

Plato's Atlantis

By Nigel Blair

Discovered at Last: The Centre of Plato's Prehistoric Oceanic Power?

"There was an abundance of wood for carpenters' work, and sufficient maintenance for tame and wild animals. Moreover, there were a great number of elephants in the island, and there was provision for animals of every kind, both for those which live in lakes and marshes and rivers, and also for those which live in mountains and on plains, and therefore for the animal which is the largest and most voracious of them. Also, whatever fragrant things there are in the earth, whether roots, or herbage, or woods., or distilling drops of flowers or fruits, grew and thrived in that land; and again, the cultivated fruit of the earth, both the dry edible fruit and other species of food, which we call by the general name of legumes, and the fruits having a hard rind, affording drinks, and meats, and ointments, and good store of chestnuts and the like, which may be used to play with, and are fruits which spoil with keeping — and the pleasant kinds of dessert which console us after dinner, when we are full and tired of eating - all these that sacred island lying beneath the sun brought forth fair and wondrous in infinite abundance. All these things they received from the earth, and they employed themselves in constructing their temples, and palaces, and harbours, and docks; and they arranged the whole country in the following manner: First of all they bridged over the zones of sea which surrounded the ancient metropolis, and made a passage into and out of the royal palace; and then they began to build the palace in the habitation of the god and of their ancestors. This they continued to ornament in successive generations, every king surpassing the one who came before him to the utmost of his power, until they made the building a marvel to behold for size and for beauty. And, beginning from the sea, they dug a canal three hundred feet in width and one hundred feet in depth, and fifty stadia [c. 9.75 kilometres, 6.1 miles] in length, which they carried through to the outermost zone, making a passage from the sea up to this, which became a harbour, and leaving an opening sufficient to enable the largest vessels to find ingress....."

Critias the Younger, quoted by Plato in the "Critias" or "Atlantic", describing the great island of Atlantis from which the Atlantic Ocean got its name, as it was before it was "swallowed up by the sea" in the catastrophe of c. 9,600 BC. The account according to Critias was obtained by Plato and other classical authors and originally brought back from Egypt in 571 BC by Solon, the famous founding father of Athenian (and, therefore, world) democracy.

Plutarch's "life of Solon", is a work of universally recognized scholarship which includes many details not found in Plato's works, including an account of how Solon heard the story of Atlantis from the Egyptian priest at Sais. Plutarch says Solon worked on the account when he returned to Athens, but, by then an old man, did not complete the final written epic. His incomplete work, however, was passed down to Plato, who based his "Timaeus" and "Critias" upon it.

Plato's Atlantis: The Great Ice Age Azores Centre?

".....We cannot entirely dismiss a massive cataclysmic earthquake in the Atlantic, for it is certainly possible, however remote this might be. And this would focus attention upon the Azores as being, in that case, possibly the remains of an extremely large island or group of islands. For it seems that Plato's report of the Atlantic as the 'real' ocean and his awareness of the limitations of the Mediterranean contain an inescapable element attesting to an Atlantic placement for the heart-of the Atlantis story; nowhere else will do."¹

The Secret Story of Our Planet – Plato's Atlantis

Michael Baigent's book "Ancient Traces: Mysteries in Ancient and Early History" is a particularly valuable survey of unsolved enigmas in ancient times, very widely researched and written in an objective and closely-reasoned way, always aiming at the most commonsense solution to the problem in hand. The Azores, on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, are at present a group of 9 islands, widely-scattered, covering a vast area of the central North Atlantic roughly opposite Portugal, which owns them. Even had there been no Atlantic sea-floor subsidence, they would have been up to 19 in number during the last Ice Age, rather than the present 9. The ones existing now would have been then much larger, mostly double their current size, and two of them (the central ones of Pico and Faial) would have been joined together.

This has been worked out in detail, using the immensely detailed professional Admiralty Charts of the Royal Navy, by Michael Baigent. As Baigent observes on page 158 of his book, it is confirmed by the Pire Re'is Map's depiction of 17 Azores islands, several of them up to 10 times the area of the current biggest island. Pire Re'is is one of the ancient maps on which Hapgood and his university team did such detailed work, recorded in "Maps of the Ancient Sea Kings".

Baigent thinks it very likely that the map accurately outlines the Azores before the / rise in sea-level at the end of the last Ice Age. This is possibly the complete explanation of Plato's Atlantis story, but Baigent also allows that something more dramatic could just possibly have occurred, a "massive cataclysmic earthquake in the Atlantic", much as Plato describes. In support of this he adds that the Azores is a known area of seismic events, with no less than 17 major earthquakes between 1522 and the present day.

This would also be in harmony with Professor Hapgood's own conclusion from his work on the Azores and other sections of the map, reported in his "Maps of the Ancient Sea Kings". When we come to analyze this later, we will see that he regarded it as evidence of major sea-floor subsidence. This was arrived at through a careful and extremely detailed comparison of the Pire Re'is map with a modern map of the Azores.

This showed the large amount that the islands — particularly those three that are on or to the west of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge — had sunk since the ancient map (on which Pire Re'is had been based) was originally drawn. I would add that this is also very good evidence of the subsidence of the Ridge itself.

There is good reason to believe that Baigent's cue here, though from him it is only tentative, is a valid one, and that there was indeed a major subsidence of the mid-Atlantic sea-bed. The evidence suggests that it most probably happened mainly at the end of the last Ice Age, a by-product of the global catastrophe that occurred at that time. Experts like Dr. Otto Muck, Christian and Joy O'Brien, Professor Hapgood and Dr. Nikolai Zhironov give detailed evidence for the subsidence, especially Zhironov whose oceanographical, chemical and geological research is meticulous and comprehensive.

If this did indeed happen, then, there could originally have been a very large island of which the Azores are remnants, and which was Plato's Atlantis. In this case, the original for the Pire Re'is Map would have been made after the planetary catastrophe of c. 9,600 BC had caused enough subsidence and sea-level rise to reduce this big island to an Azores archipelago of 17 islands. But it was clearly made before the full amount of the later subsidences and rises in sea-level — which probably took several thousand years to complete — had reduced it to anything like its present small dimensions.

The Azores during this transitional period were then, clearly, a major island group, if the Pire Re'is cartographer was accurate. Hapgood points out that there is no reason to believe that he — and the original map-makers on which he based his work — were not so. For when he depicts other island

groups he does so remarkably accurately according to our knowledge of how they should have looked at that time.

Just how major a group the "transitional" or "post-Ice Age" Azores would have been only becomes clear when one does some careful calculations from Hapgood's reproduction of the Pire Re'is map. When I set myself this task, an extraordinary picture emerged very rapidly. And it is to this that we must now turn.

A Substantial, Fertile Archipelago: An Efficient State?

It is true that the Azores island-group according to the Pire Re'is Map would have been little larger from east to west than it is today - some 580 kilometres (360 miles) - only slightly greater than the present oceanic breadth of the group (560 kilometres or 348 miles). But it is when we come to consider the size of individual islands that we realize just how formidable they would have been as a group.

The largest, of which the present Flores is but a minute fragment, would have been about 75 by 35 miles, or equal to a very large English county. Two others would have been only slightly smaller than this, while another three would have measured around 40 by 25 miles. A further two were about 25 by 15 miles. We have in effect the equivalent of 8 English counties here in area. I have worked this out as being of the order of 10,400 square miles in area.

Even without these, the remaining 9 "post-Ice Age" Azores islands, although amounting together to perhaps only a quarter of the area of the biggest 8, would have added up to more land area than the entire 9 islands do today (around 900 square miles). The whole of the 17 prehistoric Azores as given in the Pire Re'is Map approximates to around 12,500 square miles. This is comparable to that of southern England.

More significantly, it is almost four times that of Crete (3,217 square miles), which as we know was the centre of an enormous Minoan trading empire prior to about 1,450 BC, and which is (wrongly) thought of by many as a good candidate to have been Atlantis. Needless to say, the Pire Re'is Azores group is also far larger than Attica, the region of east-central Greece which formed the state over which Athens ruled in ancient times, and which according to Plato defeated the Atlanteans single-handedly after all her allies had fallen away.

In those days, states were mostly relatively small by modern standards. With very primitive land transport, the only efficient way of moving large amounts of produce or large numbers of people was by sea. Nearby water was also essential for industrial processes, and even more for hygiene and drainage purposes in an age long before such things as sewers or regular piped water. This gave an enormous advantage to states like Athens with long coastlines, and even greater benefits to islands like Crete.

An archipelago of islands like the Atlantean empire - possibly an alliance of the Ice Age or "post-Ice Age" Azores or Canaries, with other Atlantic islands and adjacent coastal areas; of western Europe and north-west Africa — would have had a still more exceptional advantage. Few of its people could have been much more than 20 miles from the sea, and most people far less. Take into account the further blessings of the sub-tropical position and (for the Azores) the warm Gulfstream current, and one really does have an extraordinarily well-endowed culture with quite unusually fertile land.

The ancient phrases "the Fortunate Isles" and "the Happy Islands" for the western islands in the Atlantic, probably including the Canaries, made this very clear. This is just what Plato described for

Atlantis, calling it for example the "sacred isle beneath the sun", and stressing just how luxuriant was the flora and fauna, including two crops every year.

It was therefore not necessarily sheer size that made countries powerful in ancient times. Rather, it was the degree to which they were able to overcome the problems which dogged other, often larger cultures. These tended to be the perennial ones of disunity, corruption, poor organization and transport, tyranny, poverty, lack of consistent policies, racial and regional strife, factional disputes, and often simply over-extendedness.

One of the most frequent hazards for the ancient powers was the manifest impossibility of maintaining great states or empires, even when they had been conquered. The initial conquest was a process which in itself often presented insurmountable difficulties, so that the state was in practice often indefinitely bogged down in a series of wearisome and ultimately disastrous military campaigns, like ancient Persia, Assyria, Babylon or Carthage.

All these chronic weaknesses were greatly alleviated in small states, like the original state of Athens, where there was not an excess of often hostile territory to maintain, and where the capital city was sufficiently well-established and dominant to control the country easily. This, for example, gave classical Athens the ability to defeat the far larger and numerically more powerful Persian Empire in around 480 BC, and the original Rome - a relatively small but well-organized city near the Italian coast - to defeat vastly more numerous peoples from all directions.

Clearly Atlantis, as described by Plato, was originally of this compact but efficiently-run type, with its core in the great circular city and the rectangular cultivated plain in the centre of the main island.

The Base for a Powerful Civilisation Destroyed by the Melting Ice Caps?

When such a state, however, embarked on a course of action, usually a war of conquest, which over-extended it, weaknesses would rapidly appear. It would soon develop just those structural defects which it had taken advantage of to defeat its originally larger neighbours. Plato's story of the Atlantean War is just such a case.

Atlantis, already ruling a large empire, tried to expand further, and doubtless suffered from the same over-extensions as later occurred with the Persian and Carthaginian empires, and even ultimately Athens and Rome themselves. Hence the small but superbly organized prehistoric proto-Athens was able to defeat the Atlanteans, just as classical Athens later - against all the apparent odds - stood up to the gigantic Persian Empire.

Remember that this "post-Ice Age" or "transitional" epoch dates from before the rise in sea-level, and Atlantic sea-floor subsidence were complete. The global warmings, which as we will see later accompanied two major global upheavals in about 12,000 and 9,500 BC, occurred as we saw astonishingly rapidly, and melted much of the polar ice-caps. The result was a decisive rise in sea-level. This was not, as was thought by experts until very recently, a gradual continuum, but occurred in sudden bursts as great lakes of recently-melted water burst out of their dammed-up areas into the Atlantic.

The greatest of these sea-level rises, as we outlined earlier, was one of about 100 feet in as little as 160 years following the 9,500 BC warming, almost exactly on Plato's date of (literally) 9,571 BC for the submergence of Atlantis. It was temporarily reversed by the re-freezing or mini-Ice Age between 8,730 BC - when the monster freezing Lake Agassiz broke out from Canada into the North Atlantic and

temporarily stopped the "Atlantic conveyor" or warm-water current from the south. As a result, the polar melting took several thousand years to happen fully.

The full extent of the rise in sea-level was likewise delayed. After about 8,000 BC, when the mini-Ice Age had been reversed, the global warming and sea-level rise resumed, and the massive "post-Ice Age" Azores were steadily diminished to their present small dimensions. Only, therefore, several millennia after the original catastrophe did the rising ocean completely reduce what had become the large Azores archipelago to the small islands of today.

Pire Re'is depicts a major island-group, what could have been the base for a powerful civilization. This remains true whether or not there had once been the even larger former base of an enormous Azores Plateau island, destroyed by the original catastrophe of c. 9,600 BC.

Its sphere of influence, if it was the original Atlantis which Plato describes, would have extended to the Atlantean "empire" the boundaries of which he outlines - including many other islands and coastal areas of Europe, Africa and America. This would have given it far larger resources, much as the geographically tiny British Isles became the base for an empire spanning a quarter of the world, and drew great military and economic strength from it.

We can probably never know for certain exactly the prehistoric role or power of the Ice Age and "post-Ice Age" Azores. But one fact remains indisputable. From Hapgood's Pire Re'is Map, we get a substantial group of numerous, closely-packed medium-sized islands - the larger ones estimated by Baigent to be about the size of Cyprus: as we saw about 10 times the size of the largest present Azores island.

This interpretation is consistent with many of the other ancient maps described in Hapgood's "Maps of the Ancient Sea Kings", certain features of which (such as remnant glaciers) place them in the period during and just after the somewhat protracted end of the last Ice Age, roughly between 5,000 and 9,600 BC.

The Straits of Gibraltar: Gateway to Atlantis

" In the end, Atlantis may prove too mysterious and too enigmatic to be placed in any normal Bronze Age setting. Solon's response may have been correct when he found himself driven to make a great epic poem out of the story.....

It appears that we cannot yet know the truth about Atlantis. Nevertheless, the idea that its story along with other elements, perhaps even from across the Atlantic, contains a folk memory of the inundation which occurred at the end of the Ice Age is plausible. This focuses attention upon the sunken lands beyond the Straits of Gibraltar, which we can assume held an active population....."¹

It is when we come to the ancient Pillars of Hercules (Herakles in Greek), the name the Greeks gave to the Straits of Gibraltar, that we really see how accurate Plato's account was. Michael Baigent points out that during the last Ice Age, with the sea-level over 400 feet lower, widespread lands would have existed stretching out at least 30 miles from the present Atlantic coasts of Spain, Portugal and Morocco, creating a minimum of 8,000 square miles of territory in the Gulf of Cadiz and northern Morocco alone. The Straits of Gibraltar, although still existing as straits, would have been far narrower and enormously longer — roughly 60 miles long in fact.

Plato makes it clear in the "Timaeus" that the Straits did in fact exist prior to the Atlantean catastrophe, but said that after the submergence of Atlantis the sea outside the Straits, where the

island had been, was impassable because of mud left by it as it sank. An explanation of this might be that the catastrophe was caused by the impact of a great asteroid or comet fragment in the ocean, or even perhaps the explosion of a volcano. Vast amounts of lava made buoyant by being shot through with volcanic gases would have been ejected into the atmosphere, thence coming down and floating on the surface of the sea. This would have been followed rapidly by great sheets of mud and dust, creating precisely Plato's "sea of mud". The same thing happened after the explosion of Krakatoa, west of Java in 1883.

However, Michael Baigent, in "Ancient Traces", has another intriguing explanation of the "sea of mud" which means that Plato's accuracy is not dependent upon the "impact" or "volcanic explosion" hypothesis. He points out that the unusually quick rise in sea-level at the end of the last Ice Age would have "devastated" the continental shelf territory on either side of the Straits of Gibraltar. In the process of flooding and submerging it, enormous amounts of mud would have been washed into the sea. The Straits — far narrower than today — could well have been literally blocked by this mud.

Moreover, Baigent adds, people would have fled inland from the floods, carrying with them tales of catastrophe, which would have been remembered in the oral traditions of the places in which they found refuge. This tradition could easily have reached Egypt over the millennia, probably combined with similar stories from some of the many other flooded areas.

There, of course, it would have been eventually written down in the Egyptian temple records and told to Solon on his visit to Sais in 571 BC, as Plato says in the "Timaeus" and "Critias". It might even have been written down at a far earlier stage: there is very strong evidence for the existence of forms of writing as far back as the Magdalenian epoch, around 14,000 BC.

Baigent adds one more crucial detail which is not generally known and which even more strikingly confirms Plato's story. During the last Ice Age, with the lower sea-level, there would have been several islands above the surface just where Plato said Atlantis was. Two of these would have been at the Atlantic entrance to the Straits of Gibraltar. These would have been very small, but the real revelation is that a third one, what is now the underwater plateau known as the Gorringe Ridge, would have been far larger. Baigent says it would have been perhaps about equivalent to Minorca, the popular Spanish Mediterranean resort.

My own estimate, working from Baigent's own map, is that its dimensions were roughly those of Majorca rather than its smaller companion Minorca: in other words, a very substantial island. And even this calculation does not allow for the considerable Atlantic sea-bed subsidence which, as we have seen, is known to have taken place.

Adding in this factor, the island would have been larger still: by how much is uncertain. And the position of this one? About 300 miles due west of the Straits, i.e. "opposite" them as Plato said, well into the Atlantic.

Atlantis Takes Shape: The Great Oceanic Complex

".....What we have found is traces of human workmanship 350 feet below the surface of the sea, which shows that, at one time, either the mountain in -which this was cut was above the level of the sea, or the sea has risen 350 feet since then..... either way it fits in very nicely with the story of Atlantis "2

The Secret Story of Our Planet – Plato's Atlantis

The above quote is from a lecture given by Dr. Egerton Sykes in 1980. Sykes was describing the Russian discovery of what appears to be remains of human stone-work on a seamount under the Atlantic in 1974, photographs of which were hard to obtain at that time (the height of the Cold War), but which he had received from a contact in Eastern Europe.

The Russians said it was on the Ampere Seamount in the Horseshoe Archipelago, a submerged series of seamounts ranging from 300 to 500 miles west of the Straits of Gibraltar, in the shape of a horseshoe with its open end facing east towards Gibraltar.

Some of these are known to have been above the surface before the rise in sea-level at the end of the last Ice Age, and Michael Baigent's Ice Age Gorringle Ridge island forms the eastern end of the northern arm of the horseshoe, i.e. the part nearest Portugal.

Sykes suspected that the Russian discovery was really off the Azores, but the Russians did not want to admit that they had been looking for a seamount there upon which to rest a nuclear submarine. The reason for this was that there is a NATO base on the Azores, and it was then a sensitive area.

Wherever exactly it was, there is no doubt that the photographs are from well under the surface of the Atlantic, and are therefore a good candidate to be a remnant of Atlantis. It is generally accepted, as we have pointed out, that the world sea-level rose by between 400 and 500 feet at and after the end of the last Ice Age, with the largest rapid rise estimated by the research of Professor Emiliani and others to be at c. 9,600 BC - coinciding with Plato's date for the submergence of Atlantis. Emiliani puts the rise at that time, as we saw, at c.131 feet over a few hundred years. More recent research substantially confirms this, suggesting around 100 feet in the most rapid period of 160 years alone. The "human workmanship" detected in these remarkable Russian photographs therefore, if such it is, is likely to date back to that time.

At this point I can expand on Baigent's account. For, in his picture of the Atlantic outside the Straits, he stops at the description of the Gorringle Ridge Ice Age island. And it is true that Gorringle Ridge (alias Gettysburg Ridge 59) alone would have been hardly big enough for Plato's Atlantis "larger than Libya and Asia put together", even with the far smaller area (possibly less than twice the size of Britain) that, as we saw earlier, was meant by this in Plato's time. Nor could it on its own have supported the large army, fleet, agriculture, plain, mountains or capital city which Plato describes.

But if one takes a suggestion I made earlier — that the comparison with the size of Libya and Asia originally could have been meant to define the oceanic area covered by the main Atlantean group of islands rather than the extent of a single island, the whole picture is transformed. Most likely it would have defined the central, most important part of the island-group rather than aiming to include all the outlying islands.

For one cannot take the Gorringle Ridge Ice Age island in isolation. It is actually one of a great many fair-sized islands which were (from a Greek or Egyptian perspective) "beyond" the Straits of Gibraltar; in other words, within a few hundred miles of them in the Atlantic. And what are these? They are not far to seek, for smaller versions of many of them still exist today. A glance at the map of the Atlantic ocean floor, with its depth soundings, shows that the Madeira and Canary Islands in particular, off the coast of north-west Africa, are (like the Azores) the mere remnants of their prehistoric counterparts. They would have been far more numerous and larger than today when the ocean-level was lower during the last Ice Age.

Moreover, we will see in a later chapter how the oral traditions of the native Guanches off the Canaries were reported by the Spaniards on their arrival in the 15th Century. Some of these, we are

The Secret Story of Our Planet – Plato's Atlantis

told, actually spoke of their distant ancestors being survivors of a far larger land that had submerged. So much so, in fact, that they had believed they were the only survivors of this great flood. In this, their legends resemble closely those of many other tribal societies worldwide, especially those bordering the Atlantic east and west.

Even more intriguing, the earliest ancient Greek accounts place the great Mount Atlas — named, like Atlantis, after Atlas and associated in many classical writings with Atlantis — not in North Africa but in Tenerife, one of the Canaries.

It is also extremely interesting that Thor Heyerdahl, in two recent TV programmes⁶⁰, mentioned that step-pyramids had been discovered on Tenerife. He said they were similar to Central American and Egyptian ones, and added that he was involved in their archaeological excavation. Of course, it is unlikely that they would date back to Atlantean times if we accept Plato's chronology. But they just might reflect, like certain step-pyramids in Central America, a far more ancient tradition of substantial building.

We now only have to use a little logic and constructive intelligence. We only have to envisage the islands which are known to have existed up to the end of the last Ice Age, and which are equally certainly known to have been submerged - or in some cases greatly reduced - at around Plato's date of c. 9,600 BC for the submergence of Atlantis.

This includes all those described above together with the Azores, still "beyond the Straits" from Plato's viewpoint, but somewhat further out in the mid-Atlantic. We then add a few others, now submerged "seamounts" or underwater plateaus but known to have been above the surface before the rise in sea-level. To this, we then add the massive areas of sunken continental shelf off Western Europe and north-western Africa which would have been dry land at that time.

Putting all these together, and calculating the enormous oceanic area they jointly cover, we can work out a rational interpretation of Plato's Atlantis. We find that the central part of this scattered archipelago - from the Goringe Ridge to the Madeiras and the Canaries, and including the continental shelves of south-western Spain, Portugal and north-west Africa — does indeed span a region comparable to what Plato would have meant by "larger than Libya and Asia put together", and is largely "opposite the Pillars of Hercules".

In this scenario, further-out islands like the Azores and the West Indies (then also enormously larger than today) would have been amongst the "other islands" which Plato said were ruled by the central one, and from which one could get over to the "great opposite continent" — America. Not only that, but the resultant pattern of land-areas would have added up to a gigantic series of islands and coastal territories. What we might call a great oceanic pattern or complex of lands.

This would have been, "when gathered together into one whole" (this phrase of Plato's implies how diverse it in fact was), well able to mount major military operations. Such as invading the eastern Mediterranean with the large army, navy and population which Plato describes. It would, moreover, answer excellently to Plato's geographical description in the "Timaeus" and "Critias". For that description was very far from just that of one island. A close inspection of Plato's accounts reveals something very different. They describe one large, and a series of smaller islands, plus an "empire" or sphere of influence which included parts of America, and the coasts of the Mediterranean as far as northern Italy in the north and the borders of Egypt in the south.

The Secret Story of Our Planet – Plato's Atlantis

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