

Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Dear colleagues,

On behalf of the Atlantys Research Program and the Scientific Committee of our 1st International Conference, I am pleased and honored to welcome you to the University of Nantes in our Faculty of Humanities. Several of you came a long way to attend this conference and I am very grateful that you decided to show your interest in our program by being with us today. I want to thank you and hope you will enjoy the time spent together as well as your short stay in Nantes. We will try our best to make it as pleasant and profitable as possible.

I would like to say a few words about our program and how it came to be. As a scholar working on the history and philosophy of ancient sciences and their heritage, one of my main fields of interest has been, for quite a few years now, meteorology and cosmological systems, what you may also call ancient physics. I very naturally came across this question : did the ancient Greeks and Romans, and more generally, ancient mediterranean civilizations, believe in something like the End of the World ? Were they afraid of it and how could they express that fear ? Did their myths prophecize such an end ? Did their philosophical or rational explanations or systems predict such an event ? Every reader of Cesar knows that the only fear of the Gauls (or Celts) was that the sky could fall on their heads. As I was also working on the physical explanations given to phenomena such as earthquakes, volcanoes and other major natural catastrophes in the ancient world, I wanted to investigate more closely the way in which natural disasters, which were quite familiar to populations living in the Mediterranean area, could influence their beliefs and representations of what a global destruction of their world could be. Did they believe that Nature or any other cosmic event could cause the end of mankind or the end of life on Earth ? I realized that addressing those questions would require the collective contribution of many fields such as philology, philosophy, history, archaeology, anthropology, geography, theology, and so on. I also understood that this topic was not mere theoretical or speculative research, that it was not a question for those only interested in ancient civilizations and history, since it was deeply related to our contemporary fears about global warming and its consequences, about the destruction of our natural environment due to human activity. Moreover, we keep being reminded from time to time, by all sorts of prophets, that our end is close and about to happen. The last time was the year 2012, when, according to the would-be Mayan calendar, we were supposed to live our last days. All I can say is that we all survived, the same way medieval Europe survived its fear of the Millenium. That is where the idea of ATLANTYS came from.

The name for it was quite easy to find. As you know Nantes is close to the Atlantic coast and used to be a very important harbour. I also had in mind Plato's myth of Atlantis, a story telling us about the end of a world. And the final spelling, with the letter Y, would be a reference to the celtic version of that greek myth, the legend of the old city of YS, city of King Gradlon, which was engulfed by the sea. Some people are still looking for it and its location is supposed to be not far away from here, on the southern seashore of Brittany, in the area known as Cornwall (the French Cornwall).

Then I had to convince colleagues in France and abroad to join me in order to plan a research program. I have to say it was not a difficult task, probably because the End of the World is an

question without limits, a never-ending story. Thanks to the partners who decided to join the project, with the support of my research institute, Centre François Viète, and the University of Nantes, I was able to apply for a financing from the Région Pays de la Loire. Our region indeed has a strong policy of supporting research activities in all areas by granting innovative projects which give us the opportunity to launch new ideas. Atlantys was recognized as a « pari scientifique » for the year 2015 and we were able to build a 3 year program involving partners in France and abroad. I am very grateful for this institutional support and I hope we will prove that our ambition deserved to be trusted.

I would like to add a few personal remarks starting with a true story. A few days ago, I was interviewed by a journalist who wanted to write a story about myself for an institutional Newsletter. She had heard of Atlantys. I proposed we focus on the program itself more than myself but she said she was interested in the person who was directing such a program. She had heard of a certain researcher, in Nantes University, who had gathered other researchers from all fields, in France and elsewhere, and had managed to raise public funding to work on a program dealing with the End of the World. She found the whole idea fascinating. I don't know if she found it disturbing. The fact is that she was interested in getting to know more about the person. Before continuing the story, I want to reassure all of you : you are not here to join my new sect under academic cover and I don't plan my future career as any kind of guru or prophet. I don't think she was suspecting such a scenario but she told me, when we first met, that she really wondered what kind of researcher or scientist I was : was I a new version of the mad or crazy scientist ? Was Doctor Strangelove my role-model ? You all remember the title of this great comedy from Stanley Kubrick : *Dr Strangelove or : How I learned to stop worrying and love the Bomb*. Or maybe she only thought I could be some kind of neurotic guy using academic research as a way to express his own anxieties. I wouldn't say she was disappointed when she met just a normal person but at least I could tell I was not the person she was expecting. I remember we had a very pleasant conversation and talked about a lot of interesting topics, not so much the End of the World, about which I had to confess, I had no truth to tell. The fact is that I usually define myself as a serene spirited and optimistic person.

What is the aim of that story ? Before giving the floor to the other speakers, I would like to make a philosophical point today. As a classicist I am strongly influenced by ancient philosophers. We should not forget that western philosophy was grounded on the Socratic idea that philosophy is about learning how to die, what the Greeks called *meletê thanatou*. We gain wisdom by the very consciousness that we are mortals and every day of our lives has to be a meditation on death. Does such a meditation mean that we spend our lives anxious and worried ? On the contrary, meditating on our mortality allows us to be free from passions, from superstitions and helps us to reach happiness, which is the second main teaching of ancient philosophy. In a much more prosaic way, I would say that immortality or eternity would be a very boring gift. As Marcus Aurelius states, life is a part we have to play the proper way until the very last moment we leave the stage. What matters is not the fact we have to leave the stage – every act or play as an ending – but how we perform while on stage. That is the beauty of it, that we only get one chance to play our best role. We may wish that the same teachings which make individuals happy and serene would apply to the way we see our world. I don't think the world we live in is eternal. I won't make any statement about the whole universe or what could be an afterlife. I just mean that our natural and physical world is

doomed, from its very birth, to come to an end. Scientists tell us how stars die, they tell us how planets have a life of their own. Even though I sincerely think that making our world sustainable by preserving the environment and protecting bio- and cultural diversity is a great challenge, I don't think that sustainability could in any way become synonymous with eternity. As long as we consider ourselves, I don't mean we as individuals but our species, as eternal, there should be no reason why we should worry about what we are doing to our world, besides simple concerns like collective comfort or well-being. As soon as we consider that there will be an end, we reach a level of collective consciousness – sorry for that expression, since I said a few seconds ago I was not a guru – that helps us performing the best way we can.

Before coming to the end of this opening speech I would like to thank all partners and colleagues who made this 1st Conference possible.

I hope we will have a lot of interesting discussions.  
I wish you a very pleasant time.