
Atlantis as Crete or Thera

The idea that Atlantis might be a memory of the fabulous palaces, courts and temples of Minoan Crete was proposed originally in an anonymous letter published by The Times newspaper in 1909 and found later to have been written by an Irish student named K. T. Frost. It was subsequently developed by a number of Mediterranean writers and historians (see reading list) and is today the most academically accepted theory on the origins of the Atlantis legend.

In the opinion of many, Plato constructed his Atlantis account from rumours and stories which circulated the Hellenic world concerning the former existence of the great sea-faring nation which had existed on the island of Crete and in other parts of the Aegean. It has been suggested that the Minoan culture was devastated in the aftermath which accompanied the eruption of Thera and the subsequent tsunamis that would have followed this cataclysmic event in c. 1628, 1450, or 1380 BC, depending on the source consulted. Archaeological evidence shows that ports and cities on Crete, as well as the Minoan town of Akrotiri on Thera itself, were destroyed in the manner alluded to by Plato in his works the *Timaeus* and *Critias*, written c. 350 BC.

As further evidence of this theory, it is proposed that the Minoans' fixation with the cult of the bull reflects Plato's statements regarding the bulls that in the *Critias* are said to have wandered freely in the courts of Atlantis' Temple of Poseidon. Every fifth or sixth year, the princes of the Atlantean islands would come together to swear allegiance to the holy laws. At such times one of these bulls would be sacrificed and its blood allowed to spill on an inscribed pillar made of orichalc, 'mountain copper', perhaps a form of bronze.

It is further considered that Plato's account of the naval war between the Atlantean aggressor and the Athenian nation preserves the memory of Crete's oppression of mainland Greece before the fall of the Minoan culture.

All these are attractive ideas which might help explain certain aspects of Plato's Atlantis account. Yet Plato states clearly that Atlantis lay beyond the Pillars of Hercules - mythical rocks which stood at the entrance to the Atlantic Ocean. Moreover, Plato says that Atlantis was situated in front of an 'opposite continent' reached via a series of 'other' islands by 'voyagers' from his own world. He also places the destruction of Atlantis at a date post 8570 BC in the *Timaeus* and c. 9421 BC in his later work the *Critias*.

Scholars, such as by Greek geologist A. A. Galanopoulos, get around this

dating problem by suggesting that the dates and measurements given in the Timaeus and Critias are wrong. This is due to a mistranslation of the assumed Egyptian texts shown by an old priest in the temple of Sais in the Nile Delta to Solon, whom Plato asserts learnt of the story of Atlantis following a visit to Egypt in c. 570 BC. In the process, the famous Greek statesman somehow managed to confuse the hieroglyph that denotes the number 100 with the character representing a figurative value of 1000. If this were so, it would change the date implied for the foundation of Athens from 9000 years before Solon's visit to just 900 years, giving a revised date of c. 1470 BC, close to the traditional date of c. 1450 BC for the Thera eruption. Although this might seem like a neat and logical solution to both the problem posed by the very early time-frame suggested for the destruction of Atlantis and the unimaginable dimensions of Atlantis' city and plain outlined in the Critias, this argument is seriously flawed. Those Egyptologists who have taken time to examine the problem assert that no such confusion can have occurred. The hieroglyphs used to denote the numerical values of 100 and 1000 are visually quite different. Solon - or anyone else for that matter - could not have made such a mistake. This is made clear in an important essay on the links between Egypt and Atlantis by J. Gwyn Griffiths, who points out:

If we assume a hieroglyphic form of the prototype, there seems to be very scanty ground for the proposal, since the normal forms for 100 and 1000 are so sharply distinguished.

Furthermore, we know from Plato's final work, *The Laws*, which appeared in c. 347 BC, that he really did intend to mean thousands, as opposed to hundreds, of years, for here he states that Egyptian art goes back 11,000 years. Since Solon does not feature in *The Laws*, we can say that this early time period was not determined from a misreading of Egyptian numerals. These early dates almost certainly derive from Egyptian king-lists, like the Royal Canon of Turin, which speak of divine and semi-divine beings who ruled for many thousands of years before the appearance of the first mortal pharaoh around 3100 BC. It was these mythical reigns that defined the greater antiquity of the Egyptian civilisation, and not those of the dynastic kings.

We also now know that although the Thera eruption devastated the Aegean and caused tsunami waves which wrecked towns as far as the eastern Mediterranean, it did not destroy the Minoan civilisation of Crete. This continued on for several generations after the catastrophe and was superseded by the later Mycenaean peoples from mainland Greece.

For these reasons alone, Plato's Atlantic island could not have been Crete, Thera or any other location in the Aegean. Nor could it have been placed on the Turkish mainland in the time-frame of the Thera eruption as has been proposed by at least two authors (James and Zangger) in recent years.

Reading list

James, Peter, *The Sunken Kingdom: The Atlantis Mystery Solved*, 1995, Pimlico, London, 1996

Luce, J.V., *The End of Atlantis: New Light on an Old Legend*, 1969, Thames and Hudson/Book Club Associates, 1973

Mavor, James W., *Voyage to Atlantis*, Souvenir Press, London, 1969

Galanopoulos, A. G., & E. Bacon, *Atlantis: The truth behind the legend*,

Nelson, London, 1969

Zangger, Eberhard, The Flood from Heaven: Deciphering the Atlantis Legend, Sidgwick & Jackson/Book Club Associates, London, 1992

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