separating America and Asia. It was by Paolo Forlani and Bolognino Zaltieri, Venice (1566).

Here Polo is referring to the Gulf of Tonkin, off the coast of northern Vietnam, and, although clearly suggesting it to be located a good deal farther south, it is easy to understand how cartographers searching for information on the area grabbed the name 'Ania' to fit reports of a strait in the general vicinity. It first appeared in a work by the

Italian cosmographer Giacomo Gastaldi in 1562, and was then adopted by the mapmakers Bolognini Zaltieri and Gerardus Mercator in 1567. The dream of the Strait of Anian was held onto tightly by explorers and cartographers over the next few hundred years, because of its theoretical instrumentality in finding the elusive Northwest Passage. European trade with Asia was booming but it was a demanding task, for goods had to be carried over land or sailed around the Cape of Good Hope. The latter, an especially terrible risk to shipping, was originally named 'Cabo das Tormentas' ('Cape of Storms') by the Portuguese explorer Bartolomeu Dias in 1488.

sailed the Strait of Anian. Under the orders of the viceroy of New Spain, de Fuca launched two expeditions to find the fabled way. The first, consisting of three ships carrying 200 men, is recorded as failing in the early stages when the crew took the ship to California after a

mutiny over the captain's 'malfeasance'. A second attempt was made in 1592, when the viceroy ordered de Fuca to return to the region with two ships; it was supposedly more successful. According to the merchant Michael Lok, de Fuca:

came to the Latitude of fortie seven degrees, and that there finding that the land trended North and north-east with a broad inlet of sea, between 47 and 48 degrees of Latitude; he entered thereinto, sayling therein more than twenty days, and found . . . very much broader Sea than was at the said entrance, and that he passed by divers lands in that sayling . . .

De Fuca recorded the opening of the strait as guarded by a large island with a towering rock spire; he then returned jubilant to Acapulco in the hope of gaining a reward for his findings, but none was offered.

Decorative example of Ortelius's map of the Tartar kingdom in 1598, with the 'Stretto di Anian' drawn just east of centre.

although a full degree (roughly 69 miles/111km) farther north than de Fuca had claimed, he recognized it as the waterway de Fuca had reported by spotting the pinnacle the sailor had described (which is now known as the De Fuca Pillar). De Fuca's alleged discovery of the Anian Strait was backed up by the Spanish navigator Lorenzo Ferrer Maldonado, who claimed to have sailed the waterway in the opposite direction in 1588, four years before de Fuca. (Although Maldonado's account is clearly fabricated, and achieved little recognition at the time, its rediscovery in the late eighteenth century gave the strait renewed fame.) This waterway that Barkley discovered was named the Strait of Juan de Fuca, but it was merely a 95-mile (153km) long passage that functions both as the Salish Sea's outlet to the Pacific and as the starting point of the international boundary between America and Canada.

The desperate hunt for a transcontinental passage meant that the Strait of Anian haunted maps for hundreds of years. A 1719 map by Herman Moll suggests it as a bay 50° north of the Island of California (see relevant entry here). The 1728 edition of a map by Johannes van Keulen also places it here, accompanied by the note: 'They say that one can come through this strait to Hudson Bay, but this is not proven.' In 1772, Samuel Hearne travelled over land from Hudson Bay to Copermine River and back – an extraordinary voyage of more than 3600 miles (5800km) – in search of the channel, but no Strait of Anian was found. For all but the most hopeful, this was sufficient to lay the myth to rest.

ANTILLIA

33°44'N, 54°55'W

Also known as Antilia, Isle of Seven Cities, Ilha das Sete Cidades, Sept Citez

In 711, the Islamic Moors of north Africa crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and invaded the Iberian peninsula. Led by the general Tariq ibn Ziyad, this massive force waged an eight-year campaign, crushing the Visigothic Christian armies and bringing most of modern Spain and Portugal under Islamic rule. The Moors continued their rampage across the Pyrenees, eventually falling to the Franks led by Charles Martel at the Battle of Poitiers in 732; but before that a strange legend emerged from the rubble of their Spanish invasion. It told of a group of seven Christian bishops who managed to flee the Muslim forces by ship across the Atlantic, eventually taking refuge on a distant island known as 'Antillia'. There, the holy men decided to set up residence, and each built for himself a magnificent golden city. This gave the island its other name: 'Isle of Seven Cities'.

How the bishops fared on the island is unknown, for no mention of Antillia is made for another seven centuries, until it began to appear on maps such as the *c.* 1424 portolan (sailing instructions) chart of the Venetian cartographer Pizzigano, which shows several of these legendary Atlantic Islands. Here, Antillia is depicted as a large, rectangular block, with seven cities adorning its coasts: Asay, Ary, Vra, Jaysos, Marnlio, Ansuly and Cyodne. Supposedly, the vast island was located in the North Atlantic, 750 miles (1200km) west of Portugal in the latitude of Gibraltar. The origin of its name is equally mysterious, but is thought to derive from *anteilha*, roughly 'opposite isle', possibly because it was thought to lie across from the Portuguese coast. (The name would later be applied to the Antilles Islands.)

The considerable size of the island made it attractive to explorers: Portugal's Prince Henry (1394–1460), better known as Henry the Navigator, dispatched a captain named Diogo de Teive and the Spanish nobleman Pedro de Velasco in 1452 to sail from the island of Fayal

in the Azores, and make southwesterly and northwesterly sweeps in search of Antillia. The men reached as far as the latitude of southern Ireland, without so much of a glimpse of the Antillian shore. The mission wasn't a total loss, however: during their journey they discovered Corvo and Flores, two outer islands of the Azores. In a letter to Ferman Martins in 1474, the Italian astronomer Paulo Toscanelli stated his certainty that the island of Antillia could be found 50 degrees east of Cipangu (Japan), and recommended it as a convenient waypoint when journeying to Cathay (China). Then, in 1486, King João II gave permission to Fernão Dulmo, captain of the northern territory of Terceira (one of the larger islands of the Azores), to locate and claim the Isle of Seven Cities in his name. Dulmo launched a search party in March but found nothing but terrific storms.

The portolan chart by Albino de Canepa (1489), with Antillia featured as a rectangular island to the far left.

Antillia marked as 'Sept Citez' on Hondius's 1631 map of the world.

Columbus, too, believed in the existence of Antillia, and reckoned the island a useful stopping-off point en route to the Indies. Entries in his travel journal of 1492 suggest he expected to find it at 28°N. This would have been based on the position given by Martin Behaim, who that same year had made the first cartographic mention of the island on his 'Erdapfel' (literally 'earth-apple') globe, with the note:

In the year 734 after the birth of Christ, when all Spain was overrun by the African heathens, this island of Antillia, called also the Isle of Seven Cities, was peopled by the Archbishop of Porto with six other bishops, and certain companions, male and female, who fled from Spain with their cattle, property and goods. In the year 1414 a Spanish ship approached very near this island without danger.

In 1508, additional Antillian detail was supplied by Johannes Ruysch on his map, with the inscription:

This island Antilia was once found by the Portuguese, but now when it is searched, cannot be found. People found here speak the Hispanic language, and are believed to have fled here in face of a barbarian invasion of Hispania, in the time of King Roderic, the last to govern Hispania in the era of the Goths. There is one archbishop here and six other bishops, each of whom has his own city; and so it is called the island of seven cities. The people live here in the most Christian manner, replete with all the riches of this century.

Hernando Colón, son of Columbus, was also fascinated by Antillia. He suggests convincingly in his *Historia del Almirante* (1571) that the exodus of the bishops took place in 714, not 734, which would line up closer with the two-year rule of King Roderic in 711. He also writes that the holy men burnt their ships on arrival at Antillia, lest they should ever consider returning to Hispania. So how did the story of the exiled bishops find its way to the mainland? Colón relates the story that, during the rule of Prince Henry, a wayward ship blown off course by a storm landed at Antillia. The crew explored the island, greeted the locals and attended a church service before hurrying back to Portugal to report the experience. However, when they were ordered to return to the island for confirmation, the entire crew disappeared. Elsewhere, the French sailor Eustache de la Fosse heightened the mystery by warning that Antillia was protected by a spell placed by one of the bishops 'knowing the art of necromancy', and predicted that the island would not be found again until 'all Spain should be restored to our good Catholic faith'. De la Fosse also claimed that sailors passing the invisible island had reported shore birds flying over their vessels, although these were also invisible 'because of the said enchantment'.

Antillia next crops up in Antonio Galvão's *The Discoveries of the World* (1563), in which the chronicler shares an account of a Portuguese ship from the Strait of Gibraltar encountering an island of seven cities. The inhabitants, who spoke Portuguese as their native tongue, enquired as to whether Spain was still ruled by the Moors, from whom they had fled after the death of King Roderic. Upon returning to Lisbon, the ship's captain gave a sample of the island's soil to a goldsmith for analysis, who declared the earth to be composed of two parts soil, one part gold. (This last detail, however, is a common addition to expeditionary stories to stir up interest, and it is clear from Galvão's distanced tone that he was wary of the tale). To Galvão, it was evident that Antillia had been confused by sailors with the Caribbean Antilles far to the west. This conclusion was supported by other geographers of the period, and the island began to be cleared from maps, although one finds it occasionally included on later works, such as Hondius's stunning 1631 map of the world.

ATLANTIS

35°09'N, 39°48'W

A map of Atlantis by Bory de St-Vincent, taken from Sur les Canaries *(1803).*

All missing islands of the past pale in scale to the largest and most famous fugitive of all: the island of Atlantis – 'larger than Libya and Asia put together', according to Plato, whose two dialogues, *Timaeus* and *Critias*

describe the land in detail. Written by the philosopher *c.* 360 BC, the works serve as the earliest record of the tale – 'not a fiction but a true story' – in which is discussed a massive war between the ancient Athenians and the Atlanteans waged 9000 years before Plato's time. Plato uses the story of Atlantis as an allegory for the arrogance of powerful nations, drawing inspiration, it is thought, from the volcanic destruction of the island of Thera (Santorini) that occurred in the mid-second millennium BC. Aristotle dismissed it as fiction, but the Greek academician Crantor ardently defended it as historical truth. Debate then raged (and, in some quarters, still does) as to whether the tale has factual basis.

A map by the seventeenth-century scholar Athanasius Kircher, placing Atlantis equidistant between Africa and America.

In *Timaeus*, Plato writes of a mighty island power 'situated in front of the straits which are by you called the Pillars of Heracles' (the entrance to the Strait of Gibraltar) that launched an unprovoked attack on the whole of Europe and Asia. In response, the state of ancient Athenians:

shone forth, in the excellence of her virtue and strength, among all mankind. She was pre-eminent in courage and military skill . . . she defeated and triumphed over the invaders, and preserved from slavery those who were not yet subjugated, and generously liberated all the rest of us who dwell within the pillars. But afterwards there occurred violent earthquakes and floods; and in a single day and night of misfortune all your warlike men in a body sank into the earth, and the island of Atlantis in like manner disappeared in the depths of the sea. For which reason the sea in those parts is impassable and impenetrable, because there is a shoal of mud in the way; and this was caused by the subsidence of the island.

Atlantis in its prime, *from W. Scott-Elliot's* The Story of Atlantis and the Lost Lemuria *(1925).*

The allegory of the superiority of Plato's ideal state was lost among the assurances of veracity made by its author, and the intoxicating excitement that ensued. Atlantis slowly came to represent all the lost worlds and utopias ever rumoured, amalgamated with myths across cultures. 'It was a legend so adapted to the human mind that it made a habitation for itself in any country,' wrote Dr Jowett, the renowned nineteenth-century translator of Plato. 'It was an island in the clouds, which might be seen anywhere by the eye of faith . . . No one knew better than Plato how to invent a noble lie.' As such, there have been a plethora of academic (and less-than-academic) theories offered as to the real location of the disappeared race, including Peru, the West Indies, Antarctica, the Canary Isles, Cuba,

Indonesia, Nigeria, Morocco, Cyprus, Sri Lanka, Sardinia, North America and the English Channel.

The maps here are rare instances of the legend committed to cartography – Athanasius Kircher follows Plato's description to depict it in the centre of the Atlantic Ocean. The German scholar included it in his extraordinary book *Mundus Subterraneus* (1665), which also features other mythical identifications: such as the 'Mountains of the Moon' as the source of the Nile (see Mountains of the Moon entry here); discussions on the buried remains of giants; and a commentary on the creatures of the underground world, including dragons. It is a work perhaps most famously known for the illustration *Systema Ideale Pyrophylaciorum,* a study of the Earth's volcanic system, a planet 'not solid but everywhere gaping, and hollowed with empty rooms and spaces, and hidden burrows', with terrible volcanoes being 'nothing but the vent-holes, or breath-pipes of Nature'.

And here Scott-Elliot maps Atlantis in its 'decadence'.

The myth of Atlantis endured, albeit pushed past the border of the scholarly into the realm of the obsessed and eccentric. In *Reflections of a Marine Venus* (1953), Lawrence Durrell writes about discovering a list of diseases as yet unclassified by medical science, 'and among these there occurred the word islomania, which was described as a rare but by no means unknown affliction of spirit. There are people . . . who find islands somehow irresistible. The mere knowledge that they are on an island, a little world surrounded by the sea, fills them with an indescribable intoxication. These born "islomanes" . . . are direct descendants of the Atlanteans.'

Athanasius Kircher's 1665 depiction of the 'fire canals', or volcanic system, of the subterranean world.

There has certainly been a specific islomania pertaining to those seeking Atlantis, which took an especially strange form in the creation of the 'Principality of Atlantis' by a group of Danish Atlantomanes led by John L. Mott in 1917. To escape war-torn Europe, the men claimed they had settled on a group of islands 200 miles (320km) southwest of Florida, eight degrees north of the Equator and 3 miles (5km) offshore of Panama and Costa Rica, which they declared their 'private Dynasty . . . or Principality of Atlantis Kaj Lemuria'. These details come to us from a US government file containing two decades of correspondence between the US State Department and various persons on the subject of the Atlantis

principality between the 1930s and 1950s. This includes one document bearing the letterhead 'Government of Atlantis and Lemuria', in which the governor-general of the principality, a Miss Gertrude Norris Meeker, warns the US State Department that 'any trespassing in these islands or Island Empire is a prison offence'; while another letter in the file, from 1957, advises the government to respect the sovereignty of the principality: 'Believe me,' writes Leslie Gordon Bell, legal counsel of the new Atlanteans, 'this is not a figment of somebody's imagination.'

AURORA ISLANDS

52°37'S, 47°49'W

In 1762, the Spanish merchant ship *Aurora*, captained by José de la Llana, was on its way home to Cádiz from a mission to Lima when the crew sighted a pair of islands midway between the Falkland Islands and South Georgia. Traffic was increasing in this region due to its proximity to the route taken by European trade vessels to round Cape Horn and so, unsurprisingly, the Auroras were confirmed by a succession of crews on trading missions: the frigate *San Miguel* spotted them in 1769, as did the *Aurora* again in 1774, followed by the *Perla* in 1779 and the *Dolores* in 1790, marking the coordinates using dead reckoning, which is essentially skilful guesswork.

In 1790, the *Princessa* of the Royal Philippine Company, ferrying goods from Spain, also reported passing the islands on its voyage to Lima – Captain Manuel de Oyarvido provided precise coordinates, and recorded the existence of a third, which he named 'Isla Nueva'. The Spanish explorer José Bustamente Guerra was then instructed to chart the 'islas Aurora', and in 1794 he found an island at 52°37'S with a snow-covered eastern side, and a western side dark with snow spreading through its ravines. His ship, the *Atrevida*, cruised alongside the island making observations from only 1 mile (1.6km) offshore, before continuing on its way. Four days later, he came across a second island, and from 'a moderate distance' noted a snow-covered southeast side. Satisfied that the islands were now placed with geographic precision, Bustamente proceeded to Montevideo. His charts were handed to the Royal Hydrographical Society of Madrid, where they were studied and filed away; and for a time no more was thought of them.

Over twenty years later, in 1820, the British sailor and seal-hunter James Weddell was drawn to the area by Bustamente's survey. He arrived at the coordinates and found open water. Refusing to believe that so many sailors before him could have made such a major

conditions; the desperation to find land on the horizon during long periods at sea; perhaps even destruction by volcanic action. Were the islands in fact giant floating icebergs, or 'ice-islands incorporated with earth' as Weddell eventually concluded? Or were they confused with the sealer's other discovery 620 miles/1000km off the Falkland Islands at 53°33'S, 42°02'W – the Shag Rocks (which were also then given the Spanish name Islas Aurora)? It has also been suggested that the Auroras might have been confused with the Falklands, but for so many skilful mariners to make the same grievous blunder seems most unlikely. The islands pop up on maps into the nineteenth century, inspiring further futile searches by Benjamin Morrell in 1823, and by John Biscoe in 1830. They can also be found on the chart accompanying John Ross's 1847 *A Voyage of Discovery and Research to Southern and Antarctic Regions.* By 1856, they had been wiped from official cartographic records. The mystery as to what so many men saw on those waters has never been solved.

AUSTRALIA'S INLAND SEA

24°54'S, 137°13'E

Maslen's wishful mapping of Australia's possible inland sea and river system, from The Friend of Australia *(1830).*

It had been forty-two years since the British First Fleet, commanded by Captain Arthur Philip, landed at Australia's Botany Bay and formed the first European colony at Port Jackson. Initially, the new land served as a penal territory, but the British were keen to push deeper into the unmapped Australian interior and get a sense of the potential for further settlement. They knew from experience that following rivers inland usually led to mountains, river systems and fertile land that frequently exceeded expectation, and so it was assumed that the same topographic logic could be applied to Australia – what kind of rich verdant paradise, it was wondered, could be waiting in the heartland?

Maslen's scene of colonists crossing Australia's possibly bountiful desert river system, with horses transporting tub-like vessels.

'The plan here offered is a practical scheme', announces the English writer Thomas J. Maslen in *The Friend of Australia* (1830), 'and not a vain theory which could not be put into practice; and it will serve equally well as a guide and book of reference, to a numerous or a small party of explorers.' Maslen, a retired officer of the East India Company, wrote his book to encourage colonial expansion efforts. It provides detailed instructions for how to conduct surveys and inland exploration (for the latter, he recommended the use of camels). It seemed most unlikely to Europeans that a country the size of Australia would exist without the same abundant water systems as that of other continents. Maslen, therefore, used his

book to exhibit his educated guess of a water-rich Australian interior. Today, *The Friend of Australia* is considered the ultimate monument to speculative geography.

Maslen's flag design 'Respectfully submitted for the consideration of Government for the adoption of the Colony of New South Wales'.

The map shown here is the one that accompanied the book, and which contributes to the rare work's modern reputation as a curiosity (only 250 copies were printed, and even those failed to sell out at the time). The theory of a vast, undiscovered Australian system of rivers and lakes had been popular for years, but it was Maslen who ran away with the idea in spectacular fashion. In the appendix, he describes the thinking behind the creation of his ideal 'atlas of Australasia *a desideratum*', supposing there to be a succession of hills stretching from the west coast towards the interior. These perhaps enclosed a high table of land, 'from whence other streams might direct their course to the dead level, and perhaps form one or more sheets of water, as the formation of lakes is one of nature's great features in Australasia'. The river network portrayed is a wonderfully elaborate and generous

BERMEJA

22°33'N, 91°22'W

Also known as Vermeja

There is a curious phenomenon in marine law known as a 'Donut Hole'. Donut Holes are legal loopholes created by the passing of a 1982 UN convention on the Law of the Sea, which essentially states that the area of water within 200 miles (322km) from the coast of a country is the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), or nautical sovereignty, of the respective nation. The Donut Holes appear when the perimeters of the EEZs of two countries don't quite meet – accordingly, these no-man's lands are deemed pockets of international water.

In the Gulf of Mexico, several of these Donut Holes, or 'Hoyas de Donas', were formed, and quickly became a point of contention between the United States and Mexico for one reason: oil. The gulf's oil fields are especially bountiful, and crucial to both countries – a current fact sheet from the US Energy Information Administration records the area as providing 17 per cent of America's total crude oil production. In this rush to clarify rights to the fields, antique maps of the region were suddenly called upon to play a crucial role in an international debate that would result in substantial wealth for the victor. Since the sixteenth century, it was discovered, charts showed a small Mexican island named 'Bermeja' nestled deep in the gulf – its existence, though, had never been proven. The Mexicans realized that, if the island could be found, it would dramatically extend their EEZ, and qualify their claim to oil rights in the region.

Bermeja first appeared on Alonso de Santa Cruz's 1539 map *El Yucatán e Islas Adyacentes*, and through to the nineteenth-century maps of the Gulf of Mexico insisted that the island could be found off the north coast of the Yucatán peninsula. Alonso de Chaves was the first to record an exact location in his *Espejo de navegantes* (Seville, *c.*1540), describing the island from a distance as seeming 'blondish or reddish'. No confirmed sighting was reported after that, but it remained on charts into the nineteenth century, when several British maps

recorded the island as having sunk mysteriously. Its last appearance is found in the 1921 edition of the *Geographic Atlas of the Mexican Republic*.

A Map of the United States of Mexico *(1826) by Henry S. Tanner, showing Bermeja floating in the centre of the Gulf of Mexico.*


image
not
available

'Vermeja' on Tardieu's Amerique Septentrionale *(1809).*

Various theories have been suggested as to Bermeja's 'disappearance'. Some blame climate change and rising sea levels, others an undersea earthquake, although, in 2010, a group of Mexican senators released a statement pointing out that such 'a force of nature does not take place without anyone noticing, and much less so when it is sitting in an area with more than 22 billion barrels of oil reserves'.

Another popular theory is that the entire island was destroyed by the US Central Intelligence Agency to ensure US hegemony over the oil fields. In November 2000, six senators from Mexico's governing party of Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) voiced 'plentiful

INDEX

A note about the index: The pages referenced in this index refer to the page numbers in the print edition. Clicking on a page number will take you to the ebook location that corresponds to the beginning of that page in the print edition. For a comprehensive list of locations of any word or phrase, use your reading system's search function.

Page numbers in *italics* refer to illustrations