

GMF 26: The Earthquake, Atlas and the Atlas Mountains

Over four months ago, on Sept. 8, 2023, a major earthquake struck Morocco, causing nearly 3000 deaths and bringing down many buildings in Marrakesh and elsewhere. By one estimate it caused a reduction of 8% of the country's GDP. It was and remains a devastating tragedy.

Morocco is rather prone to earthquakes, though this was the largest in the area since 1900, over 120 years ago. The epicenter was located in the Atlas mountains, which is home to a number of faults along what is known as the African Plate, and the Atlas mountains were formed through multiple stages where tectonic plates collided and sent the earth soaring upward. It is a lofty mountain range, with its highest peak over 13,000 feet high. Although it is less than half the height of the highest mountain on earth, Mt. Everest (or Chomolungma or Sagarmatha to the local indigenous populations), the Atlas mountains are 4000 feet higher than Mt. Olympus, the highest mountain in Greece and location of the Olympian gods. In other words, for the Greeks and later Romans, it was a towering feature at the edges of the earth.

It's no wonder then, that the Greeks and Romans were fascinated by this mountain range on the edge of the earth and suggested that it was here that the mythical giant Atlas held up the sky. In this episode, we'll discuss the origins of Atlas, his myth, and his association with this specific geographical area. And since we're on something of an metamorphosis kick, we'll return to Ovid yet again. Finally, we'll consider the legacy of Atlas and the echoes still felt in the modern world.

Segment 1

Atlas as a mythical being first shows up in Hesiod's *Theogony*, that impressive genealogical catalog of mythical figures. The *Theogony* starts from creation and moves forward in time, and around the middle of the work we find a discussion of the sons of the Titan Iapetos. Iapetos is

nothing more than a cipher, hardly more than a name, but you may have heard of his four sons: Prometheus, perhaps the most famous, Epimetheus, the obscure Menoitios, and of course the subject of our episode, Atlas. At any rate, Hesiod doesn't give us a lot to go on, but he calls Atlas "a son of invincible spirit," who "by harsh necessity supports the broad sky on his head and unwearied limbs at the end of the earth, near the clear-voiced Hesperides—this is the doom decreed for him by Zeus the counselor." So even at this early period—perhaps around 700 BC, Atlas was associated with the far ends of the earth.

Homer's *Odyssey*, which is probably a bit later than Hesiod, also mentions Atlas, here as the father of the goddess Calypso—the one who keeps Odysseus amused on her island for seven years. Homer describes Atlas standing in the sea and holding the pillars that keep earth and heaven apart; the "sea" may be a reference to the Ocean, which according to the Greeks was a giant river that ran around the occupied world. Although it's not clear exactly where Atlas is supposed to be, the Hesperides mentioned by Hesiod may give us a clue etymologically. The word *hesperos* is the Greek word for evening, and thus "west" because it's where the sun sets. It's related to the word "Vespers" or "evening prayers" in the Catholic Church, which comes from a related Latin word. Anyways, the location in the west is confirmed in a 5th-century BC tragedy of unknown authorship, the *Prometheus Bound*, where the lead character, Prometheus, informs us that his brother "stands in the west, propping up the column of heaven and earth on his shoulders." No one tells us explicitly *why* Atlas has suffered such a heavy punishment, but it's pretty clear from the context in Hesiod and the *Prometheus Bound* that Atlas had opposed Zeus as the king of the gods and suffered for it. Although the etymology of the name Atlas, or *a* + *tlas*, is contested, it seems likely that the *tla* part of the word is related to the Indo-European word "to bear or carry or endure."

Looking at these early texts, we see that Atlas had human features, was powerful enough and apparently big enough to carry the weight of the heavens on his shoulders, and he was located out there in the far western part of the world. It is, then, only natural that the Greeks and later Romans began to associate this area with Atlas. In fact, this is why the Ocean that sits to the far west of Greece was already by the 6th c. BC, some 2600 years ago, was called the Atlantic Sea, or the Sea of Atlas. The fifth-century BC historian Herodotus used the term to describe the waters past the pillars of Heracles, or as we call it today, the strait at the rocks of Gibraltar—that is, the current Atlantic Ocean. And it’s why the famous lost “island” out beyond those pillars was also called “Atlantis,” the island of Atlas.

At any rate, he is human enough for Heracles to need his help for one of his twelve labors, to retrieve the apples of the Hesperides—a mythical story that is known as early as the 6th century BC. The Hesperides, you may remember, were the goddesses of the evening and likewise located to the west, and they guarded the golden apples that were originally Zeus’ wedding gift to Hera. Heracles was famous for having to travel the whole world to accomplish his last six labors, and this one was no different. But as it happens, Heracles had no idea *where* the Hesperides were or how to get the apples, so he was forced to ask Atlas to go and get them for him. But how? Atlas was holding up the heavens, so he told Heracles that he’d have to hold up the sky while he went to get them. Heracles did, and Atlas went off to retrieve the apples. When Atlas returned, he told Heracles the equivalent of “tough luck, dude” and was about to take off to deliver them to Eurystheus himself, when Heracles apparently asked Atlas to hold the heavens for a sec while he

got a pad for his head and shoulders. For some...*dumb* reason, this trick worked, and Atlas took over for a second, which turned into, well, *forever* when Heracles took the apples and ran.

Segment 2

Some of you might be wondering how a mere hero like Heracles was able to hold up the heavens. Well, apparently, it was not *all* by himself. On a famous sculpture on the Temple to Zeus in Olympia, the goddess Athena helps Heracles as Atlas comes back with the apples. Visit our dedicated website, manto-myth.org/gmf, to see a picture of what remains of the sculpture and other cool statues depicting this labor of Heracles.

But back to Atlas himself. Elsewhere, he is not a mythical giant with human features, but rather simply the mountain itself. In fact, the 5th-century Greek historian Herodotus *only* knows Atlas as the mountain at the southwestern edge of the world:

Reading 26A

Near to this salt hill is a mountain called Atlas, whose shape is slender and conical; and it is said to be so high that its heights cannot be seen, for clouds are always on them winter and summer. The people of the country call it the pillar of heaven. [4] These men get their name, which is Atlantes, from this mountain. It is said that they eat no living creature, and see no dreams in their sleep. I know and can tell the names of all the peoples that live on the ridge as far as the **Atlantes**, but no farther than that. But I know this, that the ridge reaches as far as the Pillars of Heracles and beyond them. [Aht-LAN-tays]

Herodotus' language indicates that he had never seen the mountain himself but he identifies the mountain as the "pillar of heaven," that is, using the same language as poets had for the mythical giant. This is probably a version of the ancient interpretative strategy called "rationalization," whereby the fantastical elements of a myth are removed in order to create a version that is historically plausible. Here, Herodotus replaces the stories about a humanlike figure holding up the heavens with the mountain itself—and the mountain's height makes it at least plausible that it indeed was holding up the heavens on its lofty peak.

Several hundred years later, in the Roman imperial period, knowledge about the mountain itself was furthered by expeditions by Roman generals and others to the mountain and in some cases beyond. Pliny the Elder, who wrote a massive encyclopedia that contains a geographical account of the world, tells us that, even with more knowledge, the mountain remains a source of fantastical stories: (*NH* 5.6–7)

Reading 26B

...Mount Atlas, which is the subject of much the most marvellous stories of all the mountains in Africa. It is reported to rise into the sky out of the middle of the sands, a rugged eminence covered with crags on the side facing towards the coast of the Ocean to which it has given its name, but shaded by dense woods and watered by gushing springs on the side facing Africa, where fruits of all kinds spring up of their own accord with such luxuriance that pleasure never lacks satisfaction. [7] It is said that in the daytime none of its inhabitants are seen, and that all is silent with a terrifying silence like that of the desert, so that a speechless awe creeps into the hearts of those who approach it, and

also a dread of the peak that soars above the clouds and reaches the neighborhood of the moon's orb; also that at night this peak flashes with frequent fires and swarms with the wanton gambols of Goat-Pans and Satyrs, and echoes with the music of flutes and pipes and the sound of drums and cymbals. These stories have been published by celebrated authors, in addition to the labors performed in this region by Heracles and Perseus.

As with many places that sit on the edges of the known world, Mount Atlas is the subject of all sorts of fabulous, even magical stories: there is an eerie silence about the mountain that soars from the sands, above the clouds, and up toward the moon. Light dances on its peak; strange, wild creatures haunt the area and ecstatic music of wild revelry resounds. Yes, strange things indeed happen at the ends of the earth.

Segment 3

Pliny ends his account by referencing the myths of Heracles and Perseus that are associated with Atlas. We've already discussed the myth involving Heracles earlier, but we've been saving the second, that of Perseus, until now. That's because it is only in this myth of Perseus that we find a *humanlike* Atlas changed into the *mountain* of the same name.

The only full account of the metamorphosis of Atlas is found in the brilliant poet Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, whom we've been dealing with extensively over the past few episodes. Ovid's account of Atlas is inventive and is an original take on the Atlas myth. In Ovid, Atlas is of superhuman size, in Ovid's words "outripping all men with his huge body." He was a king in of the distant west, who he received the panting, tired horses of the sun, and his claim to fame was

twofold: his thousands of flocks and herds that he pastured, and his glorious golden tree that bore golden fruit.

But there's a problem: years ago, Atlas had received a foreboding prophecy from the goddess Themis, who once gave oracles from Mt. Parnassus before Apollo took over that job:

Reading 26C

There will come a time, Atlas, a time when your tree will be robbed of its gold, and the son of Juppiter will claim the fame of this theft.

Worried about this, Atlas fortified his land, building a giant wall around his orchard and put a giant serpent on guard to help him ward off all foreign visitors. If this sounds like the apples of the Hesperides, which was also guarded by a sleepless serpent, then you're right, but note that the golden fruit does not belong to the Hesperides but to Atlas himself. Rather than the fetcher of the golden apples, he's the owner, and he means to keep them for himself.

All of this was in Atlas' mind when Perseus arrived fresh off his successful defeat of the gorgon Medusa. He'd been flying for a whole day—the drops of blood from Medusa's head creating a massive number of serpents when they hit the sands in north Africa—and all Perseus wanted to do was rest for a bit. So when he saw Atlas' realm, he decided to ask for a place to lay his weary head (and, well, Medusa's as well, I suppose). And, of course, Perseus *is* the son of Jupiter and tells Atlas just that, which ought to be a point in his favor. What host, after all, would in their right mind reject a son of the king of the gods? But in this case it backfired. Atlas was fearful of

the prophecy and said, essentially, “no way, buster,” and started to use his physical superiority to drive Perseus off. Perseus begged Atlas to stop, but to no avail—Atlas was just too strong, so Perseus resorted to his old trick. He turned his head and showed Atlas Medusa’s head, turning the shepherd into the mountain that would bear his name. As Ovid tells it,

Reading 26D

“Well now, since you show me so little kindness, accept a gift” and turning away himself, he held out Medusa’s foul head, on his left-hand side. Atlas became a mountain, as huge as he himself had been. Now his hair and beard were changed into trees, his shoulders and hands into ridges. What had been his head before was the crest on the mountain summit. His bones became stones. Then he grew to an immense height in every direction (so you gods determined) and the whole sky, with its many stars, rested on him.

So, it turns out, Atlas was not of such massive size already to support the heavens, but the gods had to make Atlas grow so as to be the pillar upon which the stars and sky rest. Tragically, the prophecy that a son of Jupiter was going to rob Atlas of his golden apples was actually in reference to *Heracles*, another son of Jupiter, and not Perseus. With Atlas now an immovable part of the landscape, Heracles can presumably just waltz in and get the apples for himself—as is told in some versions of the myth where he does not need Atlas’ help.

Segment 4

As it happens, Ovid is not the first ancient author to give this version of this story. By chance, we find in a late, 12th century commentary to a very difficult ancient poem a very interesting debate

about Atlas. The commentator writes that Atlas was a Libyan mathematician, geographer, and astronomer who climbed up a mountain to better observe the stars, only to fall into the sea below, thus giving both his name. This might sound ludicrous, but one of the strategies of rationalizers of myth was to claim that people of olden times made important advances in knowledge and were therefore mythologized into great heroes. In fact, we have a neat report that Heracles meeting with Atlas was actually about the transfer of knowledge of astronomy. A fourth century mythographer named Herodorus writes, “Heracles, who had become a seer and philosopher, received from the barbarian Atlas the Phrygian the pillars of the cosmos, meaning that he received the knowledge of heavenly phenomena through instruction.” At any rate, the commentator goes on to report that the poet Polyidos, probably from the 4th century BC, made Atlas a shepherd who was turned to stone when he pestered Perseus with too many questions and would not let him pass through his land. This is so similar to Ovid’s version that Ovid must have known the story, making a few final adjustments to fit his own poetic needs.

I cannot help but bring in another rationalized version of the myth, one found both in a Greek text from the first century AD and in a late Latin commentary to Vergil’s *Aeneid* that dates to around 400 AD. It too involves sheep and a shepherd, and is a play on the fact that the Greek words for sheep and apples—*mēla*—sound the same.

Ok, here’s the gist of it. The Hesperides are the daughters of Atlas, and according to the myth, they had a garden with golden apples that were protected by a giant serpent, but Heracles was able to kill the dragon and take the apples—note that there is no mention of Atlas’ help here. However, we are told that this story is just a mythologized version of a normal set of

circumstances. The truth is that the Hesperides were just wealthy women who owned a lot of flocks, and the sheep's wool was of a reddish-gold color. In charge of the sheep was a shepherd named *Dracon*, which of course, like the Slytherin Draco Malfoy in Harry Potter, means "serpent." But here he is not a serpent, just a guy named "Serpent." Heracles came to these pastures, killed *Dracon*, and took the *mēla*, that is the sheep, but because of the goldish color of the sheep, people started saying that Heracles took golden *mēla*, and by a mistake in language, people thought that meant golden apples. This is yet another attempt to downplay the fantastic version of the mythical stories in favor of a more pedestrian, dare I say realistic version of events. It also, like most rationalizing versions of myths, explains that myths themselves are just a distortion based on the misunderstanding of events or language. *Dracon* is not a real serpent, just a guy named "Snake." So when people heard *mēla*, they thought "apples," not "sheep."

Atlas' importance did not end in antiquity. He remained an image or idea that still resonates today. Despite the decisive turn to GPS navigation and digital maps, many of you may nonetheless own an atlas, which is a collection of maps. It's hard to overstate how important these collections of maps were to the pre-GPS period. Ok, now, young listeners, don't judge me. I know I'm old, but I'll say this: if you have not learned how to navigate by physical map, you might want to practice that. What happens when you lose service or the battery of your phone runs out? My advice is that every car should have a road Atlas as a backup, and just looking at maps gives you a very different and broader sense of geography. In fact, the GPS way of looking at the world as a series of points takes us *back* to a time and is, I would argue, something of a regression to a hodological approach to space.

Ok, enough of my soapbox screed. But why is a collection of maps called an Atlas? Well, it goes back about 425 years, when a map-maker named Gerardus Mercator created a massive book that included historical, astronomical and geographical studies with over a hundred plates, including a lot of maps. The title on the frontispiece was *Atlas sive Cosmographicae meditationes de fabrica mundi et fabricati figura*, or for those without Latin “Atlas, or Cosmographical Reflections on the Creation of the World and and Shape of that Creation.” This title is accompanied by a large bearded figure with two globes, one in his hands and another at his feet. This is, of course, derived from the ancient idea that Atlas was an astronomer and geographer. but this image and title set the course for over 400 years of collections bearing the name Atlas. Eventually, the image disappeared but the name remained. You may also have heard of the name “Mercator,” since he was one of the earliest geographers to create a specific projection of the spherical earth onto a two-dimensional surface, the so-called Mercator Projection. For those listeners who want to see images of the early Atlases, as well as other images of Atlas, take a look at our website, manto-myth.org/gmf.

Wrap Up

Well, it’s about time to wrap up this episode, but let’s consider one more way in which Atlas has influenced the modern world. It has to do with bodybuilding, and it starts with a young immigrant from Italy named Angelo Siciliano, a scrawny kid from southern Italy who settled in Brooklyn. Constantly bullied by bigger kids, one day he was walking by statues of Zeus and Heracles at the Brooklyn Museum, where he got an idea: I want to look like *that!* So, he started a program of strength training and worked tirelessly to build his body to counter the constant bullying. Using nothing more than his body weight, Angelo got so muscular through isometric training that other kids started calling him “Atlas” after a statue of the god on top of Curley’s

Atlas Hotel in Queens, a New York institution. And the name stuck, as did his more Americanized first name, Charles. After Charles Atlas emerged from his skinny cocoon into a beefy butterfly, he did several odd jobs, including steady work in leatherworking until he was “discovered” by the artist and wealthy socialite Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney—the Vanderbilts and Whitneys were big deals in the Northeast. When Vanderbilt Whitney asked him to disrobe and pose for her, she apparently said, “He’s a knockout.” And soon, Atlas was posing constantly for camera and artists. But his claim to fame was the insanely successful mail-order exercise business that he would create some years later with his partner Charles Roman, selling his exercise routine “Dynamic Tension.” We don’t have enough time to cover Atlas’ incredible life and legacy, which helped create the craze of physical health and bodybuilding, but we do provide some links to articles on his life on our website.

[Music]

We’ve come to the end of this episode, but there are people to thank. First, I’d like to thank our voice actor, Raina Burke, for bringing a living voice to the ancient texts we’ve chosen for our program on Atlas. Raina is a double major in Environmental Conservation and Sustainability as well as in Humanities. I’d also like to thank Beatrice Mattison, a Classics major, who has provided us with another piece of original art based on the figure of Atlas—we hope you enjoy it! Finally, we’d like to thank Jared Sims—that’s Sims with one em—who has generously allowed us use of his fine jazz piece, Brooklyn Tea for our theme music—serendipitously the same Brooklyn where Charles Atlas grew up. Well, that’s it for another episode of the Greek Myth Files. See you next time!