



GOULDEN FLEECED

LYING ABOUT ATLANTIS, ALIENS, AND
ARGONAUTS IN GREEK MYTH



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Golden Fleeced

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The Cult of Alien Gods: H. P. Lovecraft and Extraterrestrial Pop Culture (Prometheus, 2005)

Knowing Fear: Science, Knowledge, and the Development of the Horror Genre (McFarland, 2008)

“A Hideous Bit of Morbidity”: An Anthology of Horror Criticism from the Enlightenment to World War I (McFarland, 2009)

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Cover image: Waters off Thasos, Greece. Photo credit: BuckRogers21 (Wikimedia Commons)



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Introduction

ANCIENT GREECE LOOMS LARGE in the modern imagination as the font of Western civilization. Its architecture, philosophy, language, and mythology live on in the modern world, and its influence has permeated every period in Western history from the Roman era through the present day. Because Greek accomplishments are so fundamental to the Western world, there has been no shortage of attempts to rewrite the history and mythology of ancient Greece to suit modern ends. This process goes back centuries, but the modern practice of the wholesale appropriation of Greek mythology as support for fringe claims and pseudoscience begins, essentially, with Ignatius Donnelly, the American politician whose 1882 book *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World* argued that the Greek gods were originally the kings of Atlantis, mythologized and worshipped by ignorant later Greeks.

Part One of this book will look at several recent claims that misuse Greek mythology and especially the writings of Plato and Homer to lend spurious credence to speculation about the existence of Atlantis and the presence of advanced technology in pre-Greek times. Then, in Part Two this book will examine the continuing influence of Robert Temple's *The Sirius Mystery*, which misused Greek mythology to support the proposition that amphibious extraterrestrials bequeathed civilization to early humans and in the process fooled scholars and the public alike into believing pseudoscience.

Together, these investigations demonstrate not just the ways Greek mythology can be mined to support outré propositions, but also these investigations show the continuing power and influence of ancient Greece more than two millennia after Greek civilization succumbed to the power of Rome.

PART ONE

ANCIENT
ADVANCED CIVILIZATIONS
IN GREEK MYTH?



IN MARCH 2011, THE NATIONAL Geographic Channel screened an hour-long documentary chronicling the efforts of Hartford University archaeologist Richard Freund to find the lost city of Atlantis. According to Freund, his research indicated Atlantis was located near Cadiz in southern Spain, and the city was destroyed by a tsunami. He also claimed to have found the actual archaeological remains of the lost city. The program, titled *Finding Atlantis*, presented a few intriguing finds and then spun those discoveries into a web of pseudoscience masquerading as science. Nevertheless, the documentary created a media sensation due to the imprimatur of the National Geographic Society and the unfortunate timing of the program, airing just days after a tsunami devastated much of northern Japan following a 9.0 magnitude earthquake. Reporters were quick to accept the Atlantis claims and to draw parallels between the lost city and events in Japan. An article in *Newsweek* by Simon Winchester, the bestselling British author, uncritically proclaimed the find genuine and ranked Atlantis beside Pompeii on the list of great lost cities.

Freund's claim was the latest in a long line of attempts to find a reality for the lost continent outside the imagination of its creator, the Greek philosopher Plato (c. 428-348 BCE), who invented the continent as an allegorical way of criticizing the civilization of contemporary Athens. No evidence for Atlantis has been found in any ancient material (writings, inscriptions, pottery, etc.) prior to Plato's dialogues the *Timaeus* and the *Critias* (c. 360 BCE).

This chapter will discuss what would be needed to prove the existence of Atlantis, and then it will evaluate Prof. Freund's claims, followed by a discussion of two other improbably claims about ancient Greek mythology. First, this chapter will review an attempt to link the Atlantis story and Greek myth to a fringe belief that the planet Venus nearly destroyed earth in prehistory, and then it will examine a scholarly publication claiming that Homer's epic poems prove the existence of advanced robotics and hydrofoil naval technology in the Mycenaean age.

Proving Atlantis

To begin thinking critically about the media circus surrounding Robert Freund's claim that Atlantis has been found in Spain, let's first consider how one would prove that a new discovery was "really" Atlantis. It isn't as simple as finding an ancient site and then trying to match it to Plato's description, no matter how loosely one interprets Plato's texts (composed c. 360 BCE).

A major hurdle is proposing a plausible method of transmission whereby knowledge of a given site can be retained and communicated through the centuries. How would Plato have known the details of whatever archaeological remains you've dug up? In his dialogues, Plato claims that his knowledge of Atlantis derives from an ancient Athenian statesman named Solon, who lived three centuries earlier and who got his information in turn from the Egyptians. If we take this at face value, we would need to prove a relationship between Egypt and the unnamed site prior to the age of Solon (638-538 BCE) and Egyptian knowledge of the site's layout, politics, internal organization, and destruction. We would *also* need to prove how and where Solon's information was retained and communicated for roughly three centuries between him and Plato. Needless to say, there is not a single scrap of evidence—no statue, no vase painting, no inscription, no papyrus fragment, no wall

painting—nothing that indicates Egyptian or Greek knowledge of anything like Atlantis prior to 360 BCE.

Contrast this with an actual documented instance of historical memory. In the *Iliad* (c. eighth century BCE), Homer records the story of Troy, long believed to have been a legendary city as mythical as Atlantis. But Homer included bits of genuine Bronze Age information, including references to a helmet made of boar's tusks that was used only in the Mycenaean Age (prior to 1200 BCE), which indicated a core of genuine history underneath layers of myth. (Plato's Atlantis story contains no Bronze Age or earlier details.) The Greeks, however, lived among the ruins of the Mycenaean Age but knew so little of that time that they assumed the ruins were the work of giants called Cyclopes (Figure 1) and they thought the men of that era demigods. These same people somehow retained street-level knowledge of Atlantis but not their own cities?

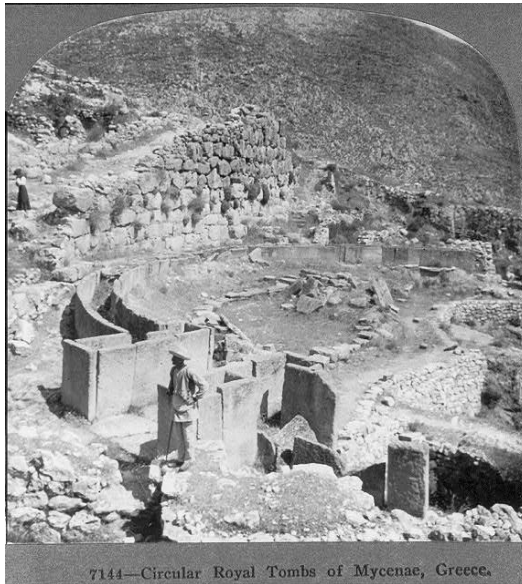


Figure 1: Mycenaean Cyclopean architecture. (Library of Congress)

Homer's geographic information led the German explorer Heinrich Schliemann to a site in Turkey where he found a city that has been identified as the site of Troy. However, Homer's information was not perfectly accurate, but rather highly distorted, the result of imperfect transmission across centuries, contaminated with error and more recent information.

But this is not all the ancient evidence. Homer was not alone in mentioning Troy—an entire series of myths and epics (known as the Epic Cycle) by many hands recorded parts of its story, as did vase paintings. We also have Bronze Age Hittite records (c. 1250 BCE) recording interactions with Wilusa (another name for Ilion, or Troy) as well as hostility between Wilusa and a group called the Ahhiyawa, identified as the Achaeans (Greeks) of Homer's *Iliad*. The Hittite records confirm that a ruler named Alaksandu once reigned in Troy, just as in Homer the son of Troy's king is Alexander (also called Paris). Alaksandu worshipped the god Apaliunas, identified as Apollo, the god who protected Troy and Paris-Alexander in the *Iliad*. These identifications, while somewhat controversial, are accepted by the majority of scholars as indicating Hittite knowledge of Troy.

In this case, we have contemporary records, an archaeological site, and later Greek recollections of genuine Bronze Age material. These many strands work together to tell us that the site Schliemann found in Turkey is the place known as Troy. What do we have to support claims for Atlantis? We have Plato's (fictional) dialogues, and nothing else. The Egyptians, who recorded interactions with ancient peoples ranging from the Minoans and the Mycenaean to envoys from the Near East, are silent about Atlanteans. The Greeks included Atlantis in no myths, legends, or epics. Nearly every ancient city that was genuinely prominent in the Bronze Age has myths associated with it, even if that city ceased to exist in later ages, as Martin Nilsson explained in his classic *The Mycenaean Origins of Greek Mythology* almost a century ago. But

somehow Atlantis got left out. Even the ancient authors themselves were fairly certain Plato made it all up.

In absence of any evidence outside of Plato for Greek knowledge of Atlantis, and in the absence of any plausible way for the Greeks (or even the Egyptians) to have known about the destruction of Atlantis, or proof that they did, we must conclude that Atlantis was what Plato meant it to be: a fictional double for Athens.

Atlantis in Spain?

With this information, what can we say about claims that Atlantis was found in Spain?

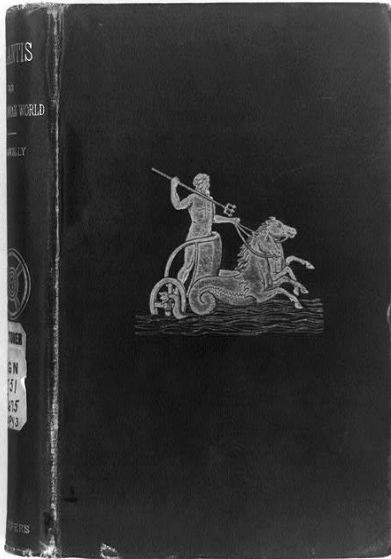


Figure 2: *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*, the grandfather of all Atlantis theories. (Library of Congress)

Richard Freund, who previously appeared in a 2004 *Nova* special where he identified artifacts found in Israel as part of the legendary Temple treasure lost after the Roman invasion of Jerusalem, argued that a site on the southern coast of Spain near the city of Cadiz is Plato's Atlantis as well as the biblical city of Tarshish, a trading center mentioned briefly in the books of Chronicles, Kings, and elsewhere. The theory itself is not new. E. M. Whishaw proposed the theory in a 1928 book, *Atlantis in Andalusia*, including an identification of Plato's city with the ancient port of Tartessos and thus the biblical city of Tarshish. Tartessos was an ancient

civilization of the first millennium BCE widely discussed in antiquity and whose cultural area is known archaeologically as spreading throughout southern Spain. Richard Freund merely adopted the Spanish Atlantis theory wholesale, but unlike Wishaw, backed it up with an allegedly new archeological discovery. Freund claimed that the Spanish site near Cadiz conforms to Plato's description of Atlantis because geophysical scans indicate that the city stood on an island surrounded by water, as Plato described. Nevertheless, epistemological and logical problems remain.

Plato, however, said Atlantis was "larger than Libya and Asia together" (the buried island Freund advocates is nowhere near that large), and composed of several concentric rings with artificial canals connecting the rings of land in a riparian system (again, the Spanish site has not been proven to match). Finally, Plato claimed that the island was destroyed by an earthquake 9,000 years before Plato's time (c. 9,400 BCE). Again, the Spanish site does not match. Initial radiocarbon dates place it anywhere from 5,000 to 2,400 years old.

Nevertheless, Freund argued that the circular shape of the site and the fact that it was possibly destroyed by a tsunami proved that the site was the legendary Atlantis, and he repeatedly emphasized how close the match was—close if you agree to change the facts that Plato wrote to "more plausible" versions. Doing so, of course, means that Freund is free to reconstruct an imaginary Atlantis of his own devising, one which is very different from Plato's but which he can imaginatively recreate to match anything he happened to find on the ground.

Especially ludicrous was his attempt to explain a carving of a warrior holding a sword and a shield as a soldier "guarding" an aerial map of Atlantis, claiming the circular shield with its pattern of concentric circles, so very similar to other ancient shields, was really a 2,000-year-old remembered tradition of the layout of Atlantis! This in an age that did *not* make any other aerial maps! Earlier, Freund and his team were giddy with excitement after finding geometric-shaped rocks

that they thought were the walls of Atlantis. They were completely natural in formation, but still Freund counted them as evidence on the grounds that Atlantians “might” have built walls with them anyway—underwater, apparently, since they formed beneath the ocean.

There is no doubt, of course, that there is a real archaeological site buried in southern Spain. What it is exactly, we just don’t know. However, let us give Freund the benefit of the doubt and agree that everything he claims about its age and layout are true. What does this tell us? Nothing, actually. Freund can propose no method by which this fallen city is somehow remembered in street-level detail from Spain to Egypt to Plato over the course of thousands upon thousands of years without leaving a single trace in the records of Egypt or Greece or anywhere else. Not a single inscription, or papyrus, or statue, or vase painting. Nothing at all from 5,000 BCE until 360 BCE when Plato wrote the *Timaeus* and the *Critias*, the first ever mention of Atlantis. By this standard, we must take the Cyclopes, the *Odyssey*, the Underworld, and the Golden Fleece as true people and events, too, since they are amply better documented in the ancient record. Or, alternately, we must seek out Thomas More’s Utopia.

Most disturbing, I think, was Freund’s attempt to argue that Atlantis was really the biblical city of Tarshish. This is the entirety of what is known of Tarshish, from 2 Chronicles 9:21: “every three years once came the ships of Tarshish bringing gold, and silver, ivory, and apes, and peacocks.” (This is repeated in Kings 10:22). Obviously, Freund said, this is Atlantis because both Tarshish and Atlantis dealt in “metals,” the only ancient cities, he said, to do so. This is patently false, since other ancient sites, like Colchis on the Black Sea, were famous for their metalworking. Incidentally, southern Spain boasts neither apes (native to sub-Saharan Africa), nor peacocks (native to India and parts of sub-Saharan Africa), nor ivory (Africa again). This kind of Bible-mongering serves little purpose except to try to rope in Atlantis as confirmation of the Bible’s literal truth—something Freund

inadvertently emphasized when using biblical terminology such as the “holy of holies” to describe decidedly non-Hebrew sites. It is no coincidence that Richard Freund’s specialty is biblical archaeology and Judaic studies, not Classical, Bronze Age, or Neolithic archaeology.

But let us grant him his point and pretend that Atlantis is Tarshish. If this is true, then we have a contradiction. Tarshish traded with the Israelites during the reign of Solomon, traditionally around the tenth century BCE. This is thousands of years after Plato’s Atlantis sunk beneath the waves (9400 BCE), and at least a thousand years off from the proposed dates when the Spanish site was destroyed (possibly around 2000 BCE). Never mind that the books of Chronicles and Kings were likely composed no earlier than 560 BCE, at which time Tarshish must still have been an active port—one still in operation when Jonah tried to sail there in the Book of Jonah (composed c. 500 BCE). So Tarshish and Atlantis, like Schrödinger’s cat, both exist and do not exist, are active and destroyed, simultaneously. The only way to make the two into one is to change Plato, and once you change Plato you are no longer looking for “Atlantis” but are instead naming whatever you find in honor of Plato’s fictional allegory.

Apparently Freund dropped in to an active Spanish archaeological investigation into an actual ancient city, ongoing since 2005, and has hijacked it to generate publicity for his research into the connection between Solomon and Atlantis to prove the Bible true. Here is what the Spanish anthropologist Juan Villarias-Robles told the *Telegraph* newspaper about Freund:

Richard Freund was a newcomer to our project and appeared to be involved in his own very controversial issue concerning King Solomon’s search for ivory and gold in Tartessos, the well documented settlement in the Doñaña area established in the first millennium BC. He became involved in what we were doing and provided funding for probes through his connections

with National Geographic and Associated Producers. He left and the film company told us the documentary would be finished in April or May. But we did not hear from him and are very surprised it has appeared so soon and makes such fanciful claims. (Owen)

But Freund was not the only one making fanciful claims about Atlantis and ancient Greece in early 2011, or even the only one to use such claims to further an agenda to prove the Bible true. Two books released within weeks of each other in early 2011 both tried to make the case for a lost, advanced civilization lurking behind the stately façade of ancient Greece.

Atlantis and Catastrophism

On February 25, 2011, Washington, D.C.'s conservative daily, *The Washington Times*, devoted an unusual amount of space to a work of pseudoscience from Algora Publishing, a small press that distributes a number of books on "alternative" archaeology. The paper is not known for its coverage of archaeology, nor as a champion of small press literature. This was a highly unusual review. Fox News columnist Martin Sieff guest-wrote a lengthy review of Emmett Sweeney's newly published *Atlantis: The Evidence from Science* (Algora, 2010), praising the book for its evenhanded exploration of the science supporting claims that Atlantis really existed. This review, however, seemed to reflect a hidden anti-science, perhaps even creationist, agenda.

Sweeney is the author of a number of volumes defending the work of Immanuel Velikovsky, the 20th century writer who claimed that the planet Venus was really a comet that swung by earth in prehistory, influencing the course of civilization when it parted the Red Sea, destroyed Minoan civilization, and what-have-you. According to Velikovsky and Sweeney, earth's history has been grossly distorted by historians and must be set right. Velikovsky, whom Sweeney follows,

claimed that the Dark Age between the Mycenaean era and Archaic Greece (the period from 1200 BCE to 800 BCE) did not exist and was the creation of close-minded scholars. By happy coincidence, if one accepts Velikovsky's claims, the historical chronology given in the Bible could be reconciled with Egyptian king lists and records, thus proving that the Bible was literally true.

None of this was discussed in Sieff's *Washington Times* review, which instead attempted to give legitimacy to Sweeney's catastrophism by giving a foothold to his work on Atlantis. At no time did Sieff discuss a troubling conflict of interest. According to the *Velikovsky Encyclopedia*, Sieff was a founding member of the pro-Velikovsky group, the Society for Interdisciplinary Studies, a former editor of its magazine, and an active proponent of catastrophism. He wrote more than two dozen articles in support of catastrophism, some as late as the 1990s ("Martin Sieff"). By hiding Sweeney's connection to Velikovsky, as well as his own, Sieff played the part of the disinterested journalist, legitimizing an ideological agenda in the guise of journalism.

Sieff even went beyond Sweeney to argue that a "sophisticated global, seafaring civilization certainly existed in the geological conditions before the last ice age." He based this claim on the work of Charles Hapgood, a professor who misread ancient maps in the mid-20th century and imagined that they showed Antarctica, not officially discovered until 1818. These maps were supposedly so accurate only a sophisticated global culture could have made them; however, repeated debunkings over the past fifty years demonstrated conclusively that Hapgood was wrong, a fact even Hapgood seemed to acknowledge before his death (Frtize 193-201).

That Sieff relies on discredited and false evidence to support a radical rewriting of ancient history is no surprise; everyone who supports "alternative" archaeology does so at some point. What is extremely surprising is that the *Washington Times* ran this bit of rank pseudoscience. Here, it seems that a hidden agenda was at work. As

noted above, acceptance of Atlantis was seen as a stepping stone to legitimizing Velikovskian theories—or at the very least, de-legitimizing secular archaeology. Once the accepted, secular story of cultural evolution has been questioned, creationist theories become that much easier to put on par with actual science.

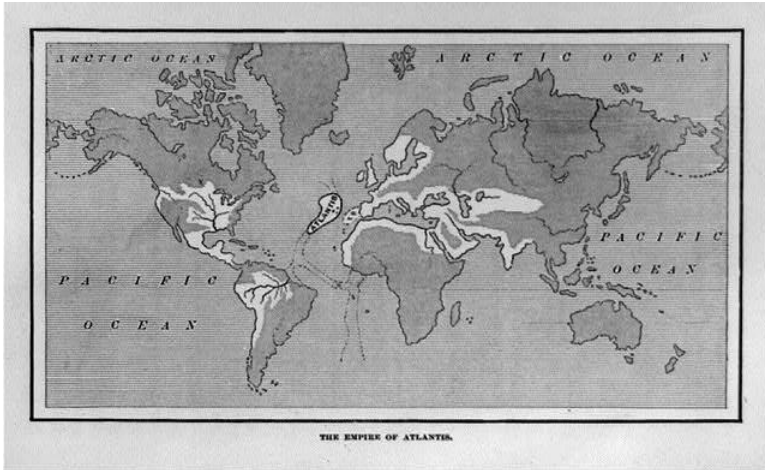


Figure 3: Donnelly’s map of Atlantis’s empire. (Library of Congress)

Given that the *Washington Times* is a known outlet for conservative attacks on science, as well as for the views of its owner, the Rev. Sun Myung Moon’s Unification Church, the entire affair seems to be of a piece—covertly attempting to subvert science in the name of dogma, catastrophist, religious, or otherwise.

Ancient Greece and Advanced Technology

A much more serious and supposedly scholarly claim about ancient Greece and its exotic mysteries came this time from modern Greece itself. Greek mechanical engineer S. A. Paipetis’s recent *The Unknown Technology in Homer* (2005) was translated into English and released in 2010. The book purported to be a mechanical engineer’s

evaluation of extraordinary and precocious technological knowledge embedded in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, two of the foundational texts of the Western, tradition composed sometime around the eight century BCE. According to the author, this anomalous knowledge demonstrates that the Mycenaeans, the ancient people of whom Homer's poems sang, had advanced modern technology c. 1600-1200 BCE. The volume was published under the aegis of the academic publisher Springer's *History of Mechanism and Machine Science* series, making it a somewhat higher grade of pseudoscience pretending toward legitimacy, but pseudoscience nonetheless.

The first third of the book is an incoherent set of digressions, most of which have no bearing on the subject of ancient technology. Instead, we are treated to works of Renaissance and modern art and discussions of the Greek-revival style vacation house built by the Austro-Hungarian empress Elisabeth, whose nickname is embarrassingly mistranslated as "Sissy" instead of "Sisi." What does the existence of a nineteenth century vacation house have to do with Mycenaean technology? Unfortunately, this tendency toward digression and irrelevancy mars an already short book (200 pages) with about 50-75 pages of padding. Worse still, the translation from the author's original (modern) Greek to English is stilted and awkward, with innumerable mistakes of grammar and spelling that are by turn humorous or obfuscating.

The author demonstrates a clear ignorance of the ancient material he purports to analyze. In Chapter 11, he follows a long-disproved idea that the so-called *Orphic Argonautica* (c. 450 CE) predated the *Odyssey* (c. 700 BCE) (Paipetis 83). Earlier, the author assumes that the river Acheron in Epirus is the actual river Acheron flowing through Hades and to which Odysseus sails (Paipetis 46). While later Greeks identified the two, the location of the physical Acheron in western Greece hardly matches the description of the infernal Acheron flowing at the ends of the Ocean. His discussions of Greek mythology

are everywhere tinged with a non-specialists over-simplification and ignorance of contemporary work in the field, especially complications and controversies that would undermine his simple thesis.

Relying on long-outdated studies of Greek myth and history (including the early twentieth century work of Arthur Evans and the Depression-era studies of Martin Nilsson largely to the exclusion of any modern work), Paipetis builds a house of cards whereby the presumption that the Mycenaean had advanced technology leads him to interpret mythological events as technological descriptions, thus “proving” the existence of the technology.

One example can stand for them all. In discussing Odysseus’ passage between Scylla and Charybdis, the author assumes that the description records a Greek discourse on the physics of vortices. Thus, Homer’s phrase “drive ship by as fast as you can” should, in the author’s words, be interpreted to mean “move fast, to account [for] speed loss due to friction and remain in course instead of diving to the bottom” (Paipetis 88). This he compares to the “gravitational sling” used by NASA to launch spacecraft out of the solar system by utilizing Jupiter’s gravitational force. However, the “friction” is the author’s own interpolation, a scientific term hardly necessary for the Greeks to understand the concept of going fast to escape from a whirlpool.

The author also believes that Homer’s descriptions of the automata built by the smith god Hephaestus represent descriptions of real robots with artificial intelligence. However, it has long been known that the ancients had mechanical or clockwork animals. The Byzantine emperors were particularly famous for their mechanical lions and birds. A poetic exaggeration of these real-life marvels is likely all that lies behind Hephaestus’s “robots,” with no naively literal reading of the *Odyssey* or speculation about ancient electricity necessary. (The author backtracks some and does state that electricity and computing technology are not “known to be” available to run the robots [Paipetis 111].)

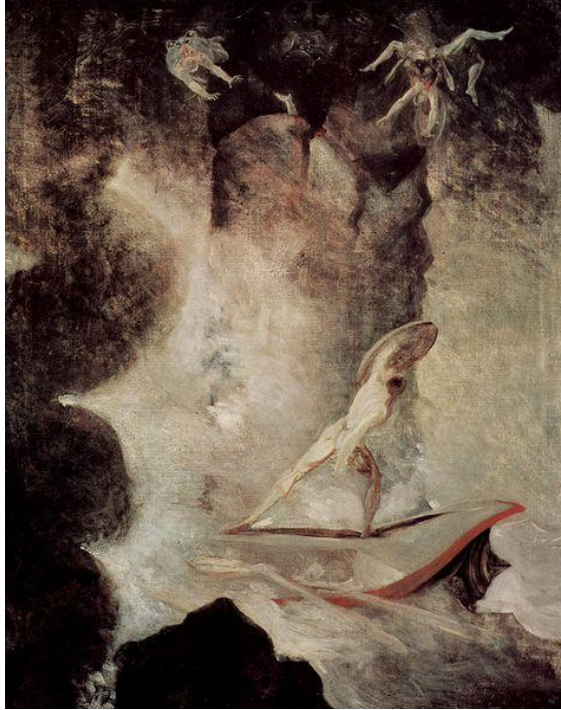


Figure 4: Odysseus between Scylla and Charybdis, Johann Freidrich Füssli, 1794-1796.
(Wikimedia Commons)

The author's claim that an invisible net used by the god Hephaestus in the *Odyssey* to capture Ares and Aphrodite (Od. 8.266-366) is evidence of manmade Kevlar or a related material is simply ridiculous:

Such materials are rather modern technological achievements, e.g., glass and carbon fibres, or even organic fibres such as Kevlar. If such materials were available in Homer's era, undoubtedly that civilization was marked by this highly developed technology. (Paipetis 104)

His identification of the boats belonging to a people called the Phaeacians as “probably a high speed jet hydrofoil” is laughable. Homer sang that the Phaeacians’ boats had no pilots but sailed according to projected thoughts (Od. 7.555-563; 13.76-92). There is no reason to imagine magical boats as a thousand-year memory of Mycenaean-era technology if the only evidence for their existence is Homer’s own poem, a poem filled with all sorts of magic that no appeal to technology could ever sufficiently explain.

That this study was published by Springer (albeit in the mechanics rather than classics arena) has given it a false legitimacy that may deceive the unwary into assuming that this is a scholarly work on Greek history. Instead, it is a work of rank speculation masquerading as science, using false analogies and wishful thinking to recreate a lost world that never was. In Part Two we will look at another work of pseudoscience that for more than three decades has used the trappings of academic scholarship to give a false legitimacy to claims that Greek mythology records encounters with extraterrestrial beings.

PART TWO

EXTRATERRESTRIALS IN GREEK MYTHOLOGY?



THE YEAR 2011 MARKS THE thirty-fifth anniversary of Robert Temple's *The Sirius Mystery* (1976; revised 1998), one of the most important works in the ancient astronaut genre. It has been fairly well-established that Temple's thesis about extraterrestrial visitation has little basis in fact. Temple had claimed that an African tribe called the Dogon had sophisticated knowledge of the invisible companion to the star Sirius, known to modern astronomers as Sirius B, and that this knowledge derived from amphibious aliens that descended to earth in ancient Sumeria thousands of years ago and were worshipped as gods. Their possession of esoteric knowledge of deep space unknown in the West until the nineteenth century is taken as proof of extraterrestrial contact.

Though anthropologists failed to find a genuine Sirius B tradition among the Dogon outside what they had gleaned from recent contact with Europeans (Van Beek 139-167), and skeptics refuted Temple's extraterrestrial conclusions, *The Sirius Mystery* continues to serve as a standard reference work in the New Age and alternative archaeology movements. In the past few years alone, works such as Christopher Penczak's *Ascension Magick* (Llewellyn Worldwide, 2007), R. M. Decker's *35 Minutes to Mars* (Galde Press, 2004), and Stephen S. Mehler's *The Land of Osiris* (Adventures Unlimited, 2002) utilize Temple's book to a greater or lesser extent to support their alternative and New Age claims. The internet, too, is a hotbed of Temple-derived Sirius theories. And, of course, Temple continues to publish books of alternative archaeology, including most recently *The Sphinx Mystery* (with Olivia Temple, Inner Traditions, 2009). Therefore, renewed study of *The Sirius Mystery* is no moot point but an inquiry into an active and important touchstone for the alternative movement.

It is not my intention to review the case against Temple's space-faring fish-men and their watery revelations. Such work has already been done, exhaustively, and, to most skeptics' minds, conclusively.¹ Instead, I would like to explore Robert Temple's misuse of Greek mythology, specifically the myth of Jason and the Argonauts, to refute frequently repeated claims that, even if one doubts his most outrageous conclusions, Temple is "scholarly, careful, and scientifically honest" (Wilson 78). Temple is frequently described as a "recognized scholar" (Kennedy 149) or even as a "preeminent scholar of mathematics, astronomy and mythology" (Spenser and South) by proponents of alternative claims, and Temple himself cites his membership in the Royal Astronomical Society² and several classicist organizations to bolster *Sirius's* claims to scholarship. An examination of the case of *Temple v. Jason* will demonstrate that claims for Temple's *Sirius* scholarship are less solid than the case for the alleged aliens themselves.

Of Aliens and Argonauts

In *Sirius*, Temple makes a number of claims about Greek mythology in general and the story of Jason in particular, which he sees as a governing myth tying together all the threads of his Sirius mystery. Temple uses Jason's legendary journey as a starting point for his forays into Greek, Egyptian, and Near Eastern mythology, and there is the strong impression that he views Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece as parallel to his own search for the extraterrestrial secrets of the flying space frogs. For him, the Jason story is the one Greek myth most closely related to an esoteric tradition of alien-derived knowledge of the true nature of the binary Sirius star system—and he even views the Argonauts as the biological ancestors of the Dogon. In order to understand the scaffolding on which Temple builds his mythological claims, let us briefly review Jason's story as it has come down to us.

Jason was the son of Aeson, deposed king of Iolcus and rightful heir to the throne held by his usurping uncle Pelias. Pelias promised to restore the kingdom to Jason on condition that Jason bring the Golden Fleece from the kingdom of Colchis back to Iolcus, a quest Pelias is sure will end in Jason's death. Jason therefore assembles fifty companions (originally unnamed but later associated with the greatest Greek heroes) on the ship *Argo* and sails to Colchis, experiencing many adventures. In Colchis, Jason fails to persuade its king to give him the fleece, and he instead steals it from the dragon that guards it with the help of the king's daughter, the sorceress Medea, on condition that Jason marry her. Jason has many more adventures on the way back to Iolcus, where he presents the fleece and deposes his uncle. He then betrays Medea's love, loses the favor of the gods, and dies when a piece of the dry-docked *Argo* falls on his head.

The Jason story is cited elliptically in Homer (usually dated to c. 8th century BCE), briefly in Hesiod's *Theogony* (c. 700 BCE), and is most fully developed in Pindar's Fourth Pythian Ode (462 BCE) and Apollonius of Rhodes's *Argonautica* (c. 245 BCE). Jason also appears in some early Greek and Etruscan art, but, intriguingly, some of these images show a different version of the legend, unrecorded in the surviving poems, in which Jason apparently descends into the dragon's stomach and reemerges, aided by the goddess Athena rather than Medea.³ Informed scholarly conjecture is that the primal Jason legend dates to Mycenaean times (c. 1500 BCE) and originally featured a voyage to the end of the world (rather than specifically Colchis) to retrieve the fleece via a descent into the guardian dragon's stomach and a triumph over death. It is possible Jason was dismembered and resurrected through Athena's ministrations or his own supernatural healing powers (Sacks et al. 125; Mackie 1-17).⁴ Medea may be a later addition to the original quest tale, though she must have appeared before 700 BCE, as she is in Hesiod. Such history is not considered in *Sirius*, despite at least two centuries of scholarly discussion about it.



Figure 5: Jason emerging from the dragon, Douris painter, fifth century BCE. (Wikimedia Commons)

For Temple, the Jason myth is much more than an adventure. His views on Jason are somewhat difficult to follow, scattered as they are through *Sirius*, but the abridged version runs like this:

Jason and the fifty Argonauts represent Sirius A (the main star we see in the sky) and the fifty-year period it takes Sirius B (the hidden companion star) to travel around Sirius A. The *Argo*, their boat, is the system taken as a whole with its fifty oars representing each year of Sirius B's orbit (Temple 95-96). In this, the Argonauts are therefore the equivalent of the Annunaki, the fifty anonymous gods of Sumer (remember the Argonauts were originally unnamed), who therefore are

also symbols for Sirius B's fifty-year orbit (Temple 120). Jason, whose name Temple believes means "appeaser," is a feckless wimp (154) who usurped his position in a myth-cycle that originally centered on the epic voyage of Herakles (Hercules) (156), who in turn is a later remolding of a still-earlier mythological figure, Briareus, one of the hundred-handed, fifty-headed monsters who assaulted Olympus and were imprisoned in Tartarus. Therefore, Temple concludes, Briareus was the original captain of the *Argo* (220). Confusingly, and perhaps in partial contradiction, Jason is also identified as a version of the Sumerian hero Gilgamesh, primarily on the basis of both having fifty companions and many adventures (Temple 118-119).

From this framework, Temple then branches out into increasingly fanciful excursions that are beyond the scope of this article.

Since Temple's defenders frequently cite his deep scholarship and thorough understanding of mythology and ancient history, it is only fair to ask how scholarly Temple's mythological framework is. We can begin by dispensing with one point easily enough. The "feckless" Jason was the creation of Apollonius of Rhodes, who was writing in the Hellenistic period, five or six hundred years after the Homeric age of epic poetry, and a full millennium after the Jason tale may have originated in Mycenaean Greece. Apollonius purposely recast the hero as a vulnerable but brave human in keeping with the tastes and values of the era (Jackson 155-162). Since this is a late development, it can have no bearing on the original myth or its supposed extraterrestrial antecedents. Similarly, I can find no support for Temple's view that Jason's name means "appeaser," as nearly every scholarly source derives his name from the Greek word "to heal" (Mackie 2).⁵ Temple provides no citation beyond his own assertion, and I am unable to determine his reasoning for his claim.

* * *

Jason and the Secrets of the Space Frogs

These minor points safely dispensed with, we can move on to the meat of Temple's Jason argument. Let us begin by asking on what grounds Temple identifies Jason as Herakles and Herakles as Briareus and/or Gilgamesh. Here, fortunately, Temple has made our job easy. In all these cases, the source of his identifications (and, indeed, it appears the entirety of his knowledge of Greek myth) is Robert Graves's *The Greek Myths* (1955), which he explicitly cites. Graves identifies Jason and Herakles thus: "Jason and Herakles are, in fact, the same character so far as the marriage-task myth is concerned ... Jason was, of course, a title of Herakles" (602). Here Graves argues that both stories reflect tasks associated with sacred kingship, and that Herakles at one point bore the title of a Jason (i.e., "healer," a meaning Temple previously rejected). This is not exactly the same as saying that Herakles captained the Argo, and Temple appears to go farther than Graves on this point.

Similarly thin is the ground uniting Herakles and Briareus. Graves holds that the Pillars of Herakles were once associated with Briareus and later assigned to Herakles after the Briareus myth "faded from memory," though he does say (without evidence or explanation) that the earliest Herakles was named Briareus (497). Temple's troubles are compounded when we discover that Graves identifies Herakles directly with Gilgamesh (451) without the need for Briareus or reference to the Argonauts. Worse, Graves specifically identifies Achilles as another Gilgamesh "variant," and he cites the older myth of Jason's descent into the dragon's stomach (one Temple ignores) as related to the Bible's tale of Jonah and the whale, Jonah being cited as synonymous with Marduk, the Babylonian god!

As the reader may have guessed, Graves, who was a poet and novelist rather than an academic, had a particular and penchant for finding fanciful correspondences between mythological characters and for imposing his idiosyncratic views on the Greek myths. Immediately upon publication of *The Greek Myths* reviewers attacked Graves for his

“defective scholarship” (Rose 208) for which there was “no conceivable evidence” to support his “inaccuracies, evasions, improbable analogies, and amateur etymologies” (Macpherson 17). In short, his scholarship was not to be trusted, and no reputable scholar would use Graves’s theories without copious documentary support, which is not to be found in *The Sirius Mystery*. However, Temple sees Graves as “invaluable” and “superb” (146).

For Robert Temple to rely on Graves’s book not just as a convenient secondary reference for Greek myths but as the foundation for his understanding of mythology and the interrelationship of myths to one another is simply unsupported. Even when Temple began writing *Sirius* in 1967, Graves’s missteps were well-known; by the time of the 1998 revision of *Sirius*, continued reliance on these erroneous interpretations was inexcusable.

There is a further complication here for Temple’s theory. Given the vast period of time over which the Jason myth was told and retold, from the Bronze Age to late versions written under the Roman Empire, it would stand to reason that prehistoric Sirius lore should best be preserved in the *oldest* versions of and allusions to the myth, those closest in time to the aliens and their teachings. But Temple does not consider this and instead takes Graves’s version as “standard” (minus the apparently interchangeable heroes). All this on top of the fact that *Graves himself warns that older Argonaut stories were nothing like the story from the Hellenistic age!* (581).

Other than a superficial swipe at Herakles’ and Orpheus’ appearance in Apollonius, Temple makes no attempt to separate late interpolations from older traditions, thus presenting every scrap of legend from 1500 BCE to 250 BCE as part of one unified Sirius-Jason complex, as though the myth were unchanged in its details for a thousand years. This would be the equivalent of trying to study early medieval Britain using only Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* (1856-1885) and a rough idea that King Arthur lived in the Dark Ages. Obviously,

one cannot claim on the basis of a modern retelling of a late version of a myth that an African tribe is the flesh-and-blood descendants of these mythic heroes.

At this point, it should go without saying that any direct relationship between Jason's fifty oarsmen and the "fifty" Anunnaki is entirely speculative. While the Anunnaki may occasionally be referred to as fifty in number (though Temple gives no source for this), their numbers vary in myth. The Babylonians, for example, considered them to be three hundred in number (Turner and Coulter 59). However, to give the devil his due, Gilgamesh *did* have fifty companions in the earliest versions of his myth (c. 2000 BCE), though these were left out of the later versions of the first and second millenniums BCE, the versions current when the Jason myth was promulgated and eventually recorded. However, as half of one hundred, fifty was an exceedingly common number in mythology, and unless we choose to read all reference to fifty as Sirius lore, there needs to be something more than linguistic convenience to justify such an interpretation of a rather standard poetic number.⁶

Conclusions

I hope this review of Temple's misuse ancient myth in *The Sirius Mystery* has accomplished two things: first, to demonstrate that an author who cannot be trusted in big things (the truth of extraterrestrial visitation) cannot be trusted in small things either; and second, to put to rest the persistent myth that even if one does not support Temple's conclusions about intelligent space-faring frogmen that his scholarship and erudition are still an important contribution to the study of ancient mythology and history.

There is a bit of poetic irony in all this, too. Robert Temple's knowledge of Jason and the Argonauts, and the story's history and development, seems to derive entirely from Robert Graves and his *Greek Myths*. Temple does not directly cite the Jason tales of Hesiod,

Pindar, and Apollonius, the ancient authors from whom we derive our knowledge of the myth.⁷ Had he done so, he might just have noticed a curious passage in Apollonius, who describes Medea's first glimpse of Jason at their clandestine meeting in Hecate's temple: "[H]e appeared to her as she desired, like Sirius leaping high from Ocean..." (88). There you have it: Jason is Sirius! Of course, this is nothing but a bit of poetic simile, but its omission underscores just how poorly researched *The Sirius Mystery* really is, despite its hundreds of endnotes and reputation as the thinking person's ancient astronaut book.

Notes

¹ See bibliography in *The Skeptic's Dictionary* entry for the Dogon for a partial list of skeptical critiques and rebuttals (<http://www.skeptdic.com/dogon.html>).

² The RAS is “open to any person over the age of eighteen” with no formal qualifications or scholarly requirements and membership does not imply the organization’s official endorsement or support of its members’ views (see “How to Join” at <http://www.ras.org.uk/>). The same applies to the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies, the Egypt Exploration Society, and the Royal Historical Society, all of which Temple listed as affiliations in the 1998 *Sirius*.

³ Temple reproduces (reversed) one such image in the 1998 revision of *Sirius* and identifies the female figure with Medea, despite the obvious armor, aegis, and owl (not, as Temple claims, an oracular dove), Athena’s symbols. He also misidentifies Athena’s Medusa-head breastplate as a “serpent” and her armor as dragon scales. Temple confesses ignorance of the image’s meaning, implying that he neither recalled Graves’s interpretation of this image nor researched the scholarly literature, which had discussed the image since at least the nineteenth century. In another plate (again mirror reversed), he misidentifies a standard scene of Medea magically resurrecting a ram as an alchemical transmutation of a ram into gold and Pelias as Jason, demonstrating his lack of familiarity with the scholarly literature and Greek mythology in general.

⁴ In fact, Iolcus was a Mycenaean center with an extensive shipyard, which is perhaps why the Jason legend begins there.

⁵ Mackie informs me that “appeaser” is “a very secondary etymology” that does not appear in the scholarly literature about Jason (personal communication, July 30, 2009).

⁶ Cf. the frequent ancient practice of using a round number like 1,000 or 10,000 as a synonym for an uncountable number (as we do with “zillions”), or the frequent appearance of triads and trinities in myth. Some numbers apparently are more poetic than others and need not refer to alien sky science.

⁷ Temple includes these authors in his bibliography, but while his endnotes cite passages from Hesiod and Pindar, these are not passages related to the Argonauts, a striking omission given the admitted centrality of the Argonaut story to *The Sirius Mystery*. I was unable to find a single direct citation of Apollonius (or Hesiod’s or Pindar’s Jason tales) unmediated through Graves.

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