

## Review: The Mediterranean Revisited

Sergio Frau, *Le Colonne d'Ercole, un'inchiesta*,  
Rome, Nur Neon, 2002, 672 pp., illustrated

*This is a multi-authored review of a book that is extremely rich and lengthy (43 chapters, among whose titles are: Chapter III, In the name of the Lord God, this round Earth of the Ancients becomes flat again. Or perhaps not? (In which – by way of preface – the story is told of how our great Sphere, which was measured and drawn by Egyptian Alexandria, became a Mystery, Sacrilege and dark until ten years ago); Chapter X, Strabo: 'The Pillars? Gibraltar or Cádiz! But none of us have ever really seen them' (An impossible Interview with the great Greek historian/geographer who summarizes for us what was known by the great men who preceded him. Christ had not yet been born and the site of those famous pillars had already been lost); Chapter XII, With Herodotus in the Eldorado of silver. A voyage to Tartessos, the Andalusian Atlantis (In which it will be seen that neither the Bible nor Herodotus ever said Tartessos was Spain. But only that it was in the West and beyond the Pillars of Hercules: exactly like Sardinia . . .); Chapter XXVIII, The Peoples-of-the-Sea versus Ramses III or the Very First World War). The author writes on culture for the daily newspaper La Repubblica.*

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### *Atlantis-Sardinia*

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For more than a century historical research into the distant origins of our civilization has had an important place in the imaginary of western culture, which is increasingly concerned with the search for its roots. The rediscovery of the great civilizations prior to the classical Greco-Roman period was initiated in the 19th century. As well as the Egyptians, Assyrians and Babylonians, as time went by there re-emerged the Sumerians, Hittites and Minoens, and at the same time it was realized how much

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in the end not only the Greco-Roman world, but also our present-day civilization owed to a whole series of cultural achievements, passed down from generation to generation through civilization's different forms and moments.

While the archaeological sciences have gradually been established and refined in university settings, the public – what is called the 'general public' – has also slowly grown familiar with these issues thanks in small part to education and in larger part to the dissemination of knowledge, but also, sadly, in great part due to the appearance and proliferation of an 'archaeological esotericism' that attempted and still constantly attempts to make the results of historical research serve a certain irrational need for mystery and fable. This is how the imposing Pyramids of the Egyptian Pharaohs, or the great megalithic 'temple' at Stonehenge in England, have become famous, not just because of what they tell us about humanity's past, but also because of what some people wanted to make them say about hypothetical, fabulous occult sciences now lost, about ancient people's incredible divinatory powers, or even about the intervention of civilizations from outer space.

It is in this contradictory context that the celebrated myth of Atlantis is set. Originally it was a passage from Plato, who mentions in his dialogues an Egyptian priest who – to give just the bare bones – is supposed to have talked to Solon about an ancient civilization on the island of Atlantis beyond the Pillars of Hercules, a civilization that, in very far-off times, was said to have come close to conquering the whole of Europe, only to disappear eventually under the sea. Over what is now two and a half millennia this has aroused the interest and curiosity of entire generations. Even Aristotle was concerned with it and suggested putting Atlantis where it came from: Plato's imagination. Deaf to this advice, hundreds of people have turned their attention to it over the years and, remaining equally deaf to historical and geographical evidence, they have ended up placing Atlantis in the Crimea, America, Nigeria and even . . . Antarctica.

The author of these present lines – alas – has turned his attention to it as well, being a physicist by both vocation and profession and therefore having a love for rational research, which then led him to examine, though cautiously, certain historical events in antiquity. In a modest little book no longer in print, I suggested at the outset that the Atlantis problem was definitely not an archaeological one but rather one of simple curiosity and erudition, and I put forward, not the hypothesis, but the proof that, if we wished to believe, however tentatively, what Plato said, geology had put before us a phenomenon that might fit his story: the rise in the sea-level at the end of the last ice age, thus submerging vast tracts of inhabited land. And I concluded that in this case the best-placed candidates for an Atlantis beyond the Pillars of Hercules could be no other than the present-day British Isles. But I was wrong!

What immediately persuaded me of this was the publication of Sergio Frau's incredible book. Incredible because Frau, who has to his credit a long and solid career as a journalist, has managed to carry out, with all the serious journalist's rigour and energy, a genuine quest through the proto-history of the Mediterranean, seeking out and drawing on a mass of documents that seemed accessible only to an elite of professional archaeologists. I have said 'journalist' but I should add 'journalist from Sardinia', because only a deep love for his native island could have given him the courage and patience needed to embark on a long-term piece of research and

to bring order to a near-infinite mass of information, in order to draw from it the coherent and convincing exposition presented in his book, in which he constantly appeals to historical evidence and eschews any temptation to slip into daydreams or, worse still, irrationality.

The starting point for Frau's research is essentially the now classic 'Columbus's egg', but are we so sure that the Ancients thought the Pillars of Hercules were really where we put them today? The answer is 'probably not', and Frau gives us solid clues suggesting that at a very far-off time, from which Plato's story could date, the sea known to and sailed by the Egyptians and Greeks must have had its Pillars of Hercules set, not at the edge of distant Spain, but on the site of a closer channel in the West, the Strait of Sicily, formed by the westernmost coast of Sicily and the northern tip of Tunisia. And behold, at a single stroke everything becomes clear and especially all that Plato says about Atlantis in the *Timaeus*. 'For there was an island there before that strait you call, as you say, the pillars of Hercules . . . From that island it was then possible to proceed to other islands and from them reach the whole continent which stretches out opposite them and borders that veritable sea' (Plato, *Timaeus*, 25a).

This passage means that we can rule out all the sites where Atlantis has been placed, and it is also difficult to square with the British Isles hypothesis. It all seems to become clear now. Beyond the Strait of Sicily is Atlantis-Sardinia, and further still are other islands until one reaches the continent that indeed, from Italy to Spain and the African coast, borders the sea: the Tyrrhenian-Mediterranean sea. If the thesis turned out to be correct, then Atlantis would leave the realm of myth and take its place in history, the history of Sardinia, which is still so little studied from an archaeological standpoint, and still left out of the history of antiquity despite the clearly visible presence of its imposing *nuraghi*, its extraordinary sacred wells or numerous other signs of civilization that are very ancient but still dumb.

However, Frau's book is not just limited to that. He starts out from Sardinia-Atlantis and guides his readers through an enthralling re-reading of European proto-history, occasionally sowing seeds of doubt, or suggesting correlations that are sometimes obvious and sometimes risky, but always stimulating and worthy of consideration. This is an exhaustive study in which all the Mediterranean peoples from antiquity confront each other and intermingle to create unexpected synergies, from Greeks to Phoenicians and touching on the ever mysterious 'Peoples-from-the-Sea'. The result is a repositioning of our knowledge about the ancient world that results from a study by a journalist but will be certain to have an effect in the academic world. Legitimately jealous of its prerogatives and suspicious of any alien incursion into its areas of competence, academia has already shown great interest in the work of Sergio Frau.

Vittorio Castellani