

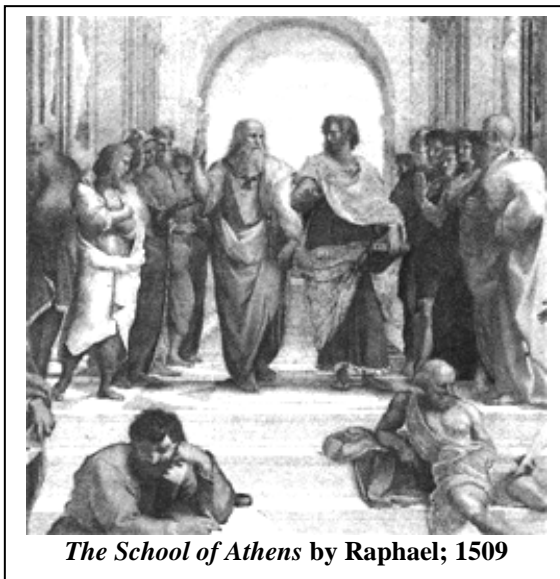
IN SEARCH OF ATLANTIS

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- **Introduction**



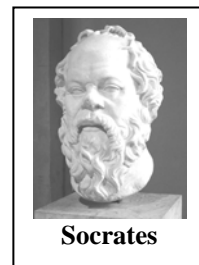
The story of Atlantis evokes controversy that relates not to its moral message but rather to whether the story is based on fact or fiction, and for those who believe the story to be factual controversy rages on the locality of this lost civilisation. The story was transcribed by the Greek philosopher Plato about 2400 years ago in his discourses *Critias* and *Timaeus*. Plato was one of Socrates' most devoted followers and in his dialogues and in his *Second Letter* says that "no writing of Plato exists or ever will exist, but those now said to be his are those of a Socrates become beautiful and new".

The Atlantis story is presented as being

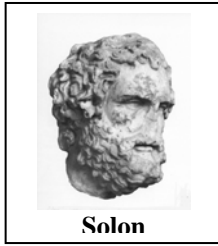
related by Critias. The story has a moral basis to emphasize that god will destroy mankind whenever man abandons religion irrespective of how powerful that community may be. It may therefore be considered to be a "parable" which is defined as a brief, succinct story that illustrates a moral lesson.

- **Fact or fiction?**

The question arises however: Is the story based on fact or fiction? The answer is clearly stated in the text itself. In the discourse *Timaeus*, Socrates is quoted as saying "And what other, Critias, can we find that will be better than this which is natural and suitable to the festival of the goddess and has the very great advantage of being fact and not a fiction?" In the same work, Plato also details the origins of the story, quoting Critias as stating "Then listen, Socrates, to a tale which, though strange, is certainly true, having been attested by Solon, who was the wisest of the seven sages. He was a relative and a dear friend of my great-grandfather, Dropides, as he himself says in many passages of his poems; and he told the story to Critias, my grandfather, who remembered and repeated it to us."



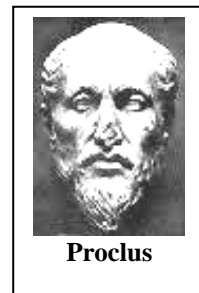
The Atlantis story is often believed to be a Greek myth or legend. However, its origins actually come from farther afield. In *Timaeus*, we are further told "...the tale which he brought with him from Egypt,... In the Egyptian Delta, at the head of which the river Nile divides, there is a ... great city ... called Sais, ... To this city came Solon.....; he asked the priests who were most skilful in such matters, about antiquity, and made the discovery that neither he nor any other Hellene knew anything worth mentioning about the times of old."



Solon

Solon (~638–558 BCE) was an Athenian statesman, lawmaker, and poet. He is remembered particularly for his efforts to legislate against political, economic and moral decline in archaic Athens. His reforms failed in the short term yet he is often credited with having laid the foundations for Athenian democracy. After he had finished his reforms, he travelled abroad reaching Egypt around 590 BCE. According to Plutarch [~46-120 AD], Solon met with “*Psenophis of Heliopolis, and Psonchis the Saite, the most learned of all the priests*”. In *Timaeus*, we are told that it was during his visit at Neith’s temple at Sais that Solon was recounted the story of Atlantis. The actual text supposedly carved on the temple’s walls has yet to be identified, however another Egyptian source lamenting a terrible catastrophe, when heaven and earth turned upside down and afterwards darkness covered the earth is found in the *Ermitage Papyrus* in Leningrad. There are other allusions to major catastrophic events in the Mediterranean, examples include the *Curse of Akkad* from Mesopotamia and of course the various stories of a great flood sent by a deity to destroy civilization as an act of divine retribution widespread among many cultures – the biblical account of Noah’s Ark; the Hindu Puranic story of Manu; the Deucalion in Greek mythology; and the Utnapishtim in the Epic of Gilgamesh.

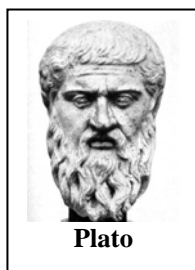
The classical texts do very clearly detail the origins of the Atlantis epoch. Many of Socrates followers apparently believed the story to be a true one. Subsequent Classical writers also believed it to be based on fact rather than fiction. Proclus in the 5th century AD (412-485 AD) wrote “*As for the whole of this account of the Atlanteans, some say that it is unadorned history, such as Krantor (~350-276 BCE), the first commentator on Plato. He adds, that this is testified by the prophets of the Egyptians, who assert that these particulars are written on pillars which are still preserved.*”



Proclus

• ***Dating the Atlantidean culture***

It does appear therefore that there is a very great likelihood that the Atlantis story is based on an element of fact and is not fully a fictional one. The next question that needs to be addressed is: When did the Atlantidean culture flourish?

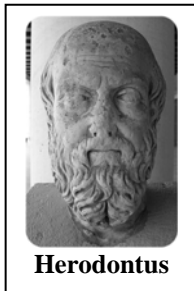


Plato

In *Timaeus*, Plato tells us that the advanced civilisation of *Atlantikos* was an Old World civilisation that was contemporary with the civilisation of Greece and predated that of Egypt by about 1000 years. “*She founded your city a thousand years before ours, receiving from the Earth and Hephaestus the seed of your race, and afterwards she founded ours, of which the constitution is recorded in our sacred registers to be eight thousand years old*”. Since Solon visited Egypt in 590 BCE, Plato’s account places the origins of the Old World civilisations to about 9000 years BCE.

This dating places the Atlantidean culture at the beginning of the Neolithic period – too early in man’s cultural development to fit time sequence. This is definitely erroneous; however Plato was following the time scale concepts of Egyptian history at his time.

Writing contemporaneously to Plato, the historian Herodotus (484-425 BCE) in his *An account of Egypt* wrote that he had been told that “from the first king [who established Memphis] down to this priest of Hephaistos who reigned last, there had been three hundred and forty-one generations of men, in the period of eleven thousand three hundred and forty years...” until the invasion of the Assyrian king Sennacherib in about 701 BCE.



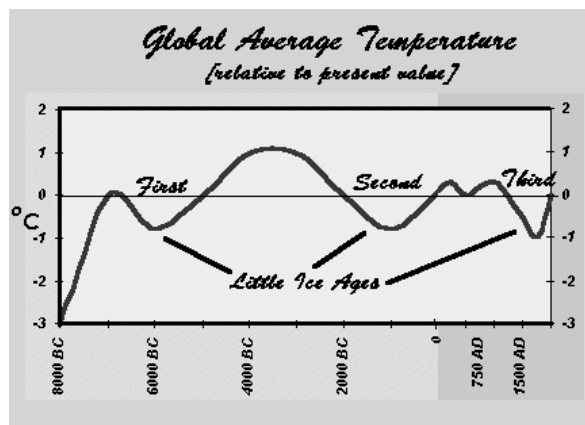
Herodotus

These figures dating of Dynastic Period are now known to be mistaken and the historical chronology for ancient Egypt suggests that the Egyptian Early Dynastic Period started ~3150 BCE when the first of the Dynastic pharaohs solidified their control over lower Egypt by establishing a capital at Memphis. Stunning advances in architecture, art, and technology were made during the Old Kingdom in the 3rd millennium BCE marked by the building of step-pyramid at Saqqara ~2650 BCE. If Grecian and Atlantidean culture originated 1000 years before the Egyptian Old Kingdom dynasty as stated by Plato, then the Atlantidean

culture originated at the turn of the 5th millennium BCE and peaked about 3000 BCE.

The dating of the catastrophic destruction corresponding to the end of the Atlantidean civilisation is probably easier to arrive at. According to Plato, a number of Old World civilisations - including Grecian, & Egyptian - had begun to flourish in the eastern Mediterranean basin. These civilisations archaeologically are known to have peaked in the 3rd millennium BCE. The Classical historian Eumalos of Cyrene’s narrative wrote that “Ninus, King of Babylon, nephew of the famous Ogyge. The latter was the king of Atlantis, the island which once existed between Libya and Sicily, and which was submerged. This large island was known as Decapolis, Atlantika, by our forefathers of Cyrene, as well as by the ancient Greeks. Ogyge was the king who governed the famous island at the time of the horrible inundation....” King Ninus lived ~2192 BCE.

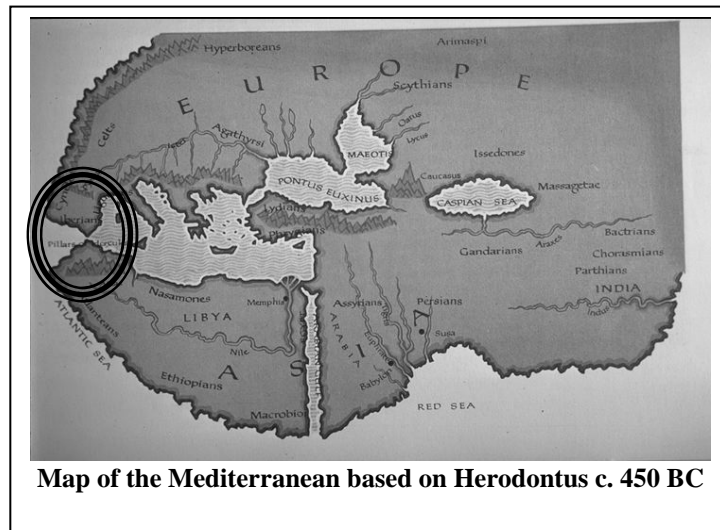
The archaeological evidence from around the Mediterranean suggests that in the late 3rd millennium a cataclysmic event resulted in the social collapse of several Old World Kingdoms in the Aegean, Egypt, Palestine, Iran, the Indus Valley and Malta. The social collapse of these kingdoms all occurred circa 2200 BCE, a period associated with a drop in mean global temperature assumed to have been preceded by a major volcanic eruption. The drop in global temperature resulted in a process of desertification in the Mediterranean region that contributed towards the collapse of the Old World Kingdoms. This climatic upheaval is also evident by studying the dust sediments collected in the Gulf of Oman. Windblown dolomitic dust generally makes up about 2% of the sediment throughout the Holocene period except at two distinct periods - the first at ~4200 BCE when the amount of dolomitic dust approximated about 4%; the second at ~2300 BCE when the dust sediments increased five-fold and



included volcanic ash. This corresponded to the period defined as the Second Little Ice Age.

- **Location**

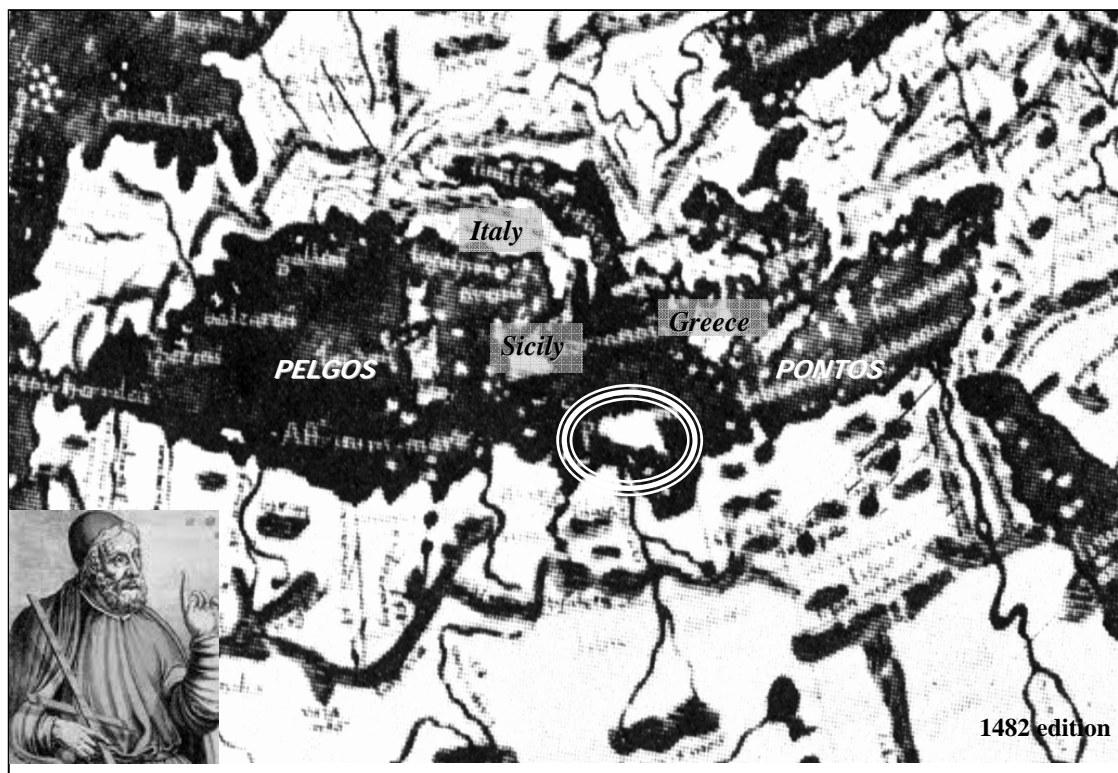
The next question related to Atlantis has also been hotly debated by various writers: Where was Atlantis situated? Plato in *Timaeus* details Critias' description of the island: "*and there was an island situated in front of the straits which are by you called the Pillars of Heracles; the island was larger than Libya and Asia put together, and was the way to other islands, and from these you might pass to the whole of the opposite continent which surrounded the true ocean; for this sea which is within the Straits of Heracles is only a harbour, having a narrow entrance, but that other is a real sea, and the surrounding land may be most truly called a boundless continent*"



Based on text by Scylax of Caryanda (~515 BCE), Herodotus places the Pillars of Heracles in what today is known as the Straits of Gibraltar. In the Classical Period the Pillars of Heracles were considered to be the portals of the then known world. This fitted very much with the political range of dominion and influence of the prevalent Mediterranean cultures in the mid-5th century BCE – the prevalent cultures included the Ionians, the Dorians, other Greek people and the Phoenicians. The linking of the Pillars of Heracles and the Straits of Gibraltar led Ignatius Donnelly in 1882 to place the land of Atlantis in the mid-Atlantic Sea; a concept that has been taken up by all proponents for an extra-Mediterranean locality for this mythical island. A mid-Atlantic locality has been shown to be impossible in view of the sea-bed geology of the region and the theory of Continental plate tectonics active in the region.

While the portal to the known world during the Classical Period was the Straits of Gibraltar, the political situation during the Old World Kingdom period in the 3rd millennium BCE was completely different. There are researchers who have argued that there were two sets of pillars or portals to the known world – one at the Straits of Gibraltar and one in the Bosphorus Straits. They argue that Plato was really referring to the latter straits and thus Atlantis would have been located within the Mediterranean

region, e.g. the Island of Santorini. However, on reviewing the political influence distribution of the major Old World Civilizations – the Aegean, Egyptian, Troy, and Malta – one clearly notes that the overall range was mainly restricted to the western Mediterranean with the portal to the unknown world being the mid-Mediterranean region between the point of Sicily and the northern coast of Africa. An island occupying this space would very well fit the description given by Plato. This would place Atlantis in the Lesser Syrtis situated in the Gulf of Sirda right in the middle of the Mediterranean straddling the eastern (*pontos*) and western (*pelagos*) Mediterranean Sea. In fact a map drawn by the geographer Claudius Ptolemy (90-168 AD) actually does depict an unnamed island in the locality. Ptolemy compiled his work using various sources available in the extensive library of Alexandria. The accuracy of his sources can be attested to by his indentifying the source of the River Nile as being the Lunar Mountains – a fact only later discovered by Henry M. Stanley in 1888.



This proposed locality fits very well with what was written regarding the remains of Atlantis after the catastrophe. In Critias, Plato tells us that after Atlantis was destroyed “*there are remaining in small islands only the bones of the wasted body The mere skeleton of the country be left.*” Eumalos of Cyrene further wrote that “*...the summit of Mount Atlas which was situated in the middle of the island Atlantika was not submerged. This summit of Mount Atlas has preserved the name of Ogygia from that of its last king and it is in fact this circumstance why we still know as Ogygia that island which still exists between Libya and Sicily; it is nothing more than the summit of Mount of Atlantika*”. Ogygia is an island mentioned in Homer's *Odyssey* as the home of the nymph Calypso, daughter of the Titan Atlas. The name *Atlantis* actually means the daughter of Atlas. A long-standing tradition begun by Euhemerus in the late 4th century BCE and supported by Callimachus [305–240 BCE], identifies Ogygia with the island of Gozo, the second largest island in the Maltese archipelago. Several

Evidence for this larger landmass on recent geological times is also available by biogeographic considerations. The Maltese and Pelagian flora and fauna has repeatedly been shown to have very close affinities sharing several endemic species of animals or plants (see Table below).

FLORA	
v <i>Euphorbia</i> sp. [Spurge]	Maltese; Lampedusa
v <i>Elatine</i> sp. [Waterwort]	Maltese; Lampedusa
v <i>Daucus</i> sp. [Carrot]	Maltese; Lampedusa; Lampione
v <i>Linaria</i> sp. [Toadflax]	Maltese; Lampedusa, Linosa
INVERTEBRATES	
v <i>Lampedusa</i> sp. [Door Snails]	Maltese; Lampedusa; Lampione
VERTEBRATES	
v <i>Podarcis filfolensis</i> [Wall lizard]	Maltese; Lampione, Linosa

The sharing of endemic species between the Maltese-Pelagian Islands that are absent from Sicily or the Italian continent suggests that the species differentiation occurred very much after the Maltese-Pelagian block broke off from the Sicilian Hyblean Plateau and that the Maltese Islands and the Pelagian Islands areas were physically connected even after the separation from the Sicilian Hyblean Plateau which very probably occurred at the end of the Pleistocene with the rising seawater level that attended the gradual melting of the Pleistocene ice mass. The geological and biogeographical evidence therefore suggests that at the beginning of the Holocene period, the Central Mediterranean region south of Sicily was composed of a large landmass. This at some stage after 10000 years BP fragmented and separated into various parts of which only the Maltese and Pelagian Islands remain. The timing of such a catastrophic event is well within the phase of man's traditional and early documented history.

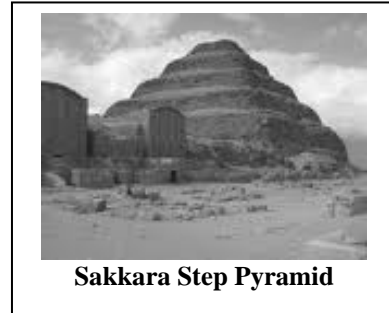
Evidence of tectonic events during the period of man's sojourn on the Maltese Islands is suggested by the geology on the western coast of Malta. The geology in the region suggests that while this tectonic movement was initiated during the Quaternary period, it remained active during the Holocene. A report was made of the presence of cart-ruts on Filfla by one of the earlier Maltese archaeologists Fr. Emanuel Magri. Filfla is one of the small islets of the Maltese Archipelago measuring only 2.0 ha and lying about 4.5 km from the south-western coast of Malta. It has been established that the Filfla landmass had split from the main island by tectonic agencies namely the Maghlaq fault that runs along the whole length of the western coast of Malta and Gozo. There is no conceivable reason, if cart-ruts were transport structures, for the presence of cart-ruts on such a small island as Filfla. This strongly suggests that Filfla was joined to mainland Malta during prehistoric times.

Evidence has been cited above for the presence of a large Central Mediterranean island situated between Sicily and North Africa during the Holocene geological period. The classical texts suggest that this landmass was broken up and submerged by a series of massive volcanic eruptions and tectonic movements probably in the late

centuries of the third millennium BCE, leaving only small fragments in the form of the Maltese Archipelago and the Pelagian Islands. Archaeological evidence should further support the scenario by associating the culture of the Old World Maltese civilization to what is described for Plato's *Atlantikos*.

- ***Atlantidean – Maltese Temple cultures***

The Atlantidean culture has been here dated on the bases of classical texts to have lasted from ~4th to the mid-3rd millennium BCE. This fits in very well with the carbon-dating results for the Maltese Temple culture that is said to have evolved in ~4100 BCE and dramatically disappeared in ~2500 BCE. During the period encompassing 3700 - 2500 BCE, the Maltese inhabitants had developed a megalithic culture which resulted in the building of the oldest free-standing structures in the world with the oldest megalith at Ggantija in Gozo being dated to about 3700 BCE, a thousand years before the earliest pyramid in Egypt – the Step pyramid at Sakkara dated to ~2650 BC.



The Maltese Megalithic Temples could very reasonably be identified with the "*many temples built and dedicated to many gods*" described in *Critias*. In the Maltese Islands, with an overall area of only 313 km², about forty-three temples have been identified. The better-preserved temples and contemporary temple models show evidence of an advanced architectural technology reflected in the techniques used in the quarrying, carriage, and

lifting of these megalithic building blocks. The Maltese Temples consist basically of a number of oval rooms each enclosed by a single skin of large stones, sometimes up to 40 tons apiece. The chambers are then enclosed in an outer wall, one block thick; the space between the walls being packed with soil and rubble. The architectural skills needed to build these magnificent structures, including the corbelling techniques apparently used in roofing some of the temples and in the close fit between the various stone megaliths, confirm a detailed understanding of masonry construction systems with the development of intelligent functional solutions to bypass the limitations of the local material. Stone was imaginatively used through the construction phase of the sanctuaries from their foundations to their roofing.

The Maltese Old World Temples were definitely used to practise rites pertaining to mythological concepts. One cults identified in the Maltese Megalithic Culture is represented by the above ground temples/sanctuaries; this dealt with Fertility. Man the Farmer was very much concerned with survival and very conscious of the cyclical process of reproduction of his crops and stock, and of his own species. He believed that his survival depended on the fertility deity who regularly supplied him with his dietary requirements. This deity had to be regularly appeased to ensure its benevolence.

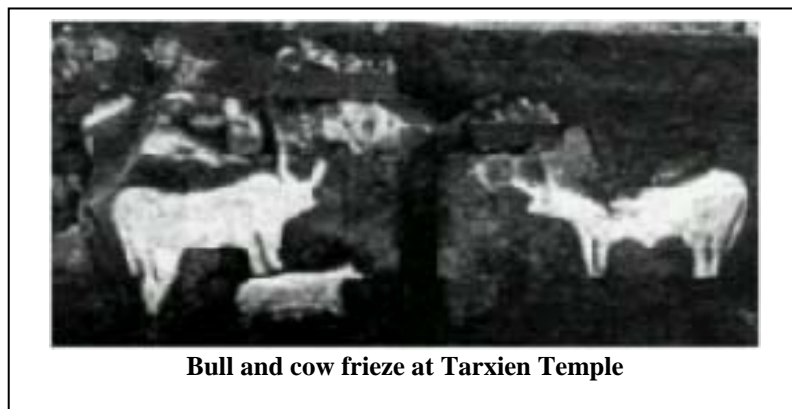


Altar at Tarxien Temple

The Maltese megalithic buildings have been associated with a progressive Fertility Cult on the basis of the clay statuettes and symbols associated with the fertility. The ritual practices in these “temples” apparently included the ritual sacrifice of domesticated animals and collected foodstuff such as fish and seashells. This is evidenced by the finds at the Tarxien Temples wherein a sacrificial altar with a curved flint knife in its interior was described in association with animal skeletal remains. At the same

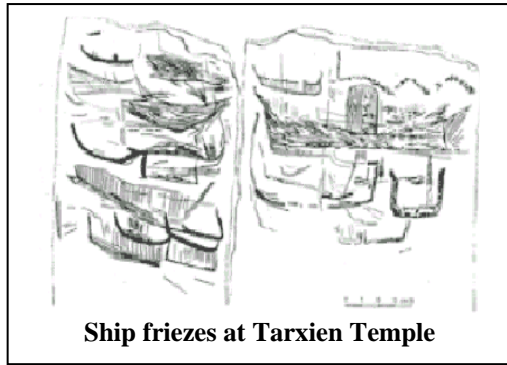
temple complex several animal depictions showing the ibex, mufﬂon, pig, bull and cow were described, while several seashells were also found. Fish depictions were recorded from the Bugibba Temple. Presumably the ritual sacrifice would also have included agricultural products, thus encompassing all the “gifts” of the Mother Earth deity.

This very much equates with the mythological beliefs of the *Atlantoi*. In *Critias* we are told that *"the people annually brought the fruits of the earth in their season from all the ten portions, to be an offering to each of the ten"*. The ten kings of *Atlantikos* also practised Bull sacrifice; a feature that was apparently also practiced by the Maltese Temple people.



Bull and cow frieze at Tarxien Temple

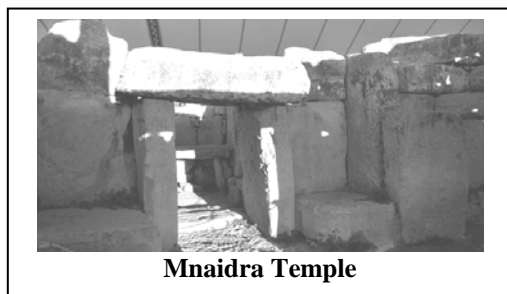
Plato in *Critias* recorded that the *Atlantoi* maintained a fleet of triremes for commerce with other lands: *The docks were full of triremes and naval stores, and all things were quite ready for use..... and the largest of the harbours were full of vessels and merchants coming from all parts, who, from their numbers, kept up a multitudinous sound of human voices, and din and clatter of all sorts night and day.* The Maltese Temple people are also known to have maintained cultural and trade links with other surrounding regions including the lands in Tyrrhenia, the Aegean, and possibly the North African coast - conforming to Plato's statement in *Timaeus* that *"Now in this island of Atlantis there was a great and wonderful empire which had rule over the whole island and several others, and over parts of the continent, and, furthermore, the men of Atlantis had subjected the parts of Libya within the columns of Heracles as far as Egypt, and of Europe as far as Tyrrhenia."*



Ship friezes at Tarxien Temple

These links required the construction of marine craft. Forty different graffiti depicting various types of ships have been identified on the adjacent uprights in the third temple of the Tarxien group of temples. The presence of these sea craft depictions confirm that during the period the maritime traffic to and from the islands was very much a going concern, while shipbuilding was already at an advanced stage of development. Further evidence of maritime traffic is

the excavation of large triangular anchors found at Tarxien and Mgarr temples. These kept the ship from drifting simply by their weight and by the friction made at the seabed. These anchors suggest that the ships were not too large or too heavy, and most probably were used in relatively sheltered waters. The Tarxien graffiti depict a number of sea craft building technology elements with different types of hulls including long, rounded, spoon-shaped, U-shaped and carvel-planked; different bows including pointed, upright and slanting; upright and ornamented sterns; and the presence of steering oars, deck lines, sails, masts, banks of oars and the bow-ram. The depictions show characteristics generally attributed to Cycladic, Cretan, Assyrian, and Egyptian ships.



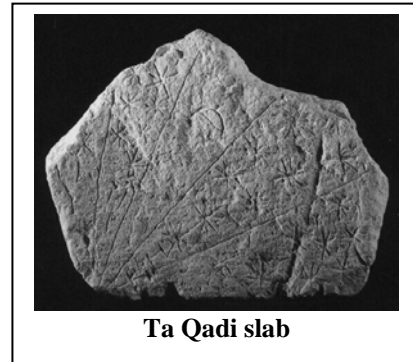
Mnajdra Temple

Navigation requires a good understanding of astronomy, and there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the Maltese Temple Culture people were well versed with astronomical concepts. The temple axis have been shown to be rather scattered but the greater majority of those studied appear to lie between south-east and south-west suggesting that the choice of this orientation was made

with some purpose in mind. The most obvious relationship for the preferences in temple orientation to suggest is an astronomical alignment, notably the main celestial bodies in the sun and moon. Observations carried out by different researchers at Mnajdra Temple have definitely shown that the central passage of the third temple is aligned with the solar equinoxes. On the first day of spring (equinox), the sun shines directly along the main passage and up to the main altar of the temple. The architecture further ensures that no sun rays reach above the altar stone. Investigators have further shown that at both the summer and winter solstice sunrise, only a narrow beam of light filters through the main doorway. This beam lights up the outer edge of one of two upright stones flanking an inner doorway. Another temple that shows a relationship to the rising sun is the main temple at Hagar Qim whose minor axis is aligned with sunset at the summer solstice. Temple alignments to moonrise have also been described. The axes of the larger temples at Ta' Hagarat, Ggantija and Hagar Qim are all approximately directed towards moonrise when the moon is at its extreme southern declination; while the main axis at Hagar Qim which has doorways at both ends, is also aligned with moonset at the maximum declination north. Less accurate

alignment to moonrise at the maximum declination south can be seen in the axis of the main temple at Skorba and the smaller temple at Ggantija.

These calendar observations would have served to guide the Temple builders in their farming activities. Besides the evidence suggested by the orientations of the various temples, it is further known that the early Maltese had a detailed awareness of astronomical objects as deduced from the symbols incised on a rock slab found in the Tal-Qadi Temple. These symbols appear to represent stars and a crescent moon. Further awareness of the lunar cycle may be deduced by the ten grooves incised on the back of two clay statuettes depicting the pregnant woman. The ten grooves may be interpreted to represent the duration of pregnancy that extends to approximately ten lunar months.



Ta Qadi slab

• **Conclusion**

The Atlantis debate has primarily seesawed between the believers and the sceptics. A review of Plato's texts confirms that the author was very careful to record his sources and trace the catastrophic story. Other texts from Egypt [*Ermitage Papyrus of Leningrad*] and Mesopotamia [*Curse of Akkad*] written in the late centuries of the third millennium BCE confirm the occurrence of a catastrophic event affecting the Mediterranean world. Archaeological evidence has further supported this widespread event with the social collapse of several Old World circum-Mediterranean Kingdoms including the Maltese Megalithic Temple Culture that occurred about 2200 BCE. The evidence points towards the catastrophe occurring as a result of a massive volcanic eruption that resulted in a drop in global temperature bring with it a "Little Ice Age" resulting in a desertification process in the Mediterranean region. All the evidence seems to support the fact that some historical reality lies behind Plato's story. Furthermore based on geology, biogeography, and the classical texts, there appears to be increasing evidence for the presence of a large landmass in the Central Mediterranean, now represented only by the Maltese and Pelagian Islands. The Maltese Megalithic Temple Culture which flourished circa 3700 - 2500 BCE is the most likely candidate to emulate the Atlantean culture.

This was first proposed by the architect Giorgio Grongnet in 1854 and subsequently by the Professor of Botany J. Borg in 1910. The suggestion never received widespread support, particularly after Spyridon Marinatos in 1939 proposed the Minoan civilization as a contender for the *Atlantikos* culture. The suggestion that Malta was Atlantis was taken up again in 1989 by author J. Attard in his fictional story entitled *The Atlantis Inheritance. A story of Malta and Gozo*. It was seriously analysed by a group of workers led by Dr. Anton Mifsud in 2000 through the publication *Malta: Echos of Plato's Island* and by F. Galea in 2002 by the publication *Malta fdal Atlantis*.

The main Mediterranean contender for Atlantis seems to be the Minoan civilization based on the volcanic island of Santorini. This however is a false contender since the Minoan culture dates only to about 2700-1500 BCE; a period that does not match the

chronological period described for Atlantis. The volcanic eruption of Thera-Santorini occurred ~1500 BCE. This in fact did not destroy the culture completely and continued to exist for a further ~150 years. The dating evidence thus excludes the Minoan civilization as a serious contender to the Atlantidean culture. The Maltese Temple civilization is a stronger contender.