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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.

Atlantis-Sardinia

Vittorio Castellani, physicist, astrophysicist and archaeologist, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei

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 Minoans, and at the same time it was realized how much 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 protohistory, 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

Limits: The Pillars of Hercules from Sicily to Gibraltar

Luciano Canfora, philologist, historian and Hellenist at the University of Bari

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

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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 Erasthenes' 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 university teacher and so of having shown that *passion and research can grab hold of each of us at any time* [Editor's emphasis].

Andrea Carandini

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On either side of the Strait of Sicily

Jean Bingen, historian and Hellenist, Académie Royale de Belgique

The book by the culture journalist Frau is a comprehensive study of a problem that at first sight seems narrow: 'where were the Pillars of Hercules?', a Hercules who was in fact a Herakles-Melkart, against a background of the representation of the western frontier of the world that could be travelled, especially in the Greek world's imaginary. And those Pillars have been traditionally and unreservedly placed on either side of the Strait of Gibraltar.

The book is disturbing because of the light and rather subversive tone with which it accumulates a mass of research parameters, sometimes inducing dizziness. These innumerable components, which include illustrations, give the book its interest for an informed audience, who will discover, as they read the captivating story, many aspects of the Greek or pre-Hellenic world, the Phoenician world and the peripheral cultures, or even the geological substrate. The accumulation of detail and the impromptu dialogue with the reader somewhat upset the structured procedure adopted by orthodox researchers, but they provoke reflection.

The author's argument is based on an indisputable fact: the division of the pre-Roman Mediterranean into an eastern zone, in which Greek archaic, then classical cities and colonies predominated almost exclusively, and a western zone, which was an area of Phoenician expansion. The frontier between them is perhaps more complex, since it zigzags past Sicily and does not appear again until somewhere on the Libyan coast. This division has given the author the impression that the Pillars of Hercules were first of all situated on either side of the Strait of Sicily, 'the Greeks' horizon from Homer to Herodotus', and that it was only later, in the Hellenistic period, that all kinds of factors made people shift the Pillars to the strait of Gibraltar. The author reminds us that in the ice ages the water level in the strait was considerably lower and left only a relatively narrow passage between Sicily (which included Malta) and Tunisia, whose underwater plateau was largely exposed. The hypothesis of an initial location for the Pillars at the Strait of Sicily is seductive, and clarifies the meaning of several ancient sources. But I do not think the land's retreat could still have an influence at the time when the socio-economic landscape of the Mediterranean began to change at the start of the second millennium BC. Similarly the author's jokey tone refers somewhat unsubtly to mighty unpleasant Greeks and in particular their literary sources.

The hypothesis, which can no longer be dismissed, has as its corollary the identification of Sardinia as being the Greeks' Atlantis (beyond the Pillars) and, based on its Phoenician past, the promotion of the part played by Sardinia and the city of Tartessos in the pre-Hellenistic western Mediterranean.

Jean Bingen

Review Contributors

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il mare sommerse l'Europa; L'antico acquedotto della Cannucceta; Cappadocia: le città sotterranee. (His dog is called Rio; his cat Ghitu.)

Luciano Canfora was born in 1942 in southern Italy. Professor of Greek philology at the University of Bari, he has published many books in the area of historiography, history of libraries and the transmission of ancient texts. The following have been translated into French: *La Véritable Histoire de la Bibliothèque d'Alexandrie*, 1988; *La Démocratie comme violence*, 1989; *La Tolérance et la vertu, de l'usage politique de l'analogie*, 1989; *L'Histoire de la littérature grecque d'Homère à Aristote*, 1994. Other publications: *La biblioteca del patriarca*, 1998; *La storiografia greca*, 1999; *Il mistero Tucidide*, 1999; 'De la quête de l'archétype à l'histoire des textes. Note brève sur la critique française', in *Diogenè* no. 186, 1999; *La biblioteca scomparsa*, 2000; *Convertire Casaubon*, 2002.

Sergio F. Donadoni was born in 1914 and studied Egyptology in Paris (1934–6) and Copenhagen (1948). He taught at the universities of Milan, Pisa and Rome, and is a member of the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei. He has directed excavations in Egypt (Antinoë, Qurna), Nubia (Ikhmindî, Sabagura, Tamit) and Sudan (Sonqi Tino, Gebel Barkal). Emeritus professor from Rome University and *doctor honoris causa* from Brussels Université Libre, he is national associate of the Accademia dei Lincei, the Turin Academy of Sciences, the Pontificia Accademia Romana of Archeology, correspondent of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres and the Institut d'Égypte. Among his books are: *Arte Egizia*, 1955; *La religione dell'Egitto antico*, 1955; *Tamit* (1964), 1967; *La letteratura egizia*, 1967; *Le Spéos d'Ellesiya*, 1968; *Testi religiosi egizi*, 1970; *Antinoe (1965–68)*, 1974; *Grand Temple d'Abou Simbel, III, Les Salles du Trésor Sud*, 1975; *L'Egitto* (Storia Universale dell'arte UTET), 1981; *Cultura dell'Antico Egitto*, 1986; *L'Egitto dal mito all'Egittologia*, 1990; *Tebe*, 1999 (co-author); *Abou Simbel. Porte d'entrée et Grande Salle F. Textes hiéroglyphiques*, undated.

Andrea Carandini who was born in 1937, teaches classical archeology at Rome University 'La Sapienza'. Among his books are: *Settefinestre. Una villa schiavistica nell'Etruria romana*, 1985; *La romanizzazione dell'Etruria: il territorio di Vulci*, 1985; *Schiavi in Italia*, 1988; *La villa romana e la piantagione schiavistica*, in *Storia di Roma*, IV,

Jean Bingen was born in 1920 in Antwerp. He is a former foreign member of the École française d'archéologie in Athens; emeritus professor of the Brussels Université Libre; honorary director of the Fondation égyptologique Reine Elisabeth (Brussels); member of the Académie Royale de Belgique, member of the Institut and corresponding member of the Deutsches Archaeologisches Institut. The author of various excavation reports (Greece, Egypt) and publications of inscriptions and Greek papyri, he has also studied social and economic problems of the Hellenistic period, in particular the opaqueness and osmotic capacity of coexisting cultures. He has also dealt with various aspects of Greek theatre.