Debt has been the common burden of the ages, and yet the whole structure of our modern economic world is built on the shaky foundation of Bills Payable and Bills Receivable. Long ago, interest ate up its own principal, and we terest on our own are currently living on the inunliquidated debts.

Solon, greatest statesman of the Greek world, was handed this age-old problem when, about 595 B.C., he was summoned to the leadership of the State with the title, Archon. He was given unlimited powers to reform the economic and constitutional systems of the Athenians. His first move was to attack the old Attic law of debt which he believed lay at the source of the public distress.

In the time of Solon, the Greek countryside was littered with roughly hewn stone markers. Originally these were boundary stones fixing the property lines of the lands of various citizens. As time had passed, it had become the custom to carve into these stones the records of mortgage contracts affecting the property which they bounded. Single stones became insufficient after a time, and eventually the added monuments to debt interfered with the plowing of the fields.

Solon, investigating the tragedy of the mortgage monument, made several interesting discoveries that were to change the course of human economics. When poor farmers mortgaged their lands to rich families on neighboring estates, and the debts were not paid, the wealthy landowners moved their boundary stones to include the encumbered property, and the previous proprietors became tenants. These tenants were obliged to pay one-sixth of their products for the privilege of working the soil; and if they failed their persons were attached and they became slaves. This was the Attic law which Solon abolished, the law which permitted loans on the security of the debtor's person.

When Solon restored the freedom of all who had been enslaved for debt, the reform was highly acceptable of course to the poorer classes; but it found little favor with the landowners. They immediately set to work in a conspiracy to discredit Solon and force him out of office. Thus, back in very olden days, when life was very simple, the basic problems which harassed the State and burdened the legislators stemmed from the persisting fallacies of human nature.

In further effort to bring some semblance of order out of the Athenian chaos, Solon also attempted a reorganization of social classes, giving political existence to large groups never before represented in government. He divided the citizenry into four groups reminiscent of old Brahman castes. He then readjusted taxation so that the poorer classes all paid equally an approximate 5 percent of their income. Equalizing the tax burden according to individual means paved the way for an equality of representation in the governing body. All citizens who paid taxes were entitled to be heard in matters of the common good, and were privileged to elect magistrates. These steps marked the beginning of the democracy of the ancient Greeks.

But the greatest of all of the reforms of Solon took place in the courts of justice. Selection of juries was by lot, with all citizens participating, even the poorest; and these juries were upheld over the pressures of established privileged groups.

One of the most curious of Solon's regulations throws light on the difficulties of his time. He forbade that a bride should bring to the house of her husband more than three changes of garment and 'like personal furniture.' He also ordained that each citizen must stand ready to show at any time to properly authorized persons how he obtained his living. Any citizen failing to do this would lose his franchise.

The drastic changes of Solon made him so many enemies that after a few years he felt he had to relinquish the burden of leadership of the State to regain his honor. Those who hated and feared him, as Archon, promptly renewed their love after he left public office and no longer threatened their ambitions. His term as Archon brought to Solon the realization of his own inadequacy; and he visited Egypt in search of a larger wisdom. He was received with kindness and every mark of respect by the priests at Sais who served the shrine of the Goddess Isis. To these wise men he told the story of his effort to enlighten the Greeks,
and correct the evils in their laws. The High Priest of Sais is reported to have said, "Alas, you Greeks, you are but children; for you know not the wisdom of the gods."

One night the priests of Sais led Solon through the long dark pasageways of the temple. They descended stone stairs rutted with age and lighted only by flaming torches, came at length to subterranean chambers hewn from the living rock. Through these chambers flowed a river. The priests said that this river was the sacred Nile that flowed from Egypt through the underworld to water the fields of the immortals. On the bank of the underground stream a small black boat was waiting, rowed by men who were blind.

Accompanied by the High Priest and the torch bearers, Solon was rowed out over the dark waters. The boat stopped on the shores of a tiny island far under ground. The light from the torches fell on two tall columns that glistened; they appeared to be made of some strange metal, covered with curious writing in an unknown language.

The High Priest, pointing his golden rod at the pillars, explained their mystery to the astonished Solon. These columns, he said, were placed on the island beneath the ground thousands of years ago by a lost people which had vanished forever from the earth. The pillars were of an unknown metal which neither rusted nor deteriorated with age.

He continued: Once long ago there existed on the earth a vast empire, the power of which extended to every corner of the world, and great fleets of merchant ships sailed the seven seas and brought their wealth to its fabulous city of the Golden Gate. Here there were schools for the study of the mysteries of Nature; towers for the examination of the stars; mines beneath the earth from which the precious metals were brought forth in abundance. This empire was ruled over by seven kings, who were the descendents of Neptune, God of the Seas.

Then came the fatal day when the seven kings of the Islands of the West in disobedience to the laws of the gods resolved to conquer the whole earth. And thus it was that war came into being, for before that time there had been no strife among men. And the seven kings led an army against the ancient Greeks and they invaded all of Europe, coming in great ships from the west. This, Solon was told, occurred about 9000 years before the seige of Troy.

The gods were angry because the seven kings had made war. They caused the earth to be shaken and the great Islands of the West vanished into the sea. In a single night, sixty million human beings perished because they had disobeyed the laws of heaven. In time even the name of the Atlantic Empire was forgotten; for it must ever be so that those who disobey the gods shall vanish from the memory of mankind, regardless of their wealth or power.

"From these ancient columns" said the High Priest, "we have read the laws that were given in olden times for the government of nations. These laws are not made by men but are the will of Eternal Nature. Upon these laws enduring States must be built. To depart from these laws is to die. So perished the nations of the elder world."

When Solon returned to Greece it was his intention to take the story of the Atlantic Empire and develop it into a great epic poem; but the infirmity of years and the responsibilities of the State interfered. Instead, Solon told the story in the fullest detail to his close friend, Dropis, who in turn recited it to his son, Critias. In his 90th year, Critias communicated the narrative to his grandson of the same name who later became a disciple of Socrates. It is in this way that the story of the lost Atlantis came finally to be incorporated in the Platonic dialogues as part of a conversation between the younger Critias and his master Socrates.

The dialogue itself was named the Critias.
A description of the lost Atlantis was written by Plato; it introduces the league formed by the ten benevolent kings who ruled over the lesser nations and the three great continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa; and who bound themselves by oath to obey the divine laws of enduring empire. This was the philosophic democracy, with all men having the right to become wise through self-discipline and self-improvement, thus achieving the only aristocracy recognized by Natural Law. The Atlantis story continues to the later decision of the kings to use their united power to enslave all the peoples of the earth, and the consequent destruction of Atlantis by earthquake and fire. Interpreted politically, it is the story of the breaking up of the ideal pattern of government.

The destruction of Atlantis, as described by Plato in the Critias, can be interpreted as a political fable. The tradition of the Lost Empire as descended from Solon was enlarged and embellished according to the formulas of the Orphic theology; but it does not follow necessarily that Plato intended to disparage the idea that a lost continent had actually existed west of Europe. Plato was a philosopher; he saw in the account of the fall of Atlantis an admirable opportunity to summarize his convictions concerning government and politics.

The Critias first describes the blessed state of the Atlantean people under the benevolent rulership of ten kings who were bound together in a league. These kings were monarchs over seven islands and three great continents. From the fable we can infer that the ten rulers of the Atlantic league were philosopher kings, endowed with all virtues and wise guardians of the public good. These kings obeyed the laws of the divine father of their house, Poseidon, god of the seas.

In the capital city of Atlantis stood the temple of Poseidon, and in it a golden figure of the god. In this shrine also stood a column of precious substance inscribed with the laws of enduring empire. The ten kings took their oath together to obey these laws, and they chose one of their number, usually of the family of Atlas, to be the chief of their league.

It was written on the column of the law that the ten kings of Atlantis should not take up arms against each other, for any reason. If one of them should break this law the other nine were to unite against him to preserve the peace.

In all matters concerning the public good the ten kings were to deliberate together, and each should be mindful of the just needs of the others; for they were the members of one body and regents over the lands of a blessed god.

The kings had not the power of life or death over any of their subjects except with the consent of the majority of the ten; and each was responsible to the whole league for his conduct in the administration of his own State.

In this way Plato describes the government of the Golden Age, in which men live on earth according to the laws of heaven.

By the three great continents of Atlantis are to be understood, Europe, Asia, and Africa; and by the seven islands, all the lesser peoples of the earth. The league of the ten kings is the cooperative commonwealth of mankind, the natural and proper form of human government. The Atlantis, therefore, is the archetype or the pattern of right government, which existed in ancient days but was destroyed by the selfishness and ignorance of men.

Plato, it must be remembered, was a monarchist by philosophic conviction, but his ideal king was the wise man perfect in the virtues and the natural ruler of those less informed than himself. This king was the father of his people, impersonal and unselfish, dedicated to the public good, a servant of both the gods and his fellow men. This king was descended of a divine race; that is, he belonged to the Order of the Illumined; for those who come to a state of wisdom then belong to the family of the heroes--perfected human beings.

Plato's monarchy was therefore a philosophic democracy; for all men had the right to become wise through self-discipline and self-improvement. One who achieved this state was by virtue of his own action a superior man, and this superiority was the only aristocracy recognized by Natural Law.

Competition is natural to the ignorant; and cooperation is natural to the wise. Obeying the pattern established by the gods, the divine kings bound themselves into the common league to obey its laws, preserve the peace, and punish any whose ambition might impel them to tyranny or conquest.

Here then, is a pattern of world government to insure the prosperity of all peoples and activate the preservation of the peace.
Plato describes at some length the prosperity of the Atlantic Isles under this benevolent rulership. The citizens were happy, and poverty was unknown. A world trade was established, and the ships of the Atlantean marine traveled the seven seas, bringing rich treasures to the motherland. There was little crime; the arts flourished; and the sciences were cultivated in great universities. Men had no enemies, and war was unknown.

The god Poseidon guarded the destinies of his domains and favored the Atlantic Empire with a good climate and fertile soil.

Men followed the occupations which they preferred and lived a communal existence, together sharing the fruits of their labors. It was Plato's conviction that the human being was not created merely to engage in barter and exchange, but rather to perfect himself as the noblest of the animals, endowed with reason and the natural ruler of the material world.

The Critias then describes the gradual change that came about in the course of the ages. In the beginning the Atlanteans saw clearly that their wealth and prosperity increased as a result of friendship. But gradually the divine portion of their consciousness began to fade away in them; their souls became diluted with a mortal admixture and human nature gained ascendancy. They became unseemly and lost those spiritual virtues which were the fairest of their precious gifts.

It is the story of how man departed from the perfect pattern of his conduct, and in the end denied the very truths which were the foundations of his strength. With the loss of his spiritual perception, material ambitions increased, and the desire for conquest was born. Men yearned after that which they had not earned, and gazed with covetous eyes upon the goods of others.

The rulers of the State were corrupted by the common evil; the ten kings were no longer friends; they no longer conferred together in the temple of Poseidon to decide all matters under the common oath. Thus was the great league dissolved by selfishness and ambition. It was then that war came into being, and with it tyranny and oppression, and despotism and the exploitation of peoples.

At last the kings of Atlantis decided to use their common power to enslave all the peoples of the earth. They gathered a vast army and attacked Europe from the sea, even going so far as to besiege the Athenian States. And so they broke the law of the gods; for the twelve deities had so divided the earth that to each race and nation was given its proper part.

Zeus, father of the gods, who carries in his hand the thunderbolts of divine retribution, perceived the evil of the time, and resolved to punish the arrogance of the Atlanteans. But even Olympus is a commonwealth, and the other eleven gods were summoned to the council hall of the immortals.

"When all the gods had assembled in conference, Zeus arose among them and addressed them thus--"... it is with this line that Plato's story of Atlantis ends; and the words of Zeus remain unknown.

But the results of the conference are not left in doubt. Zeus hurled his thunderbolts against the empire of the sea, shaking it with earthquakes and then destroying it by horrible combustion. The only records that remained were in vague traditions and two columns set up under the temple at Sais. The destruction of Atlantis can be interpreted politically as the breaking up of the ideal pattern of government.

So complete was this destruction, that men forgot there is a better way of life, and since have accepted the evils of war and crime and poverty as inevitable. The world lost too all sense of its own unity; each man's hand was thereafter raised against his neighbor. The perfect state disappeared under a deluge of politics; the priests of Poseidon gave way to the priesthood of Mammon.

Plato's political vision was for the restoration of the Empire of the Golden Age. The old ways of the gods must be restored, he was convinced, if human beings are to be preserved from the corruptions which they have brought upon themselves. Plato sought this end when he established his university at Athens--the first school of formal education in history. Here men were taught the great truths of religion, philosophy, science, and politics, to restore to them the vision of the perfect State.

The old Atlantis was gone, dissolved in a sea of human doubts. But the philosophic empire would come again, as a democracy of wise men.

Two thousand years later Lord Bacon re-stated this vision in his New Atlantis.