Mythical Countries

Fabulous and mythical countries have appeared in stories for centuries. Many explorers headed off into the wild to find them, only to then perish. Some of them are based on real places. Most are just the stuff of fantasy.

El Dorado

Legends of lost cities filled with gold go back thousands of years. The city of El Dorado first appeared in stories in the 16th century. Europeans believed that there was a lost city of gold hidden somewhere in the New World of South America. The origins of the story do have a grain of truth. The first Europeans to arrive in Colombia heard of a tribe in the mountains. The tribe showered their new chiefs with gold and jewels. These precious gifts were thrown into a lake to please their gods. Settlers referred to the chief as El Dorado. Eventually, the tribe was conquered by another. Spanish settlers moved into the area and found gold and treasure in the lake. There was so much that they assumed it must come from a city of great wealth somewhere close. Nobody has ever found such a city.

Lost City of Atlantis

The legend of Atlantis stretches all the way back to the Ancient Greeks. The story first appeared 2,300 years ago. It was told by the famous philosopher Plato. Almost all of it is false. He said that a race of people who were half-human and half-god built a new city. It was created on a series of islands in the ocean. He said that it was a paradise filled with treasure and exotic wildlife. Plato said that the island existed 9,000 years before his time. He said that many poets had spoken of it. However, his story is the only one that has ever been discovered. Powerful earthquakes and volcanic eruptions were common back then. There is a chance that great cities might have succumbed to them. It is unlikely that any of them were created by demigods.

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Shangri-La

Shangri-La is actually a very modern legend. It is another story that contains a paradise on Earth. James Hilton described a perfect village deep in the Himalayan mountains in his book 'Lost Horizon'. It was published in 1933. According to the story, all of the wisdom of humankind is stored in the community of Tibetan monks. Several places in Tibet have claimed to be the inspiration for the tale. None have been officially recognised.

Cantre'r Gwaelod

The Lost Land of Wales is an ancient story that was originally called Maes Gwyddno (The Land of Gwyddno). Both myths explain how a stretch of land between Ramsey Island and Bardsey Island, off the coast of Wales, sank beneath the waves. In Maes Gwyddno, the priestess of a fairy well allowed the water to overflow. It flooded the land, and the island sank to the bottom of the sea. The tale of Cantre'r Gwaelod began in the 17th century. In this story, a careless guard left the floodgates of a dam open, and the water flooded the land. The church bells of Cantre'r Gwaelod are said to ring out under the waves in times of danger.

VOCABULARY FOCUS

1. Which words in the first paragraph tells you that the stories might not be real?
2. Find and copy a phrase that tells you that one of the stories might have had a little of bit of truth in it.
3. If somebody is "showered with gold and jewels", what does it mean?
4. Which phrase tells you that the story of Shangri-La isn't ancient?
5. Find a word with a definition closest to "the place a story is based on".

VIPERS QUESTIONS

S Why might the story of Atlantis be partly true?

R Which story was created most recently?

R What does Maes Gwyddno mean?

S Summarise how the story of El Dorado began.

E Which of the stories do you think is most likely to have been based on a real place? Why?

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Answers:

1. Mythical and fantasy
2. A grain of truth
3. They were given lots of them - metaphorically covered in them
4. A very modern legend
5. Inspiration

S: There were lots of volcanic eruptions and earthquakes back then. These could have destroyed or sunk an ancient city.

R: Shangri-La

R: The Land of Gwyddno

S: Spanish settlers heard of a tribe who filled a lake with gold and treasure to please their gods. When the tribe left, the Spanish found the gold and believed it must have come from a wealthy city.

R: Accept any answer that looks at the information given in the text and uses it to give a rational explanation. For example: I think that El Dorado is most likely to have existed because there definitely was a tribe who put gold in the lake. They must have got it from somewhere.

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