Atlantis in the Mid-Atlantic

A very plausible solution to the Atlantis mystery is that Plato's Atlantic Island was located in the Mid-Atlantic and that the island chain known as the Azores are its surviving remnants. This cluster of nine main islands is located amid a chain of underwater mountains that rise to heights in excess of 9000 metres. They form part of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge which defines the division between tectonic plates, aligned approximately north-south beneath the ocean floor for some 17,600 kilometres. It is the tips of the very highest of these subterranean mountains that protrude from the ocean floor as the principal islands of the Azores, which are themselves endowed with sizeable mountains that soar to a height in excess of 2100 metres.

Perhaps the most important writer to propose that the Azores were remnants of an Atlantean island continent was Ignatius Donnelly, author of the seminal classic Atlantis: The Antediluvian World, first published in 1882. This American congressman set down the foundations for the thousands of books and articles that have been written on the subject of Atlantis over the past 120 years. Although Donnelly's book has seen countless reprints, much of what he had to say about Atlantis being an antediluvial motherland for the diffusion of civilisation on both sides of the Atlantic has since been proved incorrect.

Despite this drawback, Donnelly's original thesis of a central Atlantean landmass has been perpetuated by a number of well-respected scholars of the Atlantis mystery. They include Russian academic Nikolai Zhirov. In the 1960s he wrote a series of papers on the subject, as well as a definitive book entitled Atlantis - Atlantology: Basic Problems, published in 1970. Like Donnelly, he argued that the former Atlantean landmass lay in the vicinity of the Azores and that, before it sank without trace, it acted as a land-bridge for the migration of flora and fauna between Africa and the Americas.

Christian O'Brien, a retired industrial geologist, archaeologist and historical writer, has also tackled the concept of a mid-Atlantic continent having once existed in the vicinity of the Azores. In his 1997 book The Shining Ones - co-authored with his wife Barbara Joy - he proposed that the Azorean landmass, as he sees it, suffered immense cataclysms and eventually sank into the earth's liquid magma, leaving only the Azores as hard evidence of its former existence. The discovery of six fields of hot springs in the vicinity of the Azores is, he postulates, firm evidence of this hypothesis.

During underwater explorations off the island of São Miguel, the largest

island in the Azores group, in 1971 Christian O'Brien found clear evidence of an underwater river bed filled with water-worn boulders. By applying detailed contouring methods to hydrographic charts, the O'Briens discerned that rivers draining off the southern slopes of São Miguel once converged together in a huge valley, now situated some 64 kilometres out from the present coastline. Other islands in the Azores group have yielded similar hydrographic anomalies, and in one case the O'Briens even traced a series of river valleys which extended for a distance of 288 kilometres before converging together in a much larger river basin.

With a knowledge of ancient river systems, the O'Briens were able to reconstruct a land profile which revealed an Azorean landmass 'about the size and shape of Spain', with high mountain ranges rising over 3655 metres above sea-level, as well as impressive rivers that run 'in curving valley systems'. Furthermore, they have pointed out that:
In the southeast, a feature which we have called 'The Great Plain' covered an area in excess of 3500 square miles [9065 square kilometres], and was watered by a river comparable in size to the River Thames in England. It has, as we shall see, points in common with a great plain described by Plato in his Critias, as being a feature of the island of Atlantis.

The conclusion drawn from these findings is that the Azores once formed part of a much greater landmass which sank beneath the waves and is now situated 'many thousands of feet' below the current sea-level. To obtain a more substantial insight into this fascinating subject, the O'Briens propose that a scientific team take a series of core samples from the proposed sites of their river channels. They confidently predict that these will show not only evidence of ancient river beds, but also of the freshwater flora and fauna which once thrived on the former Azorean landmass.

These are fascinating insights into the protohistory of the Azores group. Yet there are fundamental problems in accepting the theory of a former Azorean landmass. It is now known, for instance, that the volcanic mountains which constitute the Mid-Atlantic Ridge are of relatively recent composition. They are like age-old geological scars on a gaping wound that never properly heals. The north-south orientated tectonic plates produce an upward flow of magma which constantly creates new underwater mountain systems that are unlikely to have formed part of a geological landmass in the manner described.

In addition to these problems, we must also acknowledge that there is now wide-scale acceptance of the so-called continental drift theory, first proposed in 1915 by the German meteorologist Arthur Wegener. In simple terms, this asserts that many millions of years ago the American and African landmasses were joined together, yet ever since they have been slowly moving apart. Just by making paper cutouts of the different continents and slotting them together we can see they fit snugly, suggesting that the continental drift theory is real. Furthermore, the fact that the American and African continents were once joined together explains much of the flora and fauna they share.

More damning is the fact that when the first Portuguese navigators reached the Azorean islands in 1427, they found them devoid not only of

human life but also of any fauna. Even though some evidence has emerged to imply that in the third century BC Carthaginian vessels from North Africa reached Corvo, the westernmost of the Azorean islands, no archaeology has come to light to suggest that the archipelago ever supported an indigenous culture.

Even if the O'Briens' proposals regarding prehistoric river beds, located off the coast of São Miguel, do prove to be correct it seems unlikely that Plato's Atlantis is the memory of a high culture which once thrived on any proposed Azorean landmass. No evidence of an indigenous culture has ever come to light on any of the islands and there is no reason to assume that Plato's Atlantis account alludes to a landmass of this sort. Even though he did state that Atlantis was the size of Libya (North Africa) and Asia combined, it can be argued that this did not relate to the physical size of the island but to the extent of the dominion held by the kings of Atlantis. This can be determined from the Critias, where Plato refers specifically to a much smaller, east-west orientated landmass that cannot have been any more than 600 kilometres in width (see the entry for the Americas). I'm afraid we shall have to look elsewhere for the true location of lost Atlantis.

Reading List

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