

*Limits: The Pillars of Hercules from Sicily to Gibraltar*

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Throughout antiquity the formidable frontier represented by the Pillars of Hercules was situated at the Strait of Sicily, where Sicily and Tunisia seem about to link up. It was only in the Hellenistic period that this symbolic frontier was moved and sited at Gibraltar. This is the argument put forward in an extremely original book by Sergio Frau, who is well known for his journeys through space and time.

When the world 'gets broader' it is more or less inevitable that its imaginary borders should also be pushed back. A famous topic in 'eristics' (*suasoria*, a kind of declamatory speech practised by the Romans, whose purpose was to persuade – French translator's note), or dramatic eloquence, which was set in Rome in the great schools of rhetoric, was formulated as follows: 'Persuade Alexander the Great not to go beyond the borders of the world.' A fine *a posteriori* exercise that includes an important element: after Alexander, and because of his march to Afghanistan, the world had become bigger. The spin-off from that spectacular march was characterized by a comparable shift of the western 'border' further west. It is no coincidence that it is in fact to Eratosthenes – in other words, a man who is emblematic of the science of the third century before Christ, the science that was dominant in the world resulting from Alexander's conquests – that we owe the 'slippage' of the Pillars of Hercules from the Strait of Sicily to Gibraltar. This scientific event is symptomatic. It confirms what we sense in other areas too. That in this way, though Alexander's conquests were directed towards the east, they also had consequences for the other half of the Mediterranean. Particularly cultural consequences (Hellenism in original guises reached this part of the Mediterranean as well), but also political and more strictly scientific consequences. Frau's research has that lapel-grabbing tone characteristic of books in which the authors involve themselves totally.

Luciano Canfora

Published in *Il Corriere della Sera*, 7 June 2002, p. 29.

*The Riddle of the Pillars . . . or the mystery of a frontier separating two identities*

Sergio F. Donadoni, Egyptologist, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei

This is a curious book. As much because of what it says as the manner in which it says it.

It reveals the mechanism (born of a mixture of curiosity, uncertainty and daring) that governed its conception and significance, by going back over each stage of its development as it presented itself in the mind and imagination (and from a certain point in the consciousness) of its author. It seems to be a 'secret book' which he takes pleasure in trying to explain – a bit like an alexandrine – in a public forum. At home I have a clock that shows behind glass, at the opposite end to the face displaying the time, the working of the pendulum, wheels and works and the toothed cogs that make up the gearing, where the various elements combine to create a coherent movement. This might be a good metaphor, I was about to say 'for this book', but I would prefer to say 'for this experiment', which is both intellectual and moral.

In my clock the most important thing, in the end, is the face. And that is how things turn out in Frau's intellectual adventure; what counts is the results he has achieved, and their main points can be clearly identified. The narrow passage formed in the area around Sicily, Malta, Libya and Tunisia divides the Mediterranean into two clearly distinct parts, both geographically and historically, contrasting a zone that is 'more Greek' with another that is 'more Phoenician'. The theory that this strait might be the most ancient 'Pillars of Hercules', which were the frontier of an area of normal traffic for the Greek navy until the Pillars were moved to the site where we traditionally place them, is the initial intuition whose proof and its rich historical consequences constitute the book's subject proper.

The idea that the site of the Pillars might have been moved is not in itself as audacious a theory as it might seem at first sight; in antiquity they were placed here and there throughout the known world and marked – and this is what mattered much more than a precise geographical location – the frontier between known and unknown. But in the case that concerns us the interest lies in the fact that the research has been based on an exploration of the ancient sources cleverly concealed behind a bogus wish to claim uncertainty and confusion when faced with the gaps that emerge in relation to the traditional interpretation. Though this latter interpretation is very often forced to betray the text and amend it or accuse the Ancients of ignorance, Frau for his part shows point by point that we have only to redraw pre-Hellenistic geography within the confines of 'its' Pillars, between Malta and Libya, for there to be no further need to correct the ancient texts, or criticize their authors. The horizon of the most ancient Greeks (say, from Homer and Hesiod to Herodotus) is thus reinscribed within the perimeter of the seas that surround them and unite them to their colonies, leaving the western part of the Mediterranean to the stern control of the Punico-Phoenicians.

Of course the unfolding of this complex vision and re-reading of the texts is necessarily accompanied by a detailed analysis, but it does not always turn out to be indisputably convincing, especially because of the too (how should I say) realistic use of certain items of information drawn, for instance, from Homer or Hesiod, which are clearly alien to any geographical siting or chronology. But we must certainly admire the re-reading of the sources and the author's sensitivity to the historical context, which is very alive in his account. And this is particularly interesting whenever it becomes necessary both to take account of and to recount the fact that the Pillars of Hercules were finally sited between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean (and so ended up flanking the Emperor Charles V's coat of arms).

Analysis of the sources leads Frau to date the time of this shift to the Hellenistic period, which is thus recontextualized in a new conception of the world. After Alexander had opened its eastern borders, the Greek world was to be further expanded in a similar way to allow it to retain its central position, just as in Alexandria Erasthones' cosmological research also influenced cartographic work in which the Pillars regained their function as a frontier but of a wider horizon. At the same time, and indeed because of these rapid developments in geography, new considerations were able to emerge, partly determined in fact by the demands of research. All those activities that the sources attribute to the Phoenicians beyond the Pillars of Hercules, placing them in the Atlantic Ocean as far as England, can now be

re-sited in the western part of the Mediterranean. And so Sardinia, which became Phoenician very early on, can take on the functions traditionally attributed to the British Isles as a site of trade in metals, and the arena for Phoenician commercial and naval activity is thus moved to a more compact setting. Once Sardinia is put back beyond the Pillars of Hercules it becomes easy to identify it with Atlantis, which is found there in Critias' discourse.

The author is quite well aware that he is walking on extremely dangerous, slippery ground here, and his experience of writing lets him adopt a mischievous but effective strategy. Through a skilful technique which makes use of quotations from ancient and modern authors presented as the report of a session where he is the moderator, he manipulates evidence and viewpoints, thus managing to justify the identification.

If Critias' Atlantis and a Sardinia situated beyond the Pillars seem fated to be one and the same, there will always remain a final doubt, that Critias' account might have embroidered with picturesque details the constantly repeated myth of a fabulous island sinking to the bottom of the ocean in the context of a mythical and far-off geography. But at the same time the skill with which the comparison has been developed between Critias and the archaeological data, and its possible repercussions for a reconstruction of the facts, are of extreme interest to me as a mere reader.

Even though I am still a little suspicious of any historical reconstruction based on deductions and hypotheses, I am forced to admit that in fact any enrichment of knowledge can only arise from an ability to form hypotheses and draw conclusions from them. In short, an ability to go beyond the Pillars of Hercules as Frau has done.

Sergio F. Donadoni

*Paradise Lost and the Pillars of Hercules*

Andrea Carandini, archaeologist, University of Rome

Sergio Frau's investigation interested me immensely because it has in a way provided a real cartography for what we already knew: in this case, that the Greeks had a very ancient mythical past, the era of Cronus and Uranus, the period of the early times of Zeus, the Greeks' supreme deity, who established order in the world. That paradise was indeed situated in the far distant past but it also existed in the present for the Greeks, that is, it was in the west, in the western isles where that lost paradise survived and lived. It was there as well that the world of the dead was to be found. In much later eras that lost paradise was placed in the area of the Pillars of Hercules or beyond, and they were imagined as being at Gibraltar. Sergio Frau's great virtue is that he has opened, and brought coherently into the present, a completely different horizon. That lost world, which the Greeks conceived of with enormous nostalgia in a way, was not situated beyond the Mediterranean but was nothing but the western Mediterranean itself. The frontier was first the Adriatic, then at a certain point it was pushed back to the Strait of Sicily. This seems to me an important fundamental achievement by Sergio Frau, who also has the virtue of not being a uni-