

# Atlantis and the Minoans

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## Abstract<sup>1</sup>

In the 1960s and early 1970s it was fashionable among academics to identify Atlantis with Minoan Crete or Thera (Santorini) in the Aegean Sea. This Minoan hypothesis or Thera-Cretan theory was proposed in 1909 but did not attract much attention until it was popularised by three books in 1969. However, the hypothesis was criticised and arguably refuted in the late 1970s. Today there is consensus among archaeologists Atlantis never existed. This article details the background, heyday, and demise of the Minoan hypothesis, furthermore, it looks at why the Thera-Cretan theory collapsed.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was submitted to the postgraduate archaeology journal *Rosetta* and it passed review on 17/8/2020, but a day later it was rejected after a specialist editor criticised lack of modern sources cited in the bibliography (see appendix for reviewer's comments), so I have decided to self-publish the paper.

## Introduction

The island of Atlantis is first mentioned by Plato in *Timaeus-Critias*<sup>2</sup> which claims the Athenian lawmaker Solon travelled to Sais in Egypt where he heard a tradition about a sunken island civilisation named Atlantis; he adapted the story into an epic poem, but it was never finished (Plato: *Timaeus*, 21c). Nevertheless, Solon told the story to his close friend and relative Dropides, who in turn by word of mouth passed it down to his family (Plato himself was a descendant of Dropides). This oral transmission almost certainly never occurred<sup>3</sup>. There is no mention of Atlantis in ancient Egyptian records<sup>4</sup> and virtually all contemporary classical scholars consider Atlantis to be fictional<sup>5</sup> and Plato's "invention for the purposes of illustrating arguments around Grecian polity".<sup>6</sup> As noted by Julia Annas<sup>7</sup> in her *Plato: A Very Short Introduction*:

The continuing industry of discovering Atlantis illustrates the dangers of reading Plato. For he is clearly using what has become a standard device of fiction - stressing the historicity of an event (and the discovery of hitherto unknown authorities) as an indication that what follows is fiction. The idea is that we should use the story to examine our ideas of government and power. We have missed the point if instead of thinking about these issues we go off exploring the seabed.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, a sizable number of scholars<sup>8</sup> took the Solonic source of Plato's story at face value and argued Atlantis was Minoan Crete or Thera (Santorini). This Minoan hypothesis or Thera-Cretan theory was notably supported by

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<sup>2</sup> Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias* form two parts of a continuous dialogue, see Haslam 1976

<sup>3</sup> Smith, 2016

<sup>4</sup> Renfrew, 1992

<sup>5</sup> Naddaf, 1994; a 1983 survey of 340 professional teaching archaeologists revealed 93.7% present to their students a "negative" viewpoint of Atlantis as a real place, compared to only 1.3% who present a "positive" view (while the remaining 5% are "neutral"), see Feder, 1984: 532-533 for the survey's results.

<sup>6</sup> Dawson and Hayward, 2016: 2

<sup>7</sup> Annas, 2003: 42

<sup>8</sup> Galanopoulos, 1960a, 1960b, 1960c, 1966; Bennett, 1963; Mavor, 1966a, 1966b, 1969; Carpenter, 1966: 30-31; Vitaliano, 1968; Galanopoulos and Bacon, 1969; Platon, 1971: 303-320; Tschoegl, 1972

the classicist John V. Luce who thought Solon acquired a tradition about Atlantis he heard while in Egypt: “Plato, I believe did not invent this tradition... It came to him from his ancestor Solon”<sup>9</sup>. In 1969, three books popularised the Minoan hypothesis: *Voyage to Atlantis* by James Mavor (updated in 1990), *Atlantis: The Truth Behind the Legend* by Angelos G. Galanopoulos and Edward Bacon, and *Lost Atlantis: New Light on an Old Legend* by John V. Luce. All three books were reviewed by Vitaliano<sup>10</sup> who decided Luce’s is the most convincing but dismissed Mavor’s book as poorly written – a view shared by the classicist Moses Finley<sup>11</sup> who reviewed both in *The New York Review of Books*, as well as by the archaeologist Colin Renfrew<sup>12</sup> in the journal *Nature*.

Despite Mavor’s book received scathing reviews, he was responsible for organising two expeditions to Thera in 1966 and 1967. The latter resulted in excavation of Akrotiri and newspapers across the globe popularised the idea Mavor had discovered Atlantis with sensational albeit inaccurate headlines<sup>13</sup>. In Mavor’s own words: “The world press had become our ally”<sup>14</sup>. Long though before Mavor’s expeditions to Thera, the Minoan hypothesis had a few proponents, although it had “made little or no impact on learned opinion at the time”<sup>15</sup>. Mavor and Luce both in 1969 credited the archaeologist Kingdon T. Frost as having first identified Atlantis with Minoan Crete, but the Minoan hypothesis was arguably disproven in the mid-late 1970s<sup>16</sup>, resulting in some proponents like Luce to become sceptical – giving up the theory or substantially revising their views<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Luce, 1969: 35

<sup>10</sup> Vitaliano, 1971

<sup>11</sup> Finley, 1969a; 1969b

<sup>12</sup> Renfrew, 1969

<sup>13</sup> Ellis, 1998: 92

<sup>14</sup> Mavor, 1990: 152

<sup>15</sup> Luce, 1969: 9

<sup>16</sup> Fears, 1978

<sup>17</sup> Vitaliano, 1978: 160; Luce, 1978: 65

## Minoan hypothesis in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century

The Minoan hypothesis was first proposed by Kingdon T. Frost in February 1909 who published an (anonymous) two-page article titled “The Lost Continent” in *The Times*<sup>18</sup>. Four years later, in *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Frost published another article about Atlantis<sup>19</sup>. His main argument was Solon heard a tradition by Saitic priests of an island civilisation that was destroyed, but he mistranslated or misunderstood some details, as well as embellished the story for his poem. These distortions conveniently explain any discrepancies between the Atlantis of *Timaeus-Critias* and Minoan Crete:

An obvious difficulty in identifying Crete with Atlantis is that Crete is inside the Pillars of Hercules, whereas Atlantis is stated most expressly to have been outside them. Although this objection seems formidable, the confusion can be shown to have arisen in a perfectly natural manner, if we imagine ourselves at Sais and take the same geographical point of view as the Egyptian priests. It is the name which has caused the difficulty, and we are expressly told that the names in the story had been translated into Egyptian and were given Greek equivalents by Solon. The Egyptian version probably said, ‘an island in the furthest west’. Crete, an island in the open sea would indeed have seemed in the furthest west to the coast-hugging [Egyptian] mariners... But in Solon’s time the geographical horizon had widened...<sup>20</sup>

Plato clearly describes the island of Atlantis outside the strait of Gibraltar in the Atlantic (Plato, *Timaeus*: 24e), but Frost<sup>21</sup> re-located Atlantis to the Aegean Sea by arguing ancient Egyptians had a more limited geographical knowledge than the Greeks. Plato (*Timaeus*: 23e) dates the destruction of Atlantis 9000 years before Solon’s supposed journey to Egypt c. 590 BCE (roughly 9600 BCE). Curiously, Frost did not explain this discrepancy as a distortion in the oral transmission when Saitic priests had spoken to Solon<sup>22</sup>. For example since the priests were speaking in a foreign language he could

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<sup>18</sup> Reprinted in Vidal-Naquet, 2007: 171-178

<sup>19</sup> Frost, 1913

<sup>20</sup> Frost, 1909

<sup>21</sup> Frost, 1909; 1913: 199

<sup>22</sup> Frost stresses the oral transmission of the Atlantis tale; if Solon instead read a historical document in Egypt there could not have been distortions because writing unlike word of mouth is unalterable (minus

have misunderstood or mistranslated what priests supposedly told him about age of Atlantis' civilisation); instead Frost offered no explanation why his dating of Atlantis or age of destruction failed to match Plato's. Frost's identification of Atlantis with Minoan Crete suffers from the fact many other locations share a number of the same features and so are not unique to Minoan Crete.<sup>23</sup> By the same flawed reasoning, Atlantis has been identified with Cyprus,<sup>24</sup> Malta,<sup>25</sup> Ireland<sup>26</sup> and different islands and places, some extremely far-fetched. Nevertheless, Frost won over a few proponents to his theory<sup>27</sup>. It is perhaps worthwhile below to list the main similarities of Atlantis with Minoan Crete:

<b>Atlantis</b>	<b>Minoan Crete</b>
Athenians fought Atlanteans (Plato, <i>Timaeus</i> : 25c-d)	Mycenaean invasion of Crete
Atlantis ruled over islands (Plato, <i>Timaeus</i> : 25a)	Minoan settlements in Aegean
Atlantis had a great harbour (Plato, <i>Critias</i> : 117e)	Crete had a port (Kommos)
Bull-rituals on Atlantis (Plato, <i>Critias</i> : 119d-e)	Bull-leaping at Knossos

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interpolations). Plato mentions ancient Egyptian documents as preserving the Atlantis tradition, Plato, *Ti.*: 24e, but he does not say Solon directly read them, Plato, *Ti.*: 24a; Frost too realised there is no suggestion in Plato's dialogue, Solon read hieroglyphics. The transmission (of the Atlantis story) from Solon to Dropides was also by word of mouth, see Smith, 2016. Plato mentions a list of recorded names told by the priests to Solon, but the list does not include the actual tradition; it is simply an aide-memoire of names, Plato, *Cri.*: 113a-b. Dropides' descendants are noted by Plato to have transmitted the story from memory, Plato, *Ti.*: 20e, 26a.

<sup>23</sup> James, 1995: 78

<sup>24</sup> Sarmast, 2006

<sup>25</sup> Mifsud *et al.* 2000

<sup>26</sup> Erlingsson, 2004

<sup>27</sup> Baikie, 1910: 257-259; Mackenzie, 1917: 106-114; Balch, 1917

These are interesting parallels but are not necessarily specific to Crete, for example Carthage had harbours, while rituals and games involving bulls were not limited to the Minoans but different cultures such as Hattians and Canaanites; Plato (*Critias*. 119e) describes Atlanteans as sacrificing bulls following rituals, but distinctive acrobatic bull-leaping depicted in Minoan art is not mentioned. While Plato (*Timaeus*: 25a) presents Atlantis as a maritime empire, the extent Minoan Crete of the Neopalatial period (1700-1450 BCE) was a thalassocracy is disputed by archaeologists<sup>28</sup>. Minoan civilisation on Crete had an influence on separate Aegean islands (notably Akrotiri, Thera and Kastri, Cythera) but arguably their influence was cultural, rather than political. Frost certainly overstressed the similarities between Atlantis and Minoan Crete, when in reality the “resemblance of the two locations is, really, very slight”<sup>29</sup>. Crete did not have canals, at least no archaeological evidence has been detected. Kershaw provides a list of at least ten differences between Atlantis and Crete and concludes these disparities are enormous<sup>30</sup>. Sprague de Camps’ aphorism about Atlantis – remains true to this day:

...you cannot change all the details of Plato's [Atlantis] story and still claim to have Plato's story.<sup>31</sup>

Vitaliano highlights the same problem:

By judicious selection of those parts of Plato’s account which fit, and rejection of those which do not as distortions or exaggerations, a case can be made for almost any part of the world as the site of a historical Atlantis, and indeed it is hard to find any part of the world which has not been proposed at one time or another.<sup>32</sup>

Luce points out a major flaw in Frost’s argument was his “weak and vague” description of the sudden downfall of Atlantis<sup>33</sup>; he lacked an explanation at the time for the natural

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<sup>28</sup> Hägg and Marinatos, 1982; Niemeier, 2009

<sup>29</sup> Gill, 1980: xi

<sup>30</sup> Kershaw 2017: 304-305

<sup>31</sup> Sprague de Camps, 1970: 80

<sup>32</sup> Vitaliano, 1973: 229

<sup>33</sup> Luce, 1969: 56

catastrophe Plato says destroyed Atlantis: “after the onset of an unbearable day and night” the island of Atlantis “...sank below the sea and disappeared” (Plato, *Timaeus* 25d). Frost almost disregarded this detail because Crete is not submerged. Another difficulty is how Solon could have heard a tradition about Crete, but not recognised it for what it was. As noted by Gill<sup>34</sup> ancient Greeks would have had a “clearer picture of Minoan Crete than the Egyptians” (although given the long stretch of time – between Solon’s day and the Bronze-Age on Crete such knowledge would have been limited). Frost however could argue because of distortions that accrued during transmission of the story by word of mouth, Solon failed to identify Atlantis with Minoan Crete:

It seems therefore that Solon really did hear a tale in Sais which filled him with wonder and which was really the true but misunderstood Egyptian record of the Minoans, though neither Solon nor the priest dreamed of identifying the sea-girt empire of tradition with Crete, the little island which had loomed so large to their forefathers... Plato himself professes to have taken his story not from Egypt but from the poem which Solon contemplated. Hence the Athenian State, which in its idealised form is fictitious.<sup>35</sup>

Frost’s Minoan hypothesis was largely ignored until several decades after his death<sup>36</sup>. John Pendlebury was one of the very few archaeologists who held a favourable view of identifying Crete with Atlantis in the 1930s<sup>37</sup>. Despite its implausibility, the Minoan hypothesis is not exactly incongruent with geology and archaeology. Frost himself was appointed a lecturer in archaeology at Queen's University Belfast. He described far-fetched and pseudoarchaeological location hypotheses of Atlantis such as inside the middle of the Atlantic Ocean as “palpably absurd”<sup>38</sup>. Frost died shortly after his second article was published preventing development of his hypothesis until decades later.

Frost’s had never suggested a natural catastrophe to explain the sudden downfall of Minoan civilisation to match the destruction of Atlantis described by Plato (*Timaeus*:

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<sup>34</sup> Gill, 1980: xi

<sup>35</sup> Frost, 1909

<sup>36</sup> Vitaliano, 1971: 67

<sup>37</sup> Pendlebury, 1939: 286

<sup>38</sup> Frost, 1913: 189

25d). This dramatically changed when the Greek archaeologist Spyridon Marinatos published a paper in 1939 first suggesting coastal settlements on Minoan Crete were devastated by tidal waves caused by a volcanic eruption on Thera, c. 1500 BCE. He did not link Atlantis to Minoan Crete until about a decade later. Thera (Santorini) is roughly 70 miles north of Crete; nearby is a submerged caldera. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, geologists uncovered evidence an eruption destroyed a Bronze-Age civilisation on the island, but Marinatos was the first to argue at close distance Crete must have been hit by volcanic ash and ejecting rocks<sup>39</sup>. As evidence, he found pumice in ruins at Amnisos, a Bronze Age site on the north side of Crete. Marinatos, first linked Atlantis to Minoan Crete in a talk he delivered at the Hellenic Anthropological Society in 1948:

The catastrophe of Thera accompanied by tremendous natural phenomena and the simultaneous disappearance of the Cretans from Egypt gave rise to the myth of a submersion of a large and prosperous island.<sup>40</sup>

A few years later, Marinatos published a paper “On the Atlantis Legend”<sup>41</sup>. To explain utopian-esque features of Atlantis in Plato’s dialogues – Marinatos in his 1950 paper argued these were added by the Egyptians to embellish the story. He maintained the Atlantis tradition was somewhat distorted before it reached Solon because Egyptians fused with it aspects from stories of their myths, including the *Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor*<sup>42</sup> (a second millennium BCE tale about a return voyage and mysterious island). According to Marinatos this Egyptian mythical tale of a “supremely happy island which later became submerged”<sup>43</sup> was incorporated into the Atlantis tradition. Aside though from an island with plentiful conditions becoming submerged, nothing else in the story resembles Atlantis in *Timaeus-Critias*; therefore, Marinatos claim is highly speculative. The Egyptologist J. Gwyn Griffiths compared the *Tale of the Shipwrecked* to Atlantis and found only “the Egyptian tradition of blissful divine rule is reflected in one aspect of Atlantis”.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Marinatos, 1939: 432-433

<sup>40</sup> Marinatos, 1948

<sup>41</sup> Marinatos, 1950; translated into English in 1969 and revised in 1971

<sup>42</sup> Marinatos, 1971: 14

<sup>43</sup> Marinatos, 1971: 15

<sup>44</sup> Griffiths, 1985: 12

Plato describes inhabitants of Atlantis as having ruled over peoples as far as Tyrrhenia (central Italy) and Libya, in northern Africa up to the border of Egypt (Plato, *Timaeus*: 25b). Following a suggestion by Frost<sup>45</sup>, Marinatos argued there was a historical core to this detail in the story and Atlanteans were Sea Peoples (a seafaring confederation who attacked Egypt in the 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE). The identity of the Sea Peoples remains uncertain and is debated by scholars<sup>46</sup>. Frost speculatively identified Sea Peoples with Mycenaean Greeks<sup>47</sup>. Marinatos instead argued Sea Peoples were not Mycenaeans, but “attempted to attack Greece before they reached Egypt”<sup>48</sup>. One argument against identifying Sea Peoples with Mycenaeans is ancient Egyptian records describe tribes of the Sea Peoples as circumcised<sup>49</sup>. However, this has been disputed.<sup>50</sup> Regardless, Marinatos’ theory about the Sea Peoples as Atlanteans did not attract attention<sup>51</sup>; it was his linking of Atlantis to the Thera eruption and Crete that caused a renewal of interest in the Minoan hypothesis in the 1960s.

### **Minoan hypothesis in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century**

In the 1950s, Marinatos’ paper on Atlantis was read by the Greek seismologist Angelos G. Galanopoulos who became an outspoken supporter of the Minoan hypothesis and

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<sup>45</sup> Frost, 1909

<sup>46</sup> Cline, 2010: 29-34

<sup>47</sup> Frost 1909, 1913: 196

<sup>48</sup> Marinatos 1971: 44

<sup>49</sup> Page, 1959: 21

<sup>50</sup> Margalith, 1994: 74

<sup>51</sup> There are many discrepancies between the Sea Peoples and Atlanteans, arguably too many to take the Sea Peoples hypothesis serious, for example Atlanteans used triremes (Plato, *Critias*: 117d) but Medinet Habu reliefs depict the Sea Peoples’ warships as powered by sails, not oars. Atlanteans are described by Plato as using chariots, pulled by horses (Plato, *Critias*: 119a-b) but the Sea Peoples used oxen; Atlanteans defeated Egyptians (Plato, *Timaeus*: 24c) but the Sea Peoples were defeated by Egyptians. Despite these sorts of inconsistencies, the Sea Peoples hypothesis continues to have a small number of proponents, see Kühne, 2004 and Franke, 2010.

published three articles on the same topic<sup>52</sup>. He also co-authored a book with Edward Bacon, archaeological editor for *The Illustrated London News*<sup>53</sup>. Galanopoulos was far less interested in Crete than Marinatos; instead, he opted to identify the metropolis of Atlantis with Thera and pointed out before the Thera eruption the island archipelago was circular in its shape. This particularistic view was rejected by other proponents of the Minoan hypothesis<sup>54</sup>; Luce criticised Galanopoulos for superimposing Atlantis' city onto Thera and described this as a "misleading exercise"<sup>55</sup>. However, Galanopoulos managed to attract supporters. In 1965, the US oceanographer James Mavor met him in Athens, and was won over by his arguments<sup>56</sup>.

Once Mavor in Athens met Galanopoulos who told him about his Minoan hypothesis – he set out to prove Thera was the metropolis of Atlantis and planned an expedition to the island. The expedition in 1966 included five individuals with distinct specialities: Mavor (oceanography), Galanopoulos (seismology), Harold Edgerton (engineering), Edward Zarudzki (physics) and Hartley Hoskins (geology). The primary purpose of the expedition was "seismic work under the direction of Zarudzki"<sup>57</sup>, and Mavor managed to acquire a research vessel from the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution where he worked. Newspapers inaccurately reporting Mavor and his colleagues discovered a manmade structure at the bottom of the caldera next to the island:

At conclusion of their two weeks on Thera, they headed for home, only to learn that their exploits had been chronicled in a somewhat exaggerated form, in newspapers around the world... the *New York Times* of September 4, 1966 ran this headline: MOAT BELIEVED TO BE PART OF ATLANTIS FOUND IN AEGEAN SEA. Mavor felt vindicated by the media coverage.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Galanopoulos, 1960a, 1960b, 1960c

<sup>53</sup> Galanopoulos and Bacon, 1969

<sup>54</sup> Ley, 1967

<sup>55</sup> Luce, 1972

<sup>56</sup> Mavor, 1990: 13-18

<sup>57</sup> Mavor, 1990: 77

<sup>58</sup> Ellis, 1998: 82

Despite Mavor insisting the discovery of a moat was not true, “clarification fell on deaf ears”<sup>59</sup> although he welcomed publicity. Mavor published two articles on the Minoan hypothesis in the US magazine *Oceanus*<sup>60</sup>. Galanopoulos’ ideas were also printed in US publications such as *The Saturday Review*<sup>61</sup>. Around the same time – the Minoan hypothesis received a further boost in support with a remarkable geological discovery on the eastern side on Crete:

Strong reinforcement of Marinatos’ theory was provided by two American oceanographers [1965] which revealed that volcanic ash from the Bronze age eruption of Santorin must have blanketed the whole eastern end of Crete, its most habitable part.<sup>62</sup>

Subsequently, in 1967 Mavor planned another expedition to Thera to prove the Minoan hypothesis and titled this ‘Helleno-American Multidisciplinary Scientific Investigation of Thera and Quest for the Lost Atlantis’. He organised another group of individuals to assist him, including Marinatos and the classical scholar Emil Vermeule<sup>63</sup>. The second expedition benefited from having the support of archaeologists and financial backing of the Archaeological Society of Athens. The expedition was a success in the sense it resulted in the unearthing of Akrotiri (Marinatos led the excavation) and afterwards Mavor and Vermeule held a press conference about the excavation at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston<sup>64</sup>. It was soon established by archaeologists that Akrotiri on the island of Thera was destroyed by the eruption of the volcano. Despite the success of the expedition, there was no evidence whatsoever to substantiate Mavor’s belief he “confirmed much of Galanopoulos’ theory that Thera was the metropolis of Atlantis”<sup>65</sup>.

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<sup>59</sup> Mavor, 1990: 152

<sup>60</sup> Mavor, 1966a, 1966b

<sup>61</sup> Galanopoulos, 1966

<sup>62</sup> Vitaliano, 1971: 68

<sup>63</sup> Mavor, 1990: 157-158

<sup>64</sup> Vermeule, 1967

<sup>65</sup> Mavor, 1990: 256

Vermeule<sup>66</sup> was sceptical of Mavor's belief he had discovered Atlantis. Marinatos too was unimpressed and complained Mavor's fixation with trying to discover Atlantis was side-tracking genuine archaeological research<sup>67</sup>. He later severed ties with Mavor and Vermeule, ordering their archaeology permits on the island to be rescinded. Vermeule thought Marinatos held a grudge because newspapers neglected to mention his name and "no one seemed interested in (the sponsorship of the) Archaeological Society of Athens". However, the Minoan hypothesis in the late 1960s and early 1970s continued to attract more supporters and Mavor in 1969 published *Voyage to Atlantis*, although it received bad reviews<sup>68</sup>. Vitaliano<sup>69</sup> criticised Mavor's book for reading as a "gossip columnists' tidbits" concerning his and Vermeule's quarrel with Marinatos. Marinatos<sup>70</sup> described Mavor's book as only interesting from a "psychological point of view".

Unlike Mavor, Luce's book received mostly positive reviews even among the sceptics. *Lost Atlantis: New Light on an Old Legend* was successful, and it was published under a different title for paperback version (*The End of Atlantis*). The eminent archaeologist Mortimer Wheeler wrote the foreword. In the book, Luce put forward many well-thought out arguments to substantiate the Minoan hypothesis; these were taken seriously by scholars at time of publication and one scholar commented in 1970 "there is always a sporting chance"<sup>71</sup> the Minoan hypothesis might be correct. Luce, like Mavor, took Plato at face value when he claimed the Atlantis tradition was brought from Sais, Egypt to Greece by Solon, but he more cautiously thought Plato added most embellishments:

Plato later perpetuated the misunderstanding by the literary and artistic form he imposed on Solon's report.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Vermeule, 1967

<sup>67</sup> Ellis, 1998: 84

<sup>68</sup> Finley, 1969a; Renfrew, 1969; Stubbings, 1970

<sup>69</sup> Vitaliano, 1971: 74

<sup>70</sup> Marinatos, 1971: 7

<sup>71</sup> Cook, 1970

<sup>72</sup> Luce, 1969: 10

Luce argued Plato based a few of his descriptions of Atlantis on Egypt and Babylon:

Plato, like Solon, realized the great dramatic possibilities of the *Keftiu*-Atlantis story. His imagination got to work on the details. He gilded the palace architecture with touches of oriental splendour from his readings of Herodotus and Ctesias. He filled the upland pastures with herds of African elephants. The square allotments and the great irrigation ditches owe much to Egypt (which he had seen) and Babylon (which he had not).<sup>73</sup>

He cautioned the grain of historical truth in the embellished Atlantis story is only a faint memory of the Minoan civilisation on Crete and its destruction by the Theran eruption:

I only emphasize the hard core of the legend as I see it, namely the tradition of a great and highly civilized island empire which had once menaced the autonomy of Greece and Athens in particular, and which came to an end as the result of a natural catastrophe. Plato, I believe, did not invent this tradition. It came to him from his ancestor Solon, as he tells us...<sup>74</sup>

The classicist Rhys Carpenter shared Luce's view but went further than him to argue the whole dialogue of *Critias* is a work of fiction and only *Timaeus* contains a nugget of history – a folk memory of Atlantis' destruction. According to Carpenter<sup>75</sup> who took the Solonic source of the Atlantis tradition at face value like Luce did<sup>76</sup>, Solon brought back to Greece with him an oral tradition from Egypt this was passed down by word of mouth to Plato, but all his vivid descriptions of Atlantis were product of his imagination:

It is arguable that Plato's report in the *Timaios* of a conversation between Solon and an Egyptian priest in Sais may have had a basis in historic fact; but it is not arguable that Plato's much longer account in the *Kritias* of the history, topography, power and wealth of the kingdom of Atlantis, had any other source than the lively imagination of Plato himself.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Luce, 1969: 180-181

<sup>74</sup> Luce, 1969: 35

<sup>75</sup> Carpenter, 1966: 30-31

<sup>76</sup> Luce, 1969: 10, 35-36, 52, 180-181

<sup>77</sup> Carpenter, 1970

Plato in his dialogues locates Atlantis beyond the Pillars of Heracles (Plato, *Timaeus*: 24e) meaning the Strait of Gibraltar, not the Aegean. To solve this problem of location, Luce suggested Solon had heard of Crete by the name Keftiu (*kftjw*) in Egyptian. Luce thought Keftiu was Crete<sup>78</sup> and many modern scholars make the same identification,<sup>79</sup> but this remains uncertain and there are a number<sup>80</sup> of hypothetical different sites:

Keftiu is far from being unanimously agreed on by orientalisks. John Strange [1980] prefers to see the Keftiu as Cypriots. Claude Vandersleyen [2002] refuses to identify them with either Crete or Cyprus, and proposes that they should be viewed as an unidentified people of Asia Minor.<sup>81</sup>

According to Luce, the etymology of Keftiu (*kftjw*) is “pillar” and he related this to Atlas (who in Greek mythology holds up the world pillar). He further argued Solon translated the word Keftiu (ancient Egyptian), into Atlantis (ancient Greek) meaning “of Atlas”:

If he had asked what *Keftiu* meant, he may have received an indication that it was an island with a pillar which held up the sky.<sup>82</sup>

The significance of this is Luce claimed Solon shifted Atlantis from the Aegean to the Atlantic based on the etymology – so Keftiu was confused with the Pillars of Heracles at the strait of Gibraltar. This argument was not supported by other proponents of the Minoan hypothesis; Galanopoulos and Bacon<sup>83</sup>, in contrast positioned the Pillars of Heracles at the promontories Taenarum or Maleas in the Peloponnese. Even if *Keftiu* was Crete “Egyptian records have little to say about *Keftiu* at all”<sup>84</sup> so Solon could have acquired little to no information about Minoan Crete if he travelled to Egypt.

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<sup>78</sup> Luce, 1969: 53

<sup>79</sup> Wachsmann, 1987: 98-99; Panagiotopoulos. 2001: 263-265; Matic, 2014: 281

<sup>80</sup> Strange, 1980; Vandersleyen, 2002

<sup>81</sup> Fabre, 2004: 34

<sup>82</sup> Luce, 1969: 180

<sup>83</sup> Galanopoulos and Bacon, 1969: 97 cf. Smith, 2019

<sup>84</sup> Gill, 1980: xi

To explain other disparities including age and dimensions between Atlantis and Crete, Luce argued Solon, or the Egyptians could have magnified them by a factor of ten by accident<sup>85</sup>, or these were Plato's own exaggerations<sup>86</sup>. Galanoupolos<sup>87</sup>, Bennett<sup>88</sup> and Andrews<sup>89</sup> preferred to argue Solon had inflated the numbers by accident; in contrast Carpenter took the view it was specifically Plato who modified the size of the island: "Atlantis grew in Plato's thoughts into a continent too large for the Mediterranean" <sup>90</sup>.

### **Atlantis: Fact or Fiction?**

In 1975, the Department of Classical Studies at Indiana University had sponsored a symposium "Atlantis: Fact or Fiction?" (conference papers were published three years later). Luce's paper modified the Minoan hypothesis largely in response to some of the aforementioned difficulties<sup>91</sup>. No longer taking Plato at face value, Luce now doubted the Solonic transmission of the Atlantis story, "Whether any information passed along it... much open to doubt"<sup>92</sup>. As noted by Gill: "Luce [1978] himself now gives a much more cautious statement of the theory"<sup>93</sup>. He now pondered if it was Plato (not Solon) who went to Egypt and spoke to Saitic priests "gathering some historical information, however garbled"<sup>94</sup>, which served as an inspiration for Atlantis. At the symposium, a devastating rebuttal of the Minoan hypothesis was presented by J. Rufus Fears:

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<sup>85</sup> Luce, 1969: 181

<sup>86</sup> Luce, 1969: 194

<sup>87</sup> Galanoupolos, 1960a

<sup>88</sup> Bennett, 1963

<sup>89</sup> Andrews, 1967

<sup>90</sup> Carpenter, 1966: 31

<sup>91</sup> Luce, 1978

<sup>92</sup> Luce, 1978: 65

<sup>93</sup> Gill, 1980: xii

<sup>94</sup> Luce, 1978: 63

Neither archaeology nor Greek mythology offers any support for the view that the tale of Atlantis reflects... imperial power and sudden disappearance of Minoan Crete... how futile must be any search for historical elements in the myth... Atlantis is not a remembrance of things of the past, but rather completely a poetic fantasy.<sup>95</sup>

By 1982, Luce was sensibly no longer arguing Atlantis was Minoan Crete in the form of a historical core embedded in a garbled tradition; he claimed the equation of Minoan Crete with Atlantis now only worked “in a figurative sense”<sup>96</sup> meaning Atlantis was no longer a real but imaginary island, but Plato’s used Crete as a model to invent Atlantis. Similarly, Robert Stevenson’s fictional Treasure Island was probably based on a real island. The idea Atlantis was inspired by the Thera eruption or Crete – is a lot more plausible than the Minoan hypothesis<sup>97</sup>; the latter should not be confused with former:

Plato might have derived some of his ideas from Minoan Crete in one way or another, but such a derivation is far too roundabout for Atlantis to qualify as a legend which presents a distorted view of an actual event... Atlantis must be considered just another of the myths of Plato.<sup>98</sup>

## Conclusion

Minoan Crete poorly resembles Atlantis to the extent “any hunt for correspondence of detail between Atlantis and Minoan Crete is a wild goose chase”<sup>99</sup>. If Atlantis was Crete or Thera, why was this identification not made by Plato? Luce argued Plato failed to identify Atlantis as Crete because the tradition of Atlantis was garbled before it reached him because of many alterations to the story during its oral transmission<sup>100</sup>. However,

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<sup>95</sup> Fears, 1978: 131

<sup>96</sup> Luce, 1982

<sup>97</sup> Scranton, 1977; Forsyth, 1980; Hartmann, 1987; Rehak, 2002

<sup>98</sup> Vitaliano 1978: 160

<sup>99</sup> Lee, 1977: 164

<sup>100</sup> Luce, 1969: 34, 180

Luce at the same time argued for vague traces of “topographical and customs of Crete” in the story<sup>101</sup> leaving it unexplained how Plato failed to recognise the Minoan features.

In 1976 and 1977, the classicist Christopher Gill published two articles that arguably refuted the Minoan hypothesis. The first article became the basis of notes he published on *Timaeus-Critias*<sup>102</sup>. One of Gill’s main criticisms focuses on how solely Solon could have heard the Atlantis tradition in Sais, Egypt (assuming he did travel there); why was the story not available to other Greeks?<sup>103</sup>. Herodotus travelled to the same place (Sais) Plato says Solon did but mentions nothing in his *The Histories* about Atlantis<sup>104</sup>. Plato is the sole primary source for the Atlantis story; all ancient writers that mention the story quote (or rely directly) from him, hence: “The Atlantis tale of course, is not folklore in the strict sense”<sup>105</sup>. Atlantis therefore is very unlike Troy; the latter appears in Greek mythology, but the island of Atlantis does not appear in any known tradition.

The geologist Dorothy B. Vitaliano, originally sympathetic to the Minoan hypothesis<sup>106</sup> became sceptical<sup>107</sup> and later abandoned the hypothesis entirely<sup>108</sup>. Her key criticisms touched upon the Thera eruption and how geologists originally overemphasized its impact<sup>109</sup>. Gill<sup>110</sup> has noted there is a major issue with chronology; if the Thera eruption occurred in the 17<sup>th</sup> or early 16<sup>th</sup> century BCE it cannot have resulted in the downfall of Minoan civilisation since numerous palaces continued to flourish until c. 1450 BCE:

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<sup>101</sup> Luce, 1969: 183

<sup>102</sup> Gill, 1980: viii-xii, revised in Gill, 2017: 43-48

<sup>103</sup> Gill, 1980: ix

<sup>104</sup> Smith, 2016: 12

<sup>105</sup> Vitaliano, 1971: 66

<sup>106</sup> Vitaliano, 1968

<sup>107</sup> Vitaliano, 1971, 1973: 251

<sup>108</sup> Vitaliano, 1978: 160

<sup>109</sup> Vitaliano, 1978: 147-154

<sup>110</sup> Gill, 2017: 46

When Luce wrote his book, the evidence of datable pottery suggested that the eruption occurred about 1500 [BCE]... It is now widely supposed that the eruption at Thera took place in the late seventeenth or early sixteenth century, and that the large-scale burning of palaces in Crete occurred significantly later.

Admittedly, a small number of scholars continue to date the Thera eruption to around 1500 BCE.<sup>111</sup> However, this does not close the gap between c. 1500 and 1450 BCE: “If Thera exploded before the fall of the Cretan centres, how could it have possibility been destroyed?”<sup>112</sup>. Given this issue with chronology – the Minoan hypothesis today has far fewer proponents it did in its heyday<sup>113</sup>. Nevertheless, the Atlantis author Peter James in 1995 complained “hackneyed claims about Thera are still being peddled”<sup>114</sup>. Many are the result of tourism industry on Thera (Santorini) or poor scholarship.<sup>115</sup> In 2019 the Lost Atlantis Experience Museum (on Santorini) opened its doors to visitors; the museum promotes the Minoan hypothesis and seems to ignore critical literature.

Although the Minoan hypothesis is arguably refuted, it remains a possibility “Minoan Crete was one of the models Plato used to create his fictitious Atlantis”<sup>116</sup>. When Plato was alive, Greeks undoubtedly had some knowledge of Minoan Crete drawing on their own myths; Plato in his *Laws* (706b) even mentions the mythological king Minos. Such knowledge should not be overstressed and Luce is correct to have cautioned Greeks of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE would have “remembered very little at all about the fifteenth century BC”<sup>117</sup> so it is more likely Plato based Atlantis on places he was familiar with and had visited such as Athens<sup>118</sup>. As for Atlantis becoming submerged Plato could have been inspired by the destruction of the city Helike in 373 BCE that was destroyed by an earthquake and accompanying tsunami.

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<sup>111</sup> Driessen, 2019: 196

<sup>112</sup> James, 1995: 80

<sup>113</sup> Pellegrino 1991; Castleden 1998; Menzies, 2011; Stergakos 2014

<sup>114</sup> James, 1995: 83

<sup>115</sup> Rehak, 2002

<sup>116</sup> Gill, 1980: xii

<sup>117</sup> Luce, 1969: 203

<sup>118</sup> Vidal-Naquet, 2007: 23

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## Appendix

### *Atlantis and the Minoans - Specialist Editors 2 & 3 - Final changes*

Dear Oliver,

These are some final comments on your paper from our second and third specialist editors, these have been merged for ease of reading apart from their general comments which can be read below. The reason for additional Specialist Editors is due to their availability and expertise.

SE 2 Comments:

I read the article with interest and I think that, with some small changes, it is ready for publication.

The article traces the history of the Minoan hypothesis step by step, from its birth down to its almost complete rejection. In the introduction the author correctly refers to Plato's dialogue from whose interpretation the Minoan hypothesis stems, then he anticipates the fortune of the theory in the 1960s and 1970s and its subsequent decline in the mid-late 1970s. At this point the discourse loses some clarity because it goes back in time by mentioning the three books that popularized the theory in 1969 and finally takes a further leap back to 1909, with Frost's first identification of Atlantis with Crete. Although a complete reading of the article clarifies the time sequence of these studies and hypotheses, I would suggest following the chronological order also in the introduction, or at least inserting the three books of 1969 (those by Luce, Mavor, Galanopoulos and Bacon) in the paragraph where they belong and moving the part on the decline of the theory at the end of the introduction. The subsequent body of the article is clear and well set out.

On page 5, the extent Minoan Crete was a thalassocracy is questioned and in this regard only one contribution (Hägg and Marinatos, 1982) is cited, which however does not appear in the bibliography at the end. In addition to adding the missing entry in the bibliography, I suggest supporting the statement with some more recent bibliographical references. The bibliography is rich but only 10 of the works cited have been published in the last 20 years. If on the one hand the article traces the history of the studies and therefore follows the fortune of the theory, which roughly comes to an end in the late 1970s, on the other hand some major issues that are mentioned (Cretan thalassocracy, Minoan influence in the Aegean, identity of the Sea Peoples, identification of Keftiu with Crete...) have sparked discussions even in more recent years. For an overview and summary of these topics I suggest consulting two (relatively recent) manuals that, I believe, could be easily found even at this difficult

time: Shelmerdine (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Aegean Bronze Age* (2008) and Cline (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Bronze Age Aegean* (2010).

I highly recommend reviewing the order of the bibliography (Brandenstein and Bennett are reversed; Feder and Fears are reversed; Frost and Frost are placed out of order; H interrupts G, which then resumes; Pellegrino and Rehak are placed out of order) and above all ensuring that it is complete (Hagg and Marinatos, 1982 and Christ, 1886 - for instance - are missing).

SE 3 Comments:

This paper is not quite ready for publication and will require some revisions.

The overall assessment and outline are interesting. It is nice to see the historical background of the Minoan hypothesis laid out, the organisation and in many instances sentence structure do require some attention. In some cases, scholar's names are misspelled, and the structure makes it difficult to follow the argument logically.

Additionally, I would suggest utilising a structure that is less like an "author by author review of literature" and instead focuses on the hypothesis as you are trying to relay it. So perhaps you could start with an "Initiation of the Minoan Hypothesis" and then lay it out on a phase by phase basis of the theory's development, rather than approaching it as author-by-author. Something like this will help to elevate your paper to a true scholarly review of the development of the Atlantis Hypothesis.

Overall, I think that the premise is interesting, and nice to see in a concise format, it is well researched with an appropriate number of parentheticals.

Dear Oliver,

A Plato expert has also looked over your article and has suggested a few revisions, though they are aware that this is not a philosophical paper, the points that are raised are for clarification only.

There were no general comments as there are only minor clarifications. These have been merged with the other specialist editor's comments.

17/08/2020

Dear Oliver,

Thank you, we have the correct reference now. The only thing to make this publishable is a final, summing up sentence as currently the end sentence is a bit lacking, otherwise we are happy to say this will be published tomorrow.

18/08/2020

Dear Oliver,

On behalf of the committee, I would like to apologise. I have looked over the comments from the specialist editors and, apart from the paper by W.-D. Niemeier, you have not included any of the recommended reading from the Specialist Editors. The committee and I have discussed your paper and decided that this article still requires further changes, before we feel comfortable publishing it. As you are aware, the journal is being published today but this paper requires more time for you to add and, indeed, read the additional reading that was recommended by the Specialist Editors, please see the latest version which includes all additional reading prior to publication. Your paper has been fully copy edited and is returned to you now for further changes. We are not sure when we will be releasing our next issue but please know that we would still like to publish your paper when the next issue is released.

Apologies for the news