ABSTRACT

The focus of this study is to trace Plato’s myth back to its origins in order to attribute Atlantis to only one possible realistic location in time and space, that is to say the historical and cultural context of the Aegean. A comparative analysis of linguistic, archaeological and iconographic evidence is therefore conducted so as to recognize some distinctive features of the Minoan world which Plato seems to recall. Further clues to the Aegean ideology are also derived from an investigation of the Atlantean spatial configurations.

In the light of our current archaeological and linguistic data, the references to Atlantis given by Plato in Critias and Timaeus seem to regard the historical, political and cultural events which characterized the Aegean world. The description of an Atlantean golden age followed by a period of decline, concomitant with violent earthquakes and floods, seems therefore to constitute the memory transfigured into a myth of the terrible eruption which took place in Thera (Santorini) around 1530 BC. Similarly, Plato’s mention of a war between Atlantis and Athens could be related to the political and cultural clash between Minoan and Mycenaean worlds.

Furthermore, Plato’s description of the island’s scenery also reflects characteristic features of the Aegean world. Atlantis is surrounded by concentric circular enclosures. Nevertheless, archaeological and architectural evidence of planned circular urban centres is scarce and mostly related to cosmological beliefs. On the other hand, the arrangement of space in Atlantis follows an archetypal pattern based on a circle-and-square dichotomy, which is widely attested in linguistic, archaeological and literary sources. More precisely, the spatial configuration described by Plato perfectly matches a geometric dualism which can be observed in the iconography and in the shape of dwellings, sacred architecture and burial techniques of the Aegean world.

1. INTRODUCTION

Plato’s Timaeus reads: “For it is related in our records how once upon a time your State stayed the course of a mighty host, which starting from a distant point in the Atlantic ocean, was insolently advancing to attack the whole Europe, and Asia to boot. For the ocean there was at that time navigable; for in front of the mouth which you Greeks call, as you say, 'the pillars of Heracles,' there lay an island which was larger than Libya and Asia together; and it was possible for the travellers of that time to cross from it to the other islands, and from the islands to the whole of the continent over against them which encompasses that veritable ocean. Now in this island of Atlantis there existed a confederation of kings, of great and marvellous power, which held sway over all the islands, and over many other islands also and parts of the continent; and moreover, of the lands here within the Straits they ruled over Libya as far as Egypt, and over Europe as far as
Tuscany. So this host, being all gathered together, made an attempt one time to enslave by one single onslaught both your country and ours and the whole of the territory within the Straits. And it was, Solon, that the manhood of your State showed itself conspicuous for valour and might in the sight of all the world. For it stood pre-eminent above all in gallantry and all warlike arts, and acting partly as leader of the Greeks, and partly standing alone by itself when deserted by all others, after encountering the deadliest perils, it defeated the invaders and reared a trophy; whereby it saved from slavery such as were not as yet enslaved, and all the rest of us who dwell within the bounds of Heracles it ungrudgingly set free. But at a later time there occurred portentous earthquakes and floods, and one grievous day and night befell them, when the whole body of your warriors was swallowed up by earth, and the island of Atlantis in like manner was swallowed up by the sea and vanished. (24 e - 25 d)

Although this reference to Atlantis is nothing more than a brief mention incorporated into the complex structure of Timaeus, it has always proved extraordinarily evocative. This myth has attracted the great interest of many people from different fields ranging from the most discerning archaeologists, novelists (Jules Verne and Arthur C. Clarke were not immune to its charm), scientists (in particular Wernher von Braun) and legions of original-thinkers, who recognized Atlantis - and nowadays still recognize it - as the place of the spirit. This has led a contemporary commentator to the conclusion that if Plato had been able to foresee every single odd conjecture and more-or-less bizarre interpretation which would follow his text he might well have decided not to recount the myth. To a certain extent, this position reminds us of the rationalizing opinion the young Giacomo Leopardi expresses in his Essay on the Popular Errors of the Ancients (1815), when after listing disparate locations attributed to Atlantis he remarks that “i più avveduti” have always considered Plato’s narration nothing but a tale. However, in 1815 Leopardi couldn’t have been aware of the sensational discoveries Heinrich Schliemann was to make a bit more than fifty years later. In fact, thanks to he who might be called the father of the archaeology of myth our knowledge of the past has been incredibly improved. Therefore, in the light of Schliemann’s scientific work, it seems not entirely inadequate - even from the point of view of the most discerning minds - to look for the origin of Plato’s myth. Indeed, it seems reasonably safe to search for the seeds of Timaeus and Critias from this new archaeological perspective, although, however, with due caution and detachment.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The long-surviving fragment of Critias seems to indicate that the description of Atlantis (or possibly of its end, even though there is no documentary evidence) could have been the central topic of the dialogue, which in fact had been pre-announced in Timaeus. The piece of work in our possession gives the image - probably complete - of a sort of “Atlantic” happy age, however, only at its end, and precisely when the text breaks, a decline of its inhabitants is suggested. They are said to have gradually lost their divine nature while being overcome by their human nature (the kings were descendants of Poseidon and Clito.) Thus, this is probably the reason for both their arrogance shown in Timaeus and their ruin established by Zeus, the God of gods who reigns by Law. Critias contains a meticulous description embellished by exotic details and onomastic elements, some of them clearly derived from Greek (however cf. Solon’s translation), others of different origin; for instance, Plato recalls the names of the first kings and briefly refers to a possible correspondence between Greek and “Atlantic”, when he says that the younger twin-brother of the first-born Atlas “who had for his portion the extremity of the island near the pillars of Heracles up to the part of the country now called Gadeira after the name of that region, was Eumelus in Greek, but in the native tongue Gadeirus.” Since Eumelus is a name clear in itself one could dare to etymologize an “Atlantic” word …Naturally as a jest. Obviously, some parts of the narration are certainly false from a historical point of view, whatever their origin and role in Plato’s later thought. In particular, two elements are chronologically unacceptable: first of all, the enormously exaggerated remote age in which the solitary feats of Athens take place -
considering that at that time Athens did not exist; secondly, the central position Athens holds in the period before the first half of the first millennium BC, since in the Mycenaean age the Helladic political and cultural centre was in the Peloponnese. Nevertheless, these anachronisms are not enough to discourage research. On the contrary, it is reasonable to wonder if a period of one thousand years before Solon, instead of nine thousand years before him7 - or even nine hundred years before him - could provide a realistic (pre)historical background which to a certain extent might match Plato’s narration. It seems also plausible to wonder if traces of such a realistic (pre)historical background are still visible in Plato’s texts, although the extraordinary imagination of the author might have transfigured them into a myth.

In 1966 - one year before Spyridon Marinatos began to excavate the site of Akrotiri in Thera - Rhys Carpenter’s *Discontinuity in Greek Civilization* was published by Cambridge University Press. Here, the American archaeologist advanced a totally new explicatory answer to one of the most complex and still unsolved problems of the history of the Mediterranean - which he literally calls a “riddle”, that is to say the dissolution of the Mycenaean kingdoms” within the wider crisis which affected a large portion of the East Mediterranean in the late XIII century BC. One of the authors of this paper commented on Carpenter’s hypothesis about ten years ago, when after having stimulating conversations with the renowned climatologist Mario Pinna he realized that the data emerging from the Mycenaean archives of Knossos and Pylos were to a certain extent discordant with the idea of a severe famine in the historical background of these ruins.8 However, this is not the point.

On the basis of the manifest geological system represented by Thera together with the archipelago of the small islands of Thirassia, Apronisi, Palea and Nea Kameni, Carpenter - who, as he admits himself was not the first to noticed that - referred to another parallel pattern, which was destined to become emblematic of the event, that is to say the eruption of the volcanic island of Krakatoa. Carpenter writes: “on 27th August 1883 the entire superstructure of the Krakatoa volcano collapsed into the great void that had been hollowed out beneath it to a depth of some 1,500 feet below sea level. Into this abyss, now left open to the sea, a gigantic inrush of ocean water caused a consequent rebounding outrush of tidal waves, some of which are said to have been over 100 feet high” ... “Inasmuch as the sea-filled cauldron of Santorin measures twice the diameter and consequently has four times the superficial area of the cauldron created by Krakatoa, with much the same depth, the disaster that overwhelmed ancient Thera must have been of much greater intensity. No living thing could possibly have survived on the island; and nearby Crete (no portion of which was more than 140 miles distant) must have been wrapped in darkness of falling ash amid terrifying storms of wind and rain. Who is not reminded of the vivid description of the destruction of the island of Atlantis as recounted to Solon by the Egyptian priest in Plato’s *Timaeus*, how there were tremendous earthquakes and inundations and in a single ensuing terrible day and night the island sank into the sea and disappear? Since the priest, according to Kritias’ account, asserted that ‘whenever anything great or glorious or otherwise noteworthy occurs it is written down and preserved in our temples’, and since Egypt, less than 500 miles distant from Santorin in direct air line and regularly visited by Minoan and Mycenaean traders and emissaries, could not conceivably have failed to have knowledge of the great disaster in the Aegean, is not entirely reasonable to interpret Santorin as the ultimate origin of the legend of Atlantis?” (pp. 29-30) ... “I am accordingly prepared to maintain that in Solon’s day there was preserved in Egyptian temple chronicles the mention of an island that had sunk beneath the sea during a tremendous natural upheaval, and that this island - for which Plato invented the name Atlantis - was no other then Santorin.” (p. 31.)

At the time this idea must have sounded heretical (as Carpenter himself suggests p. 27.) Nevertheless, one year later, Spyridon Marinatos began his memorable excavation in Akrotiri, in the SW end of the island, and he brought to light one of the most extraordinary places of the II-millennium-Mediterranean sites BC, a small Minoan town preserved underneath the ashes of the volcano, such as was Pompei in
the XVI century BC. On 1st October 1974 Spyridon Marinatos suddenly died and he was buried there.9

3. CONCLUSIONS

By common consent, the way to Atlantis is extremely long and dangerous for the audax viator who dares to follow it. However, on the basis of the heuristic validity of Carpenter’s thesis - although one should always bear in mind its limits – many particular clues seem to lead the research in the direction of Thera. Therefore, the authors of this paper would like to invite their readers to carefully consider the following data and draw their own conclusions. Historical and cultural evidence shows that:

− the presence of bulls is pre-eminent both in the “Atlantic” folklore and in the Minoan world. There is no doubt, in fact, that the scene of hunting without weapons described in Critias10 perfectly matches the narrative decoration of one of the two Vapheio gold cups (Sparta, LH II)11 depicting the capture of bulls by peaceful means. However, the two cups deal with domestication rather than sacrifice12

− the inhabitants of Atlantis were barbarians, they could not speak Greek (113 a-b.) The Egyptians translated the names of the “Atlantic” kings into their language, then Solon decided to compose a poem and converted them into Greek. In addition, the Egyptians must have heard the language of Keftu, Crete, and there is no doubt now that before the arrival of the Mycenaeans at Knossos (around the middle of the XV century BC.) a non-Greek language was spoken in Crete13

− The whole myth of Theseus and the Minotaur can be easily read as a metaphor - and as a memory!- of the emancipation of continental Hellas from Knossian control - even though the Greek tradition considers Minos a Mycenaean king, while Theseus is the Attic hero par excellence.

− Furthermore, according to the same tradition, the Greek lineage of Knossos began around the middle of the XV century BC when Asterios, son of Tektamos, succeeded Lapis, who is therefore supposed to be the last pre-Greek king of Crete. The date suggested by Eusebius of Cesarea in his Chronicle (1447 BC) surprisingly coincides with that of the passage between LM I and LM II, which is concomitant with the Mycenaean conquest of Crete.14

− The eruption of Thera - despite of a recent adaptation of c.14 data - should be chronologically located in LM I (around 1530 BC.)15 This date is not inconsistent with points c) and d) given above, provided that the natural catastrophe not be seen as closely concomitant with the political and military crisis of Minoan Crete. In LM II in particular, on the one hand a sort of decline gradually becomes manifest in the Minoan world, on the other hand a progressive development characterizes the Mycenaean world (and consequently trade relations with Egypt).16

These, if we are not mistaken, is objective data. Taken with due caution, it seems to lead the search for Atlantis through space and time towards Crete and Thera (considered as part of a geopolitical system) and more precisely towards a Minoan world which is clashing with the Mycenaean world. In conclusion Plato’s imagination might have transfigured the historical conflict between Mycenae and Knossos into a clash between Athens (representing Hellas) and Atlantis (representing pre-Greek Crete). Obviously, however, this remains nothing more than a hypothesis.

REFERENCES

Negri, M. Scrivono palazzi e labirinti. See www.scritturedimenticate.iulm.it


1 The State is Athens. An old Egyptian priest is speaking with Solon.
2 The term “Libya” indicated a portion of land in North Africa west of Egypt; “Tuscany” indicated West Italy.
3 Greece and Egypt
4 Quotations are taken from The Loeb Classical Library (2005). Critias and Timaeus are translated by R. G. Bury.
5 Martin, T. H. (1841). Notes sur le Timéé XIII. Dissertation sur Atlantide, in Études sur le “Timéé” de Platon, II. Paris: p. 257. The authors owe this piece of information, and much more, to the graduation thesis of C. Lombardi, to whom they want to express their thanks.
6 The king’s nocturnal remark is very suggestive: “And when each of them had made this invocation both for himself and for his seed after him, he drank of the cup and offered it up as a gift in the temple of the God; and after spending the interval in supping and necessary business, when darkness came on and sacrificial fire had died down, all the princes robed themselves in most beautiful sable, and sate on the ground beside the cinders of the sacramental victims throughout the night, extinguishing all the fire that was round about the sanctuary; and there they gave and received judgement…” (120 b)
7 See Plutarch, Numa XVIII.
9 Further information about the peculiar circumstances of Spyridon Marinatos’s death can be found in La Ferla, M. (2003). L’uomo di Atlantide. Roma: Stampa Alternativa. The book is extremely interesting although the author is a journalist probably not very familiar with scientific inquiries and much more interested in making an impression. For instance, La Ferla suggests that a bunch of red flowers noticed by the American scientist Charles Pellegrino was the only token of affection for the archaeologist who had discovered the town (p. 23.) The author adds that Spyridon Marinatos died without receiving a worthy burial ceremony nor a memorial tombstone. In the space of twenty-eight years he would only receive the bunch of red flowers Charles Pellegrino had seen one night in September in 1988. However, one of the authors of this paper remembers that he had seen a bunch of red flowers precisely in the same square nearby Telchines Street in the Spring of 1983. Therefore it may be concluded that, excluding all possibility of an extraordinary longevity of the same bunch of flowers, pietas for Spyridon Marinatos could have been neither secretive nor sporadic (furthermore Spyridon Marinatos’s bust stands beside that of Carl Blegen at the entrance of Chora Museum). The Charles Pellegrino La Ferla refers to is the author of Unearthing Atlantis. An Archaeological Odyssey, New York 1991. This book is also very interesting, especially because the names of Arthur C. Clarke and Wernher von Braun appear in its pages. However, there is a certain lack of constraint, in particular as regards the Aegean chronologies of the II millennium (p. 270) and the strange association of the name “Thera” with the idea of fear (the name of the island refers to the eponymous hero Theras, descendant of Oedipus and regent of Sparta. Previously the island had been given a Greek name, “Kalliste”, meaning the fairest one.) Perhaps our eclectic American colleague was thinking of the word terror? The serenity with which Pellegrino meditates on the Aegean writings (p.230) is unpleasantly striking. Speaking of lack of constraint another interesting book is also Frau, S. (2002). Le Colonne d’Ercole. Un’inchiesta, Roma: Nurmoen according to which Altantis should be identified with Sardenia.
10 “And when they were about to give judgement they first gave pledges one to another of the following description. In the sacred precincts of Poseidon there were bulls at large; and the ten princes, being alone by themselves, after praying to the God that they might capture a victim well pleasing unto him, hunted after the bulls with staves and nooses but with no weapon of iron; and whatsoever bull they captured they led up to the pillar ad cut its throat over the top of the pillar, raining down blood on the inscription.” (119 d-e)
11 According to Demargne (1988). Arte egea. Milano: La BUR: p.187 a thick rope is tied around the bull’s leg. Further information about Vapheio gold cups are also given in the very short inscription of Haghios Stephanos, Sparta, HS Zg I, whose chronological location is dubious and probably in between LM I-II and LM IIIA-B.
12 In the other cup the bulls are already tamed and yoked.