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Sinking Atlantis

The Fall of the Minoans

More than two thousand years ago, the Greek historian Plato wrote about Atlantis, the fabled civilization that was swallowed by the sea. But the origins of Plato's story have never been identified. It is only recently that some archaeologists have begun to believe the legend may have started on Crete. They are hoping that scientific investigation can provide an actual link to Plato's ancient folk memory.

Five thousand years ago, the Minoans, Europe's first great civilization, flourished on the island of Crete. The sophisticated inhabitants, named after the legendary King Minos, were the first Europeans to use a written language, known as Linear A, and the first to construct paved roads. They were an advanced society of highly-cultivated artisans and extremely skilled civic engineers. The Minoans were excellent ship builders and sailors, and their maritime empire was so vast, it rivaled that of the ancient Egyptians. They were an enigmatic people, worshiping snake priestesses and engaging in human sacrifice with origins not linked to Europe as expected, but to ancient Iran, which may explain why they were so different from the Greeks who rose to power after them. Such practices gave rise to Greek myths about the Minotaur, a half-man half-bull that ate human flesh in his forbidding labyrinth. But inexplicably, at the height of their power, the Minoans were wiped from the pages of history. The reason for their disappearance has perplexed historians for generations — until now.

The island of Santorini, 70 miles north of Crete, was home to the wealthy Minoan seaport of Akrotiri, a place where the wall paintings discovered portray their landscape with happy animals and farmers harvesting saffron. But the Minoans had built their prosperous city on one of the most dangerous islands on earth, next to the volcano Thera. Around 1600, B.C., Akrotiri was shaken by a violent earthquake. Some time later, an eruption occurred. The Thera eruption was one of the largest in human history — blasting more than 10 million tons of ash, gas, and rock 25 miles into the atmosphere. Incredibly, despite Crete's close proximity to the volcano, the debris from Thera largely missed the major Minoan towns.



On Crete, strange and chaotic layers of soil, broken pottery, building materials, and even cattle bones can be found along the eroding coastline near the ancient town of Palaikastro. With the help of soil scientist Hendrik Bruins, archaeologist Sandy McGillivray discovers that the soil also contains micro-organisms that are normally found only on the ocean floor. The only way they could have been deposited on land is by a powerful tsunami. The presence of Thera pumice that could only have been washed ashore on Crete by powerful waves seems to indicate that the volcano caused the tsunami, and carbon dating of a cow bone found in the chaotic layer of sediment confirms that it was deposited there around 1600 B.C., the same time that Thera erupted.

Archaeologists are only now beginning to understand what happened in the decades that followed. One of the most remarkable clues is a small statue that was found in Palaikastro. It was discovered in an archaeological layer deposited a hundred years after the disaster. A statue made of ivory tusks, gold with a serpentinite head, a prime example of one of the great masterpieces of Minoan art, which has been vandalized, suggests ritualized violence against the Minoan culture. Additional signs of such deliberate destruction have been found in other places on the island. Archaeologist Maria Vasaki believes the answer lies in an unusual cemetery in Chanea. The bodies have been dated to the period of widespread unrest in the Minoan world. Similar bodies have been found near Knossos as well. Their weapons were not Minoan—they resembled those used by the ancient Peloponnese Greeks. The invaders from the Greek mainland slashed and burned their way across Crete, overwhelming the weakened Minoans. The tsunami not only left the Minoans ripe for an attack, it gave the Greeks an important military advantage.



At long last, the story of the Minoan disappearance has been unearthed. Five thousand years after it hit, an epic natural disaster can be blamed for their collapse. A wave that washed away an empire is strikingly reminiscent of a mystical city that sank beneath the waves. And though we may never know for sure if Crete was Atlantis, we at least have an explanation for the downfall of Europe's first great civilization.

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