

# Plato's atlantida nesos as the "Island of Meroe"

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*"Turning my face to sunrise, I created a wonder for you. I made the islands of Punt come here to you, with all their fragrant flowers, to beg your peace and to breathe your air."*

Speech of god Amun in the Amenhotep III mortuary temple of Luxor

## ABSTRACT

The so-called "Island of Meroe" today in North Sudan, was encircled by three rivers : the Blue Nile on the South, the White Nile on the West and its affluent the Atbara River on the North-East. According to Flavius Josephus (*Antiquity of the Jews*, II, 10) : "The city of Meroe was situated in a retired place, and was inhabited after the manner of an island, being encompassed with a strong wall, and having the rivers to guard them from their enemies, and having great ramparts between the wall and the rivers". The ruins of the city of Meroe stand 200 km North of Khartoum. The archaeological digging in the ancient city began on 1909-1914 and are pursued until now but they are still greatly uncompleted. They allowed to discover numerous ancient buildings, several temples, and the so-called Royal Baths mentioned by Plato, as well as an important iron industry.

Obviously the "Island of Meroe" was not in the middle of ocean : the mistake of the Greek translation could be due to the Egyptian expression "wadj wr" (the great green) meaning the sea sometimes, and sometimes the Nile. The straits named by Plato "Heracles' Pillars" is in fact in Arabian language Bal-el-Mandeb. The identification of the *atlanticon pelagos* with the Red Sea is confirmed by several ancient authors and by its designation as a *pontos* (an enclosed sea) in Timaeus, 25 (cf. the Land of Punt for Egyptians). Consequently, the unnavigable sea mentioned by Plato could not be the remains of a sunken island but corresponds to the zone of the Sawabi archipelago just before the Straits, considered for a long time as an impassable obstacle by ancient Red Sea sailors.

The final cataclysm of Atlantis could occur on 591 B.C. under the reign of pharaoh Psametik II. Indeed this king made a victorious military campaign against Kushites (Ethiopians for Greeks) with an army including Greek mercenaries led by general Potasimto and an Egyptian corps led by general Amasis who will become himself pharaoh in Sais twenty years later.

Although Psametik II celebrated his great victory against Kushites, it is possible that an earthquake followed by a rockslide buried a great part of his soldiers sleeping in the Mut temple in Djebel Barkal (Napata). The same earthquake had destroyed the dams and ramparts in Meroe on the monsoon season allowing the rivers to drown the city for some months or years.

The report of the Egyptian priests to Solon could be an Amasis' propaganda aiming to remember to Greeks that thirty years earlier, together with Egyptian troops they have subdued the bellicose kingdom of Kush. In fact pharaoh Amasis who was confronted to the imminent threat of Babylon and Persia was managing to obtain a new military alliance with Aegeans.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Meroe is mentioned by the Greek and Roman authors: Herodotus, Strabo, Diodorus Siculus, Pliny the Elder, Heliiodorus and Flavius Josephus (Eide, 1996). It seems to have been a flourishing town at least as early as the eighth century BC. It was situated between the 5th and the 6th cataracts at the junction of several main rivers and caravan routes, connecting central Africa, via the Blue and White

Niles with Egypt, and the Upper Nile region itself with Kordofan, the Red Sea and the Ethiopian highlands. Since it lays within the rain belt, the land about it was seasonally more productive than the region of Napata, and it was thus a somewhat more pleasant place to live and as well a more secure and defensible city than Napata, the previous capital of Kush. By the third century B.C. it was only one of several large towns that had arisen in the same region. Bounded to the West by the Nile, to the North by the Atbara River and to the South by the Blue Nile, this area now known as the district of Keraba, in West Butana province of North Sudan, was the heartland of the later Kushite kingdom, and came to be known in Greek and Roman literature as "the Island of Meroe."

The French explorer Frederic Cailliaud (Cailliaud, 1905) reported : "From the Atbarah River begins the Island of Meroe. The springs of this Nile affluent are close to those of Rahad its other affluent". According to Bruce (Bruce, 1790) : "On the point where the springs of Atbarah and Rahad are nearest, there is a wadi flowing East to West. During the season of flood, this wadi emptied by rains realizes a perfect junction between the two rivers, so this territory becomes really an island as described by ancient authors".

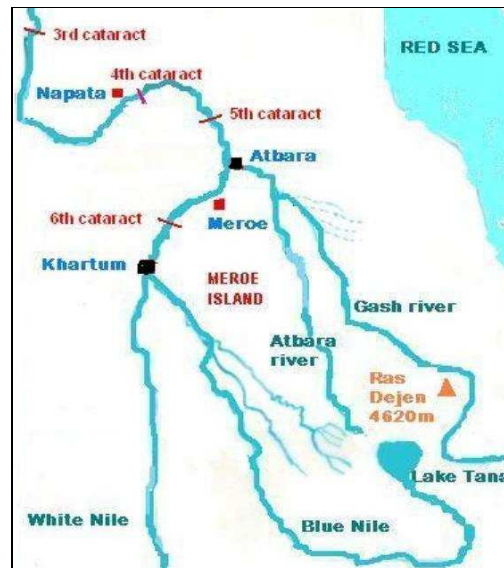


Figure 1 : The Island of Meroe.

## 2. MEROE IN ANCIENT AUTHORS

Thus we will firstly consider some reports of ancient writers about the "Island of Meroe" :

- Flavius Josephus in his book "Antiquity of the Jews" (Book 2, chapter 10) reporting that Moses reached Meroe with the Egyptian army, described the city as follows :

"The place was to be besieged with very great difficulty, since it was both encompassed by the (Blue) Nile quite round, and the other rivers, Astapus (White Nile) and Astaboras (Atbara River) made it a very difficult thing for such as attempted to pass over them; for the city was situated in a retired place, and was inhabited after the manner of an island, being encompassed with a strong wall, and having the rivers to guard them from their enemies, and having great ramparts between the wall and the rivers, insomuch, that when the waters come with the greatest violence, it can never be drowned; which ramparts make it next to impossible for even such as are gotten over the rivers to take the city."

- And Strabo (63/64 BC – ca. 24 A.D.) in his "Geographia" (Book XVII, chapter 2, 1-3) said about Ethiopians (Kushites):

"Their largest royal seat is the city of Meroe, of the same name as the island. The shape of the island is said to be that of a shield. Its size is perhaps exaggerated. Its length is about 3000 stadia (555 km), and its breadth 1000 stadia (185 km). It is very mountainous, and contains great forests. The

inhabitants are nomads, who are partly hunters and partly farmers. There are also mines of copper, iron, gold, and various kinds of precious stones. It is surrounded on the side of Libya by great hills of sand, and on that of Arabia by continuous precipices.”

This description by Strabo corresponds word for word to the report of Plato (Critias 114). So it is possible that their main source was the now lost “Periegesis” of Hecataeus of Miletus (c. 550-476 B.C.), as it was also the source for Herodotus whose report (Book II, chapter 143) concerning his visit to the Egyptian priests greatly looks like that of Solon : “Hecataeus the historian was once at Thebes, where he made a genealogy for himself that had him descended from a god in the sixteenth generation. But the priests of Zeus (Amun) did with him as they also did with me (who had not traced my own lineage). They brought me into the great inner court of the temple and showed me wooden figures there which they counted to the total they had already given, for every high priest sets up a statue of himself there during his lifetime; pointing to these and counting, the priests showed me that each succeeded his father; they went through the whole line of figures, back to the earliest from that of the man who had most recently died. Thus, when Hecataeus had traced his descent and claimed that his sixteenth forefather was a god, the priests too traced a line of descent according to the method of their counting; for they would not be persuaded by him that a man could be descended from a god.”

- And finally Pliny the Elder (23-79 A.D.) in his “Natural History” (Book VI, chapter 35) reported: “They also state that the grass in the vicinity of Meroe becomes of a greener and fresher colour, and that there is some slight appearance of forests, as also traces of the rhinoceros and elephant. They reported also that the city of Meroe stands at a distance of seventy miles (113 km) from the first entrance of the Island of Meroe, and that close to it is another island, Tadu by name, which forms a harbour facing those who enter the right hand channel of the river. The buildings in the city, they said, were but few in number, and they stated that a female, whose name was Candace, ruled over the district, that name having passed from queen to queen for many years. They related also that there was a temple of Jupiter Hammon there, held in great veneration, besides smaller shrines erected in honour of him throughout all the country. In addition to these particulars, they were informed that in the days of the Ethiopian dominion, the Island of Meroe enjoyed great renown, and that, according to tradition, it was in the habit of maintaining two hundred thousand armed men, and four thousand artisans.” (Cf. Critias 119). The whole of this country has successively had the names of Etheria, *Atlantia*, and last of all, Ethiopia, from Ethiops, the son of Vulcan.”

Also a modern author L. Ginzberg in his book “Legends of the Jews” (Ginzberg, 1909) reporting rabbinic traditions about Moses in Meroe described the royal city of the Ethiopian (Kushite) king Kikanos as follows :

“On two sides they made the walls higher, on the third they dug a network of canals, into which they conducted the waters of the river girding the whole land of Ethiopia, and on the fourth side their magic arts collected a large swarm of snakes and scorpions. Thus none could depart, and none could enter.”

### 3. THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE CITY OF MEROE AND NEARBY

Perhaps you are now waiting to hear that the excavations in Meroe allowed to discover the exact model of triple concentric circles alternating land and water as described by Plato. For the moment we must be patient and stay realistic taking only in account the archaeological and geographical characteristics of the city of Meroe and its region. It is also important to consider that until now only thirty per cent of the site were investigated.

The city stood on the right bank of the Nile 200 km North of Khartoum. Describing its actual state the archaeologist Timothy Kendall said: “Today Meroe is the largest archaeological site in the Sudan. Lying about a half a mile (800 m) from the river, the city ruins alone cover about a square mile (2 km<sup>2</sup>) in area.. Most prominent among the ruins is the huge stone walled enclosure containing the rubble remains of the palace and government buildings, several small temples (one with painted frescoes), and a so-called "Roman bath" or nymphaeum. Immediately behind it sprawls another

walled compound enclosing the Amun Temple, a near copy of the one at Gebel Barkal. The remains of several other major sanctuaries lie nearby among the trees. Between these and the palace compound there are the extensive unexcavated mounds of the settlement, and on the east end of the city, on the edge of the desert, there are great slag heaps which have suggested that Meroe was an important iron working centre “.

The royal enclosure had numerous buildings, such as two square palaces, an astronomical observatory (identified through now disappeared wall paintings), an audience hall and baths that must have belonged to the palace complex.” Animal bones suggest also an area of outdoor slaughter.

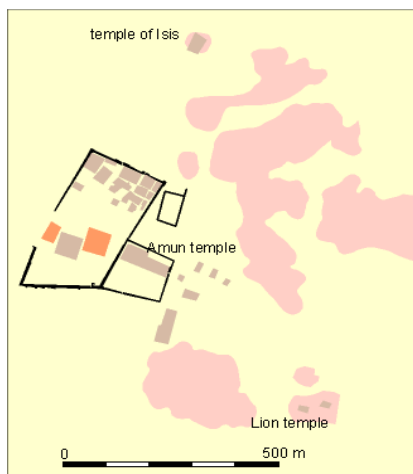


Figure 2 : Map of the city of Meroe

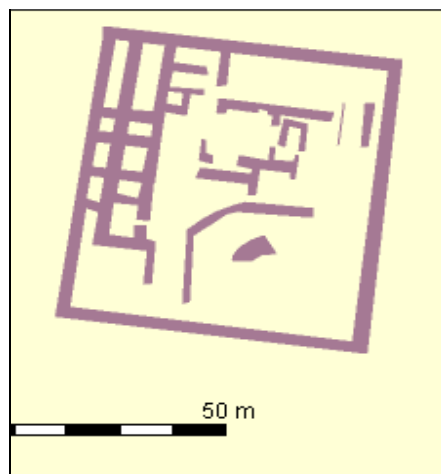


Figure 3 : The royal palace M294

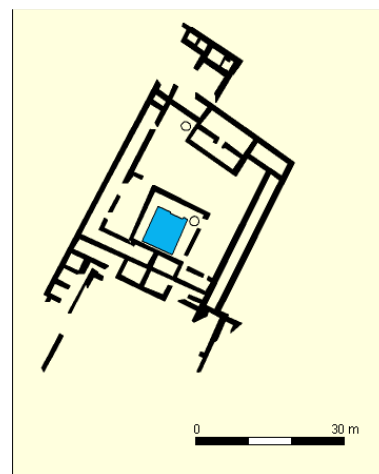


Figure 4 : The Royal Baths

As you can see on Figure 2 the main buildings of the royal enclosure were two similar square palaces and the so-called Royal Baths at West. This area was surrounded by a big rectangular wall of dressed blocks (3,5 m to 7,75 m of thickness). There were towers in each corner and gates of the wall. East of this area and backed to the wall was the big Amun temple.

Each palace M294 and M295 (Fig. 3) measured 40 x 40 meters. There are traces of staircases which suggest there must have been upper floors. A cachette found in M294 yielded many objects of high quality which could be the votive deposit of an earlier Amun temple standing on an island representing the primeval hill itself. The actual palace M294 was thus built in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. over an earlier sacred precinct (as Plato said in Critias 115).

The Royal Baths (Fig. 4) mentioned by Plato (Critias 117) were in an extensive building with a big square water basin of 7,5 m of side and depth of 2,5 m, easy to enter by a staircase. The basin was supplied with water flowing through several pipes. The water had evacuated by a vaulted channel which ran from the basin bottom westwards under the city wall in direction of the Nile. Although the decorations of the actual remains made of red bricks were dated from the Greco-Roman period, the ancient building could be a water sanctuary dating of the earliest Napatan period (8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.).

In this respect we must consider that for Libyans Amun was a god of water and soil fertility (as well as for Ammonians of Siwa oasis north-west of Egypt where pharaoh Amasis built an big Amun temple). In Meroitic temples Amun was often associated with Hapy the Egyptian genie of the Nile inundation (Vikentiev, 1930).

It is supposed that the earliest city in Meroe was built on three alluvial hills, as northeast and southeast of the royal enclosure are several mounds not yet completely investigated. However there are indices that the North mound had been inhabited as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. According to the archaeologist R. Bradley (Bradley, 1982) a canal had encircled the three hills and another wall or dam outside the canal had protected the city against the Nile flood.

And finally as described by T. Kendall : “Behind the city in the eastern desert lie its vast cemeteries. Those nearest the town were reserved for the common people... About three miles away (5 km), lining the tops of two ridges, are the towering pyramids of the rulers, of which over forty can

be counted. Until 280 B.C. the kings of Meroe were still buried in Nuri near Napata. That is why neither Plato, nor Strabo mentioned the pyramids of Meroe, as when Hecataeus of Miletus visited the city in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. not any pyramid yet existed in Meroe.

#### 4. GEOGRAPHICAL ENVIRONMENT

The plain of Meroe on the right bank of the Nile is protected from the North wind by a low but massive round mountain Djebel Amia (400 m of height), from which descends a river Wadi Mukabrab. In its first course it flows North towards the Atbara River, but obviously its course was willingly reoriented by man towards West to go to the Nile by means of a big earthen dam. By this way its lower course flows East to West (instead of South to North) closing the entry of the plain of Meroe by North. South of the city another tributary of the Nile, Wadi El Awad, protected the other access to the plain and by its long course it connected Meroe with the inland of Butana. Perhaps these two wadis correspond to one (the third one ?) of the three water enclosures described by Plato (Fig. 5).

According to Simone Wolf (Wolf, 2003 ; Wolf, 2008) and Hans-Ulrich Onasch (Onasch, 2008) of the University of Berlin, massive water channel systems were recently discovered in the area of the Royal Baths, one of them being independent of the baths. A team of the Department of Archaeology of Khartoum University (Ali Osman, 2008) is now planning to perform a detailed study of the wadi systems around Meroe. These recent developments were exposed in the 11th International Conference for Meroitic Studies held in Vienna on September 1-4, 2008.

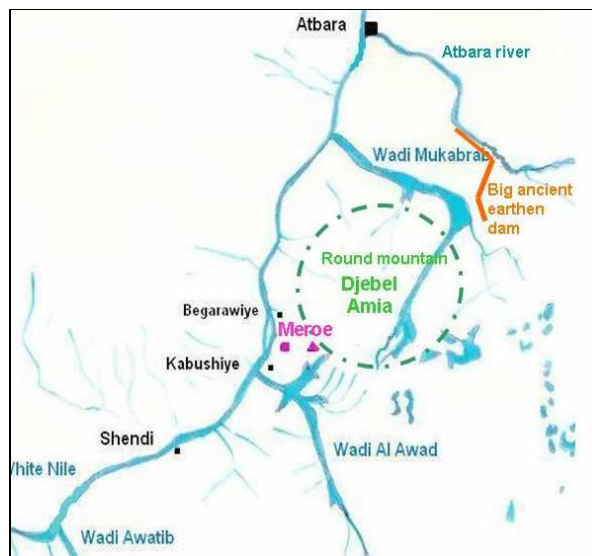


Figure 5 : The geography of Meroe area

According to Pliny the Elder (N.H. Book 6, 35 ) there was an harbour on the Nile in front of Meroe. At the actual stage of digging it was not detected (but perhaps nobody was looking for it). However, the harbour described by Plato looks like the Meroitic site of Wad ben Naqa 80 km upstream from Meroe. This ancient settlement on the right bank of the Nile was located between two branches of the now fossil Wadi Kirkeban allowing to reach by water the two big ancient Meroitic cities of Naqa and Musawwarat es Sofra built on the plain some twelve to eighteen miles (20 to 30 km) inland.

Moreover an important mining activity existed in Upper Nubia in ancient times : mainly the extraction of gold and iron. But there could be also a production of “orikhalkos gleaming as fire”. This one according to Pliny (Book 34, chapters 2 and 20), was an alloy of copper and gold also named *pyrope*. It is presently called *auricupride* ( $Cu_3Au$ ) and found at natural state in South Africa and in a Russian Urals region named Karabash (cf. Meroe in Sudan Keraba !).

## 5. OTHER MEROITIC SETTLEMENTS

Moreover, as Timothy Kendall (Kendall, 2007) said : "If Meroe was the major city of the kingdom, it was not the only one. The Butana steppe is dotted with other Meroitic remains, some up to sixty miles (100 km) east of the Nile. Other settlements have been identified further south along the Blue and White Niles, and many Meroitic settlements arose in Lower Nubia, some barely a hundred miles (160 km) south of Aswan. Apart from the capital, the most monumental sites are three, which lie between forty and fifty miles (between 65 and 80 km) South of Meroe.

At Wad Ben Naqa, on the east bank of the Nile, there may be seen the remains of an enormous palace, together with two temples and a town. This was apparently a river port. The site of Naqa was clearly an important religious centre, for it possesses the ruins of seven stone temples, a town, and a cemetery. On-going excavations here have revealed that the town was also surrounded by numerous manor houses with plantations.

Musawwarat es Sofra, ten miles (16 km) to the North, was also a cult centre and perhaps, too, a caravanserail. The most spectacular site in the Butana, Musawwarat contains the sprawling ruin known as the "Great Enclosure", a labyrinth of stone buildings, temples, corridors, ramps, and courtyards. Tremendous stone walls partition the complex into no less than twenty separate compounds, which have recently been found to be protected gardens of fruit trees, all brought, together with their appropriate soil, from the banks of the Nile and watered by an elaborate underground pipe system.

While both the sites of Naqa and Musawwarat now are in virtual desert, careful management of somewhat greater rainfall in ancient times made the area much more fertile than it is today. Huge hafirs (catch-basins) were constructed at each site to collect the annual rainwater and keep it until needed. The largest hafir at Musawwarat is 800 ft. (243 m) across and 20 ft (6 m) of depth. Stone statues of guardian lions and frogs ringed many of these artificial lakes magically protecting their contents.

The major god of the region of Meroe was a divinity of local origin, called Apedemak. He was often identified with the moon. He normally took the form of a powerful lion-headed man, dressed in armour. He usually appeared in the reliefs of his temple in a warlike aspect, standing or seated on a throne or on an elephant, grasping prisoners and weapons of war, or holding elephants and lions on leashes. Magnificent temples in his honour were built at every major site in the Butana. "Apademak could be a warrior hero benefactor for the region in ancient time (perhaps Thutmose Ist), who had been deified as reported by Diodorus (Book III, 8, 9) .

## 6. KUSH: A POWERFUL ENEMY OF EGYPT

Pliny the Elder (N.H. Book VI, 35) reported : "Romans are not responsible for the ruin of Ethiopia. It is the result of numerous conflicts between Egyptians and Ethiopians (Kushites). Alternatively Ethiopia was leader or was submitted to Egypt." As early as the second millennium, Kush and Egypt were in perpetual rivalry for the domination of the Nile valley. The pharaohs of the 12<sup>th</sup> dynasty had to build several big fortresses between the first and the third cataracts to protect their South frontier against recurrent attacks of the powerful Kushite kingdom of Kerma, which spread from South of the third cataract at least as far as the fourth cataract. During the Second Intermediate Period, Kerma rulers were allied to Hyksos to strangle the frail Theban kingdom. They were defeated by Kamose around 1550 B.C. But after recovering Lower Egypt from Hyksos, pharaohs of the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty finally subdued the kingdom of Kerma in order to avoid further attacks from South. From the reign of Ahmose the Land of Kush was administered by a viceroy vassal of Egypt. Thutmose Ist reached the 5<sup>th</sup> cataract and Thutmose III built a temple in Djebel Barkal the sacred city of Kush. This temple was later embellished by the Ramses of the 19<sup>th</sup> dynasty.

However in the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. a new Kushite dynasty emerged in the region of the 4<sup>th</sup> cataract. In 747 B.C. Piankhy (also translated as Piye) king of Napata conquered Egypt as far as Memphis. This dynasty of black pharaohs reigned on both Nubia and Egypt. A son of Piankhy,

Taharqa reigning in Memphis (690-664 B.C.) spread his empire from Khartoum to Lebanon and according to Strabo (V, 2, 2) as far as Etruria which is Tyrrhenia. Thus he reigned for twenty years on the largest empire ever created on the Nile in ancient times. But in 671 B.C. a son of Taharqa, Tanutamun the last pharaoh of the Kushite 25<sup>th</sup> dynasty, was expelled from Egypt by the Assyrian king Assurbanipal. His brother and successor Atlanersa reigned only on Upper Nubia from his residence of Napata.

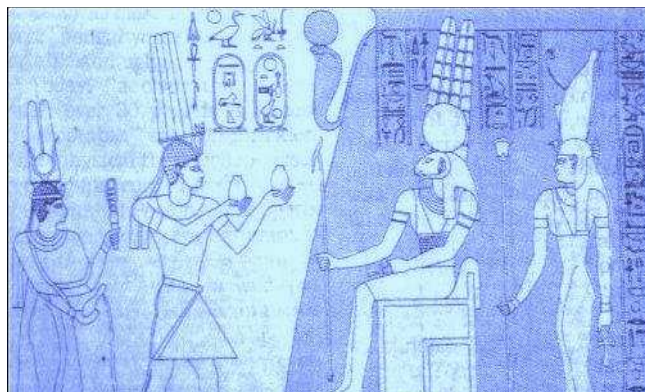


Figure 6 : Djebel Barkal at Napata the sacred city of Kush with god Amun and goddess Mut dwelling under the mountain (Amun temple B300).

At Napata the sacred city of Kush, Djebel Barkal “the pure mountain”, a tabular hill of 100 m high stands on the right bank of the Nile just before the 4<sup>th</sup> cataract. It has a pinnacle in the shape of an aureus snake up crowned with the sun disk. In the mind of Kushite people Amun their dynastic god dwelled under this mountain (Fig. 6). Numerous temples and royal palaces were built at the bottom of the mountain. On the right bank of the Nile, 13 km South from Djebel Barkal is the necropolis of El-Kurru. Here are the pyramids of 9 kings and 14 queens of the 25<sup>th</sup> dynasty of Napata. After 656 B.C. a new necropolis was settled in Nuri on the left bank of the Nile. Here are the pyramids of 21 kings and 52 queens mainly coming from Meroe. These two big necropolis and the two other ones in Meroe are witnesses to the power and longevity of the Kushite dynasties.

Finally, in 591 B.C. pharaoh Psametik II of the 26<sup>th</sup> dynasty hearing that Kush intended to attack Egypt decided to quell this recurrent problem by a radical military campaign (Manuelian, 1984). General Amasis conducted the Egyptian troops, which were reinforced by a corps of Greek mercenaries led by general Potasimto. These armies reached Napata and burned the temples at Djebel Barkal where reigned the Kushite king Aspelta (593-568). After Aspelta reign, in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. the royal residence was transferred from Napata to Meroe 300 km far to South.

## 7. THE VISIT OF SOLON IN SAIS

Twenty years after his military campaign against Kush, Amasis the ancient general of Psametik II, became himself pharaoh in Sais (571-526 B.C.) When Solon met the priests of goddess Neith in Sais some ten years later, Egypt was submitted to a strong threat of Darius the ambitious Persian king. So the priests of Sais glorified the previous military deeds of Greeks because Amasis was hoping to obtain again an alliance with Aegeans to fight against Persians.

The priests met by Solon were probably Libyans as pharaoh Amasis himself. It was perhaps difficult for them to read the Egyptian records in the books of the temple which were written in the so-called “abnormal hieratic” scripture, whereas the current one was already demotic.

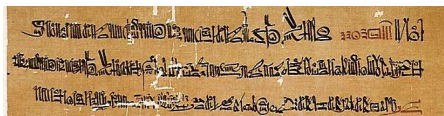


Figure 7 : Papyrus Harris in hieratic scripture

So they had wrongly translated the numeration for 800 by 8000 years. By this fact, 900 years before Solon in Egypt circa 560 B.C. give a dating circa 1500 B.C. when the kingdom of Atlantis was founded by Poseidon.

This dating corresponds to the beginning of the reign of Thutmose Ist succeeding Amenophis Ist whose mother queen Ahmose-Nefertari could be the daughter of king Kamose with a Kushite princess of Meroe. (According to some traditions king Kamose had spent his youth in Napata. After reconquering Lower Egypt from Hyksos, he had returned for forty years in Meroe and came back to Egypt when 67 years old, to reign in Thebes under the name of Thutmose Ist).

## 8. MYTHOLOGY OF ATLANTIA AS “THE ISLAND OF MEROE”

Consequently, the myth of foundation of Atlantia corresponds to an early phase of the Kushite dynasty of Napata whose ancient roots were in Meroe.

Evenor the father-in-law of Poseidon equals Uenor who is the mythic father of Berber people (Libyans). This deity is the symbol of rain. (See also Uranus “the wetting god” spouse of Gaia the Earth for Greeks and first king of Atlantia). Ptolemy (IV, 7) mentions near Meroe the “Euonymites”.

Poseidon appears to be Amun the dynastic blue-skinned god, symbol of water and soil fertility for Egyptians and Kushites. And until now, the word “aman” means for water in Berber language.

As for Cleito her Meroitic name could be something as “qore-ato” meaning the queen of water.

The offspring of god Poseidon (Amun) “through numerous generations” was the lineage of the kings of Napata, then followed by the kings of Meroe.



Figure 8 : Statues of Kushite kings.



Figure 9 : An Oromo warrior in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

Plato said (Critias 115) “This palace they proceeded to build at once in the place where the god and their ancestors have lived...” That corresponds to the moment when the Kushite royal residence was transferred from Napata to Meroe in 568 B.C. Consequently it is the city of Meroe in the late 6th century B.C. which was described in Plato’s report.

According to Plato, Poseidon generated five pairs of male twins. This corresponds to the tradition of an African ethnic group named Oromo also called Galla (d’Abbadie, 1880) : “Maca (their moon god) divided the country in 10 castes or gadas grouped two by two and exercising the power successively during 8 years (power of Lubas). These five couples correspond to five natural governments: 1. the one of men or the reason, 2. the one of the current water or the progress, 3. the one of the sheep or quietude, 4. the one of the lion that represents strength. 5. The one of the vulture

that presides to the rapine. Oromos believe that every caste arriving to government brings in policy the tendency that is his own" (The Greek names of the twins of Poseidon also designed abstractions).

As described by Plato (Critias 119-120 ) “Abba Bokou, president of the justice parliament slaughters a beef, sprinkles himself of its blood and sprinkled his ministers. To enact a law, one slaughters a young bull. The king dives his sceptre in blood “ (de Salviac, 1902).

And as painted on frescoes in Avaris and Knossos (circa 1500 B.C.), until now Oromos of the Omo valley in Ethiopia practice a ritual of bull jumping for young men they named « maza » (Arnott, 1993). The man-to-be must "jump the cattle" four times to be successful. This test is performed while naked except for *a few cords* bound across the chest (Parry, 2006).

## 9. GEOGRAPHY IN PLATO’S REPORT

### 9.1. The world of ancient geographers

In the mind of ancient geographers the world was divided into three parts : Europe, Libya (Africa) inhabited by Ethiopians (black people) and Asia. The whole world was encircled by a unique sea named Okeanos by Homer. (Fig. 10). But Egyptians considered Okeanos to be the Nile (Diodorus, I, 12, 6). They called it “wadj wr” the great green. So it was easy for a Greek translator to take the Nile for the sea.

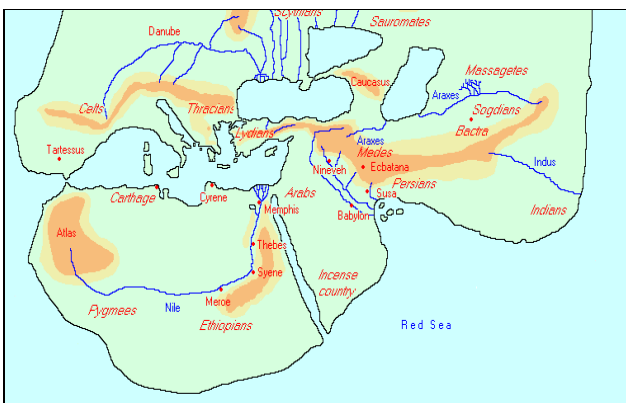


Figure 10 : The world viewed by ancient geographers



Figure 11 : The Semien Mountains of Ethiopia

In this map Africa and India were oriented West to East instead of North to South. The Nile took its source in the extreme West in Atlas Mounts where is now Morocco. But when we rectify the direction of Africa from north to south, the Nile course becomes correct and Atlas mounts are now in Ethiopia where are the Semien Mountains, the fourth highest peaks of Africa (Fig. 11).

Samely Claudius Ptolemy the Alexandrian geographer mentioned the existence of an “ypodromos Aithiopias” meaning an harbour of Ethiopians, but he located it on the coast of Maurusia actual Mauritania.

### 9.2. The Atlas’ mountains : Pillars of Heaven

These basaltic peaks on Figure 11 are those of Ras Dejen 4620 metres (15157 ft) in Mounts Semien north-west of actual Ethiopia (previously Abyssinia). In Amharic language its name means “the watcher”. And according to Homer (Odyssey I, 53-54) : “Atlas watches alone on the high pillars which keep separate the earth from the heaven”. Also in the Amun temple (B500) of Napata, king Taharqa is represented sustaining the sky and in Meroe there was an astronomical observatory (Bradley, 1984). This corresponds to the report of Diodorus (Book IV, 27 : 28) saying that “Atlas had worked out the science of astrology to a degree surpassing others and had ingeniously discovered the spherical nature of the stars.”

And Diodorus (III, 55, 3) said :”There is an island called Hesperia, near to the marsh called Tritonis (Lake Tana ?), from a river (Blue Nile) that runs into it. This marsh borders upon Ethiopia, under the greatest mountain in those parts, called by the Greeks *Atlanta*, extending itself to the ocean.”

In fact the name of Atlas could have its origin in the greek word “etalon” meaning the calf. This same Greek root had also given the name Italos by the intermediary of the Siculean “witalios”, umbrian “(v)italu” : son of the bull (Franke, 2008). In this respect, it is interesting to remember that the meaning of the Egyptian name of king Kamose (17<sup>th</sup> dynasty) was “generated by a bull”. Indeed, although no sufficient archaeological proofs are available until now, according to some ancient traditions, it is probable that Kamose spent a great part of his life in Upper Nubia (circa 1550 B.C). This could be the reason why the kings of Kush always claimed to be the heirs of ancient Egyptian rulers (the pharaohs of the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty issued from queen Ahmose-Nefertari the black daughter of Kamose with a Kushite princess).

### 9.3. The “Heracles’ Pillars” in ancient authors

According to Arrian in his book *Anabasis*, Alexander the Great said : “Our ships will sail round from the Persian Gulf to Libya as far as the Pillars of Hercules, then all Libya *to the eastward* will soon be ours”. Alexander the Macedonian never went to Gibraltar, for sure !

And Pliny the Elder H.N. VI, 29 said : “Farther than Adulis (Eritrea), at ten days of navigation, is the harbour of Isis where Troglodytes bring the myrrh... The harbour itself contains two islands named the Doors, one of which contains columns of stone with texts in unknown characters.”

Moreover Strabo (Book XVI, 4, 5) said : “The straits at Ethiopia, here is a pillar of Sesostris the Egyptian, on which is inscribed in hieroglyphics, an account of his passage.” And it appears that this legendary Sesostris is the same person as the Egyptian Heracles (Diodorus, Book I, 24) .

And Proclus said in his “Commentary on Timaeus” (from Marcellus, who wrote a history of Ethiopian affairs) : “There were seven islands in the Atlantic Sea, sacred to Persephone, and also three others of enormous size, one of which was sacred to Pluto, another to Ammun, and another one between them to Poseidon, the extent of which was a thousand stadia (200 km).”

Samely Strabo said (Book XVI, 4, 4) : “The straits at Deire are contracted to the width of 60 stadia (12 km); not indeed that these are now called the Straits, for ships proceed to a further distance, and find a passage of about 200 stadia (40 km) between the two continents. Six islands contiguous to one another leave a very narrow passage through them for vessels, by filling up the interval between the continents. Through these, goods are transported from one continent to the other on rafts ; it is this passage which is called the Straits.” And this is consistent with Plato saying that the sea named Pontos could be easily crossed (Timaeus, 25) .

In my mind, the seven islands of Proclus consacred to Persephone are those of the Sawabi archipelago in the Straits of Bab el Mandeb. Strabo mentioned only six islands because one of the seven ones was bound to the coast forming Ras Syan (Fig. 12). And Persephone is the Greek translation for Isis (the spouse of Osiris king of hell).

As for the three big islands, the one devoted to Pluto-Osiris is Egypt, the one devoted to Amun (or Hemen) is Arabia, the one between them devoted to Poseidon is the Island of Meroe (East of Africa), considering that ancient geographers named “islands” all states delimited by rivers as well as by sea.



Figure 12 : The Sawabi Islands in Bab el Mandeb



Figure 13 : The big rockslide in Djebel Barkal

And Joao de Castro, a Portuguese sailor of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century wrote (Kammerer, 1936) : "On this distance there are six islets fairly large and high. The mouths of the straits seen from outside cause to sailors a real terror. Because the passage seems defended and blocked. However there are some channels, narrow but deep, through it is possible to find his way without risk." This could be an explanation of why Plato said that this area was impassable to navigation.

## 10. THE FINAL CATAclysm

In Djebel Barkal a rockslide caused by an earthquake covered the entrance of the Mut temple (Fig. 13). This temple (B300) was built by king Taharqa in the 7th century B.C. If relics of Egyptian and Greek mercenaries with their weapons would be found buried under the blocks, it would be possible to date the event of 591 B.C, just after the triumphal campaign of Psametik II against Kush.

And according to Diodorus (III, 55, 3) "The marsh Tritonis (Triton = the Nile) disappeared in the course of an earthquake, when its parts lying towards the ocean were devastated". So an earthquake (the same one as in Napata ?) could have broken the ramparts and dams in Meroe allowing the city to be drowned (for some time) by the Nile and its tributaries. As so much that traces of destructions by flooding were found south east of the city. This earthquake could be the final catastrophe described by Plato.

Consequently the area impassable to navigation described by Plato (*Timaeus* 25) could not be the remains of a sunken island, but rather the zone of the Sawabi archipelago in the Straits of Bab el Mandeb considered for a long time as an impassable obstacle by ancient Red Sea sailors.

## 11. CONCLUSIONS

### 11.1. Consistency of Meroe with Plato's report

The Island of Meroe (*atlantida nesos* of Plato) had the shape of a rectangular shield and was almost wholly encircled by three large rivers. The royal city (*basileia*) was built on separated islands encircled by a channel. The royal enclosure (*acropolis*) had twin palaces and was delimited by a strong wall. It also included royal baths built on an ancient water sanctuary. A rampart and dikes protected the city against the Nile floods. A great Amun (Poseidon) temple was backed to the royal enclosure. The city had two periods :

- the Napatan period before the 6th century corresponding to the myth of foundation of Meroe by Poseidon-Amun ;
- the royal residence period during the Meroitic kingdom from the late 6th century B.C. to the 4th century A.D. This era is considered to be the floruit of the city which was finally conquered by Ezana, an Ethiopian (Abyssinian) ruler of Axum.

A major flood could have temporarily drowned the city after an earthquake had destroyed the ramparts and dikes in 591 B.C.

### 11.2. The historical frame of Plato's report

Solon was in Sais just thirty years after Amasis have triumphed against Kush with the help of Greeks mercenaries. He was told this story glorifying Athenians because pharaoh Amasis hoped to obtain again the military help of Greeks to face the Persians' threat on Egypt. When Plato wrote his report on the *atlantida nesos* nearly two centuries and half later, he took a great part of his information from the same author used later by Strabo to describe the "Island of Meroe".

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### *Chronology of Ancient Authors*

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- Solon 638 – 558 B.C. in Egypt circa 560 B.C.
  - Hecataeus of Miletus 550 - 480 B.C.
  - Herodotus 482 - 425 B.C.
  - Plato 427 – 348 B.C.
  - Diodorus Siculus 90 - 30 B.C.
  - Strabo 57 B.C. – 25 A.D.
  - Pliny the Elder 23 – 79 A.D.
  - Flavius Josephus 37 – 100 A.D.
  - Claudius Ptolemy 83 – 161 A.D.
  - Arrian c.95-c.175 A.D.
  - Proclus 412 – 485 A.D.
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