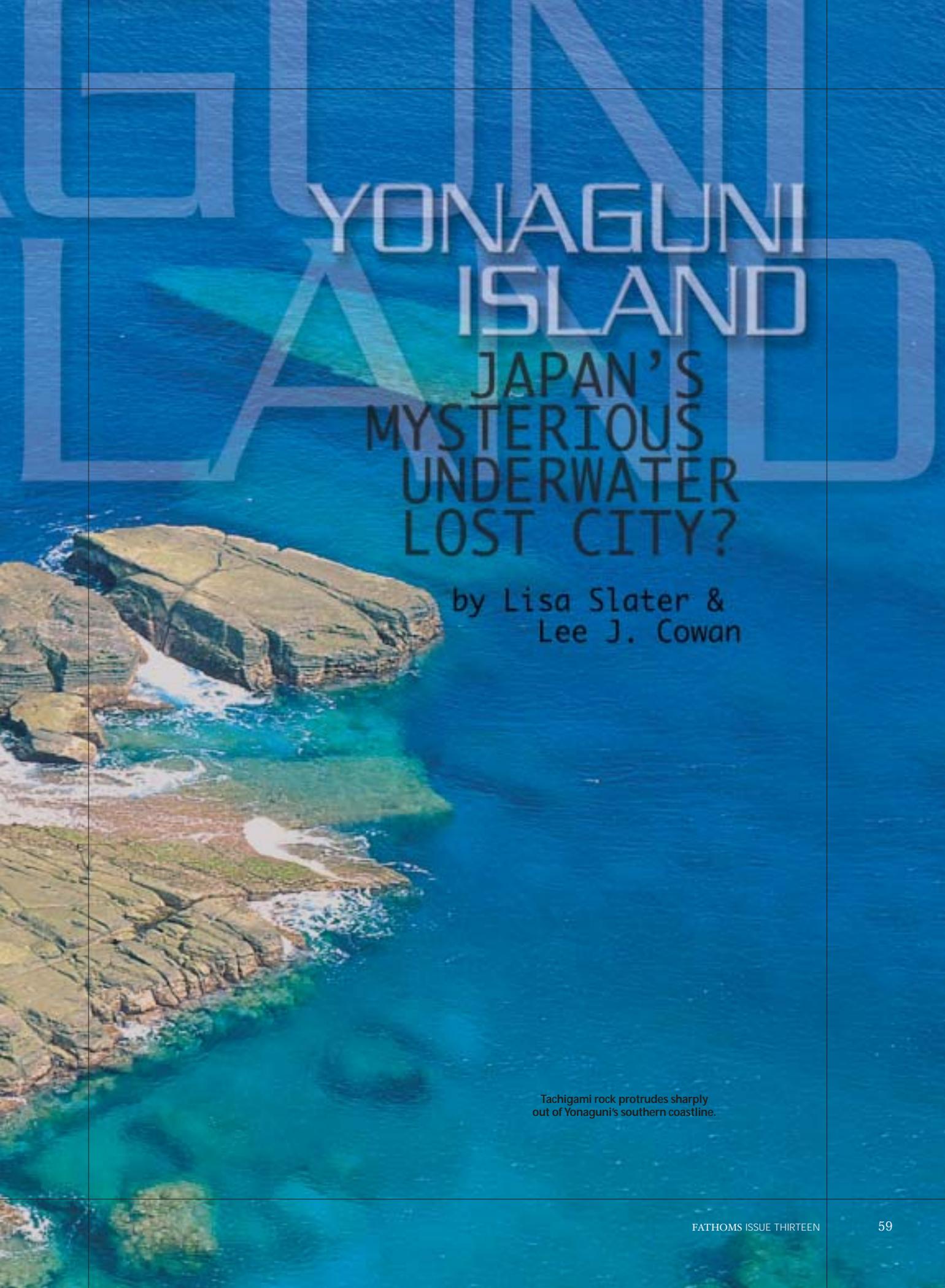




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YONAGUNI ISLAND

JAPAN'S MYSTERIOUS UNDERWATER LOST CITY?

by Lisa Slater &
Lee J. Cowan

Tachigami rock protrudes sharply
out of Yonaguni's southern coastline.

As I gaze around Tokyo with its neon lights and sprawling concrete, it seems difficult to believe that 1,400 miles away in the Ryukyu archipelago submerged beneath cobalt water in a virtual paradise is an ancient, underwater 'city'. At Yonaguni Island, a recently discovered set of ruins rumored to be the sister city to Atlantis will challenge history as we know it if proven to be manmade. So in an attempt to decipher the true genesis of this mysterious wonder, I find myself jetting off to this remote part of the world.

In 1986 Kihachiro Aratake, a local diver, was out looking for new dive sites when he came across these ominous stone monuments and this remote, rugged island was forever put on the diving map.

The main monument, an impressive series of stone steps and terraces that resemble the Mayan ruins of South America, rise up from the ocean floor 30 meters below. At over 50 meters long, 20 meters wide and 30 meters high, it's bigger than any marine animal you'll encounter and unlike those phantom whale sharks and hammerheads this thing doesn't move, so a sighting can be guaranteed.

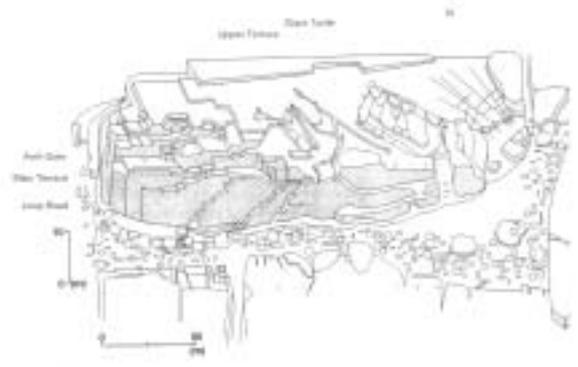
The water is a warm 83°F (28°C) and with no limit to the visibility, in the distance the ruins await investigation. Approaching the site through a symmetrical, narrow tunnel at a depth of 10 meters we make our way into the 'foyer' where towering megaliths welcome us. In these ancient rocks I notice mysterious carvings engraved into the stone and wonder if this could have been caused by natural erosion or are they evidence of an ancient form of writing?

In the tow of a brisk current, our group of six head northeast around a corner leading to an angular terrace. Starting at around 20 meters and rising up just shy of the surface, the terrace is a series of stone steps ranging from one half to a few meters in height. The steps' precise symmetrical corners carved at perfect 90-degree angles lead me to one conclusion, the structure must be man-made. Or is it?

Now, diving along the top of the ruins we arrive at a triangular pool, which resembles a Kaa, an artificial spring for drinking water similar to those found in island castles, which date back to ancient Okinawa. Looking down at what appears to be a drainage system centered around a well-preserved canal 20 cm by 30 cm. I later learn this canal could have carried water at a rate of 0.02 tons per second. Could this be evidence of an advanced ancient culture?

Fins dancing against the current, I

dive down into the 'sacred place of worship', an area reminiscent of an altar complete with a cross etched into a 15-foot wall. Heading south out to sea we cross a 'loop road' curving around the monument's base towards another set of steps. I turn around and gaze at the spectacular view of stone monuments, the magnificence of what I have just experienced begins to sink in.



Extensive scientific research has confirmed that the site is comprised primarily of fine sandstones and mudstones that were deposited about 20 million years ago. Dr. Robert M. Schoch of Boston University, is one of just a few American academics to have visited the site. He comments that this type of rock tends to fracture in very straight lines in the event of an earthquake, an all too common occurrence for Japan. Perhaps then, an earthquake is one explanation for the near-perfect symmetrical steps that appear to have been carved.

Weather activity and the natural wave and tidal action may also be largely responsible for eroding the sandstone in such a precise fashion. Indeed it is not just the monuments that enjoy such symmetry. During my tour of the island it's easy to spot a number of sites on land that share a similar topography as the underwater ruins.

As the rock was not placed at the site, rather it has naturally existed for millions of years, Schoch argues that it is most likely a natural phenomenon. He maintains that humans may have modified the rock for their own purpose. Perhaps it could have been part of an ancient quarry where blocks of rock were cut by stonemasons and then used for building other structures, structures that haven't stood the tests of time so well. This theory would help to explain the symmetrical notches that have been found throughout the site.



John Chandler



This mysterious series of stone steps and terraces resemble the Myan ruins of South America, rising up 25 meters from the ocean floor



Kihachiro Aratake

An underwater photograph showing ancient stone ruins on the seabed. The scene is dimly lit with a blue tint. In the foreground, there are large, rectangular stone blocks. In the background, several fish are swimming near the ruins.

This set of 10,000 year-old underwater ruins will challenge history as we know it if proven to be man-made

Until conflicting scientific results prove otherwise, Schoch remains a steadfast member of the natural school of thought.

That the site is a natural phenomenon however, has not been met without staunch criticism. For instance, how about the carved steps sheltered from relentless waves and natural erosion? The discovery of a number of similar structures that surround Yonaguni and other islands in the Ryukyu archipelago lend support to the manmade theory. Surrounding the main monument are smaller monuments; south of the main monument is a little plaza; 500 meters southeast lies the 'stadium' – a large flat area that has steps leading up to it and a huge turtle carved

theory that an advanced ancient civilization named Mu once existed as part of a mid-Pacific Ocean continent. In Churchward's book, 'Children of Mu' he writes, "sixty-three million people lived on the now lost continent of Mu over 200,000 years ago". A sister civilization to Plato's Atlantis, it was wiped out in a catastrophic earthquake some 20,000 years ago. Churchward maintained that the only remnants of Mu are the Hawaiian Islands.

Over the years even Churchward's family members have contested certain facts regarding his claims. Jack Churchward, the great-grandson to James Churchward offers a conflicting report that the tablets were in fact reed or papyrus

Kihachiro Aratake



Could weather activity and tidal action be responsible for eroding the sandstone in such a precise fashion?

out of stone indicates art work. A 'loop road' and a 'retaining wall' connect all of these sections making this whole region resemble a small city. The idea of a submerged lost city is not new and fascinating stories have transpired over the years.

James Churchward, (1851-1936) reported that in 1868 he had discovered stone tablets long since forgotten in an East Asian temple vault in India that detailed man's earliest civilization. With the help of a 'rishi', a divinely inspired sage, Churchward set to work translating the writings contained within the tablets. Perhaps following in Plato's footsteps and spurred on by his findings, Churchward developed a grand

scrolls that were shown to Churchward by the rishi and not discovered by him. He comments that the "tablets have always been a fraud". Unfortunately for Churchward, his theory has not been backed up with scientific data and has since been rejected. However, all is not lost for Churchward as strands of his theory have recently resurfaced in the highest echelon of Japan's academia.

During my last trip to Yonaguni I was invited to the office of Professor Masaaki Kimura, a research geologist working at Ryukyu University on Okinawa Island. He has studied the monuments for over 10 years and steadfastly

maintains that the monuments are man-made. Long before the oceans rose, Kimura believes that the 160 islands that comprise the Okinawa archipelago were originally connected and formed a single arc. Perhaps therefore, Churchward's theory of Mu, a lost civilization, existed not in the mid-Pacific but rather a little northeast in the Okinawa region. At this time the only evidence of an ancient civilization existing in Japan is that of the Jomon people who date back 10,000 years. But all evidence relating to the Jomon has been found on mainland Japan and northern Okinawa islands only.

Dating the pyramid structures at about 10,000 years old, Kimura proposes a link to the last Ice Age and the infiltration of the oceans. Originally above water, the monuments now lie 35 meters below the surface due to the rising of the oceans caused by ice melts, tsunami and major earthquakes. Before the oceans rose, the site would have been 50-100 meters above sea level and quite a fair distance from the shore. Listening to his theory, I picture a castle high up on a hill that offered sweeping views across to Taiwan.

Kimura agrees with skeptics admitting natural forces may have created the terracing but "it's the surrounding features that make this site appear to be man-made". For instance, a symmetrically cut tunnel through the lintel rock wall is typically characteristic of an ancient Asian monument or holy place. Even more interesting is the 'loop road' and 'fence' that surround the main monument. He suggests that the fence, comprised of strategically placed rocks, was built to protect the region. After extensive research it has been demonstrated that the loop road was above water 9000 years ago and that the base rock was open to natural air for at least 1000 years.

Kimura became interested in Churchward's theory when he came across stone tablets that were dug deep into parts of the main monument. According to Kimura, both his and Churchward's discoveries contain similar symbols. In addition, Kimura's tablets have two holes and he notes

that, "above each of the holes, there is a further indentation pointing the same way indicating the stone had been suspended from a line strung through the holes." Is it possible that these stone tablets were suspended much like we would hang a good luck charm or sign? Had there been only one hole it could be argued that a marine critter may have dug it out, but two make this quite unlikely. It is also unlikely that natural forces would create the same markings found on each tablet. For Kimura, man definitely made these tablets.

Other recent findings support the manmade theory. For instance, stone tools found on the ocean sea floor have been estimated to be 10,000 years old. It is these ax-like tools, that may have been used to construct the monuments. Kimura also points to an ancient piece of art – a sculpture of a cow. Perhaps these people worshiped cows much like they do in India where Churchward claimed his discoveries.

It is generally believed that civilized society began around 5000 years ago. However, some academics believe advanced society existed as early as 10,000 years ago, although no solid scientific data has been confirmed to support this idea. No doubt the origin of the monuments will continue to be debated, but with the theories offered by Churchward and Kimura and other recent findings, is it possible that the secrets to a lost civilization have finally been revealed? Are the monuments remnants of some lost civilization? If so, what did the people use this site for and where were they from?

Mystery, history and culture combine to make Yonaguni's 'lost city' one of the world's most unique dive sites. Strewn across the Ryukyu archipelago are 160 sub-tropical islands with excellent visibility, pristine corals and abundant marine life that make a visit to Yonaguni Island a 'monumental' experience. For information on package tours to Japan's South-West Islands contact Open Coast travel agency 1866.OCT.DIAL (628.3425), or check out www.opencoastravel.com. 

Originally from London England, Lisa Slater became a world traveler by trekking the Himalayas, camping throughout South and East Africa and traveling through most of Asia. It was during these globetrotting adventures that her appreciation for diving evolved.

Obtaining an instructor certification in Cypress in 1997 Lisa has worked in the diving industry in Trinidad and Tobago, Egypt, Honduras and Japan. After settling in Japan for several years and becoming fluent in Japanese, Lisa gained a deep appreciation and acquired a unique perspective for the country and local culture.

Moving to Los Angeles four years ago, she now consults American and European corporations that engage in business with Japanese clients.

