

REFLECTIONS

LOOKING FOR ATLANTIS

Robert Silverberg

Just about a year ago, magazine time—it was in the issue dated March 2012, but I write these columns well in advance—I told of my forthcoming trip to the Canary Islands, and expounded the nineteenth-century theory that this group of islands in the Atlantic is, in fact, all that remains of the lost continent of Atlantis.

Well, now it is actually March of 2012, though this column will not appear until early in 2013, and I have returned from the Canary Islands and can share with you the results of my efforts to discover the surviving vestiges of that lost continent.

Atlantis, as I said in the earlier piece, was first heard from about 355 B.C. in Plato's dialog *Timaeus*. In that work he tells a tale that he says goes back nine thousand years, to a time when the vast and mighty land of Atlantis controlled the entrance to the Mediterranean and dominated much of the territory eastward from there. Plato describes the great palaces and temples of Atlantis, its harbors and docks, and the huge defensive wall surrounding its capital, fashioned of locally quarried stone, "one kind white, another black, and a third red," covered with plates of tin, of brass, and of the yellowish-red metal called orichalcum, evidently some alloy of copper.

Belligerent, warlike Atlantis got its comeuppance, Plato says, when it was assailed by violent earthquakes and floods, "and in a single day and night of rain . . . the island of Atlantis disappeared, and was sunk beneath the sea."

The notion that the Canary Islands were the surviving mountaintops of Atlantis was first set forth in 1803 by a French scholar, Bory de Saint-Vincent, who focused his attention on the

Guanches, the prehistoric native race of the islands, long since absorbed into the culture of the Spanish conquerors who had arrived in the fifteenth century. Settlements of Guanches, a race of tall, handsome, fair-skinned people, were found on all seven of the islands. (Strictly speaking, only the people of the island of Tenerife used the name "Guanches" for themselves, or, more accurately, "Guan Chenerfe," meaning "son of Tenerife," the other islanders using such names for themselves as "Bimbaches," "Mahos," and "Gomeros," though they all had similar languages and cultural practices. Since the Spanish conquest the term has been applied generally to the entire indigenous population.)

The curious thing about the various island groups lumped under the name of "Guanches" is that at the time of the Spanish invasion in the fifteenth century they had no knowledge of the art of navigation. Each population group was confined to its own island and had no contact with any of the others. Since they had similar languages and cultural traits, they must all have had some common ancestor, and it was reasonable to assume that they once had had sufficient maritime skills to have been able to come across by boat from the mainland of Africa, but somehow had lost those skills as the centuries passed.

The nineteenth century, a time of great interest in the world's prehistoric past, produced not only reasonable scientific assumptions but a great many unreasonable ones, and among them were some odd theories of how the Guanches got to the islands. One was that they had crossed from the vicinity of what is now Morocco on a land bridge that later sank into the sea. (There is no

geological evidence for such a bridge.) Another, of an even higher order of improbability, is that the seven widely scattered islands making up the Canaries represent the highest peaks of what had been the continent of Atlantis before it was destroyed, nine thousand years ago, by that devastating earthquake and flood. The Guanches, so the notion goes, were the surviving Atlanteans, who had fled to the tops of the islands' mountains when the cataclysm struck and had become stranded there, isolated from one another by a sea that they eventually forgot how to cross.

Well, maybe so. But one big problem is that Plato's Atlantis was just a fantasy, a pretty fable that he had brought forth to illustrate certain philosophical points. As his own pupil Aristotle said, "He who invented it destroyed it." The lost continent has, of course, been a staple of speculative fiction for a long time. Jules Verne's Captain Nemo took his submarine, the *Nautilus*, to the sunken ruins of Atlantis ("vast heaps of stone, amongst which might be traced the vague and shadowy forms of castles and temples"), and located it roughly in the vicinity of the Canaries. Many a later novelist, including the author of this column, has written novels of fantasy telling of the glory and destruction of Atlantis. But modern undersea exploration has failed to produce any evidence that the seas beyond the Straits of Gibraltar hold the ruins of a lost continent. The tale of Atlantis remains just that—a tale.

Well, I liked the idea that the Canary Islands were the mountains of Atlantis, rising above the sea like the masts of a sunken ship, and while I was there last month I searched diligently for some vestige of the lost continent, a bit of marble frieze sticking up somewhere, a fragment of orichalcum siding, a quarry that might have yielded the various-colored stone of the great wall. Alas, I found none of that. The island I visited was Gran Canaria, one of the two largest; I picked it rather than the more popular

tourist destination Tenerife because, aside from its pleasant winter weather, it offered the finest botanical garden in the islands, botany being a major interest of mine, and a museum devoted to the prehistoric culture of the Canaries. Gran Canaria turned out to be a dry, hot place, rugged and mountainous, with forbidding cliffs of brown rock in the interior and a fringe of pretty beaches all along its coast. No marble in sight. No orichalcum. I abandoned the Atlantis theory forthwith.

The museum of prehistory, though, in the capital city of Las Palmas, offered a different hypothesis, nearly as exciting, for the presence of the Guanches in the Canaries.

Ancient burial mounds are found all over the islands, particularly on Gran Canaria and Tenerife. Archaeologists have uncovered more than a thousand well-preserved Guanche skeletons in them, and even some mummies, preserved by a process not very different from the one used in ancient Egypt. One rather grim room in the Las Palmas museum provides a comprehensive display of them: hundreds of skulls in cases along the walls, plus some complete skeletons and a few mummies. From these one can see that the prehistoric inhabitants of the Canaries were, just as the early Spanish conquerors said, a tall race, the men averaging more than six feet in height, with high foreheads, long skulls, relatively short arms, wide, prominent cheekbones, and red or blond hair.

The interesting thing about that is that it could be a description of the paleolithic Cro-Magnon race that occupied southern France some thirty thousand years ago and left us such remarkable things as the painted caves of Lascaux. We have no Cro-Magnon mummies, so we have no idea what color their hair might have been, but otherwise the Guanche skeletons are an anatomical match for the "cave-man" bones that have been found in France's Dordogne region and points southward from there:

a tall, long-skulled people, with those markedly jutting cheekbones.

The resemblance between the Guanches and the Cro-Magnons was noticed almost as soon as the Cro-Magnons themselves had been re-discovered during railway excavations in France in 1868. Nine years later, the French archaeologist Rene Verneau (1852-1938) spent a year in the Canary Islands, studying the relationship between the Guanches and the Cro-Magnons by exploring burial mounds, habitable caves, ancient monuments, and even funeral parlors, where he could examine the bodies of the recently dead (for, although Guanche culture was suppressed by the Spaniards, the Guanches themselves were only partly assimilated into the conquering race by intermarriage, and much of their original gene pool survives on the islands even today.)

To Verneau there was little doubt that the Guanches had been a surviving outlier of the vanished Cro-Magnon race. And no modern research in the field of physical anthropology has done anything to overthrow that hypothesis.

As it appears now, the Cro-Magnons originated in France, spread gradually into Spain, and in the course of the following millennia continued southward, reaching North Africa well before the Roman era. Some interbreeding with North African population groups took place there—which accounts for the occasional skeletons from the Canary Islands burials that lack classic Cro-Magnon traits—but the pure Cro-Magnon strain seems to have continued to exist until at least five thousand years ago, and at some point Cro-Magnons from what is now Morocco crossed the sixty miles or so of sea that separate the easternmost Canary Island from the coast of North Africa and began the settlement that produced the people we call the Guanches. Gradually they forgot the art of navigation, so that each island's population lived on in isolation, but without great cultural divergence, until the Spaniards came and disrupted everything.

One can still see Canarians with Cro-Magnon faces in the island towns today. (There is even a painted cave, dating from the twelfth century A.D., on Gran Canaria. Its murals look nothing like those of the celebrated Lascaux cave of ancient Cro-Magnon times, but, well, artistic styles do change over the course of twenty-five thousand years.)

So I didn't find Atlantis in the Canary Islands, but I did, it seems, find the last outpost of the Cro-Magnons. One aspect of that that I particularly like is that a Spanish priest of the late sixteenth century jotted down about a hundred Guanche words while their language was still a living thing. Those hundred words are all that is left of the Guanche tongue. They are interesting enough for that, but what if they are also, by some tenuous line of descent, words that the Cro-Magnons spoke? We know nothing at all of the language of the ancient cave-painters. But the cave art shows that they were a people of considerable cultural sophistication. Did they have poetry as well as painting? Drama? Was there a Cro-Magnon equivalent of Homer, or Sophocles, or—startling thought—Shakespeare? We'll never know, at least until those time machines I like to write about become realities.

But we do have those Guanche words that the good friar Alonso de Espinosa preserved for us, and perhaps—*perhaps*—they would be understood, more or less, by a Cro-Magnon wandering to the Canary Islands out of the remote past.

Achahu canac . . . god.

Afaro . . . grain.

Cancha . . . dog.

Cel . . . moon.

Xerax . . . sky.

Chamato . . . woman.

Coran . . . man.

There you are. Basic Cro-Magnon vocabulary for the modern age. Though my search for Atlantis on Gran Canaria ended in failure, I did find a link to something far more ancient . . . and real.