

Alternative Archaeology

There is a vast and heterogeneous literature that presents a picture of human prehistory that departs radically from that found in academic publications. For instance, we are told in several best-selling books (such as Bauval and Gilbert 1994; Hancock and Bauval 1996) that the layout of the site of the three pyramids at Giza maps the position of the three stars that comprise Orion's Belt, as these stars appeared roughly twelve thousand years ago. Conventional Egyptologists, it is said, have radically underestimated the age of the pyramids. According to Bosnian-American entrepreneur and amateur archaeologist Semir Osmanagic, another high culture constructed pyramids in Bosnia at an even earlier time, more than 30,000 years ago. Such an early date would imply that high cultures flourished at a time when academic prehistorians insist that the only societies were bands of Palaeolithic hunter-gatherers. Some authors leave the identity of such ancient civilizations an open question, whereas others link them to lost continents such as Atlantis and Lemuria. As such references to mythic geography and to the great antiquity of some advanced civilizations indicate, there are historical links between some of the suggestions in this literature and ideas disseminated through →Theosophical channels.

How were early humans able to construct such massive monuments? To take one example cited by alternative archaeologists, the so-called Nazca lines, a set of gigantic geoglyphs in a desert in southern Peru, depicting stylized humans, plants, and animals, including hummingbirds, monkeys, and lizards, seem to defy the technological capabilities of prehistoric peoples. To add to the mystery, these designs are of such immense proportions that they are discernible only from a great height. A radical claim, proposed in →Louis Pauwels and →Jacques Bergier (1963, 148) and popularized by figuring prominently in →Erich von Däniken's 1970 blockbuster *Chariots of the Gods*, suggested that the best explanation for these structures was that they were built after instructions provided by aliens, who visited the area in prehistoric times. The rather unremarkable explanation offered by

mainstream archaeologists is that nearby elevations in the landscape provide the necessary vantage point, and that the local indigenous people created the figures by removing the top layer of soil to reveal the strata underneath.

Mainstream archaeologists accept that contacts between the Old and New World took place in pre-Columbian times: the Norse settlements in Greenland and Newfoundland are well documented. Authors with a more speculative bent have added a substantial number of claims of transoceanic voyages to this short list. Again, links to occultist historiography in general, and Theosophical ideas in particular, are common in literature describing such purported migrations, but individual creativity and reliance on other kinds of mythic materials is also very frequent. Thus the Olmecs, the first high culture of the Mesoamerican area, have been linked to the putative arrival of Africans by Ivan van Sertima (1976), while numerous writers supporting the narrative presented in the Book of Mormon argue that several waves of immigrants from the Near East arrived in the Americas many centuries before Columbus.

It is easy to provide a list of controversial claims about the distant past, but much harder to discern any shared properties. At least at first sight, the claims presented above – the radical re-dating of monuments, the involvement of aliens in human prehistory, the reinterpretation of various archaeological finds, and the transoceanic contacts of prehistoric peoples – are quite diverse. They involve different types of artefacts that originated in vastly different parts of the globe, and are dateable to very different epochs. One of the most obvious traits that unite them is the intense distaste they provoke among professional archaeologists. Sceptically inclined articles and books (such as Cole 1980; Fagan 2006; Feder 1984, 2005; Harrold and Eve 1995; Williams 1991; Stiebing 1984, 1995; Schadla-Hall 2004) refer to such claims as examples of pseudo-science: accounts of prehistory united by their intrinsic falsehood. Stephen Williams (1991, 12) defines “fantastic” theories about American prehistory as those that “use data and interpretations that will not stand close scrutiny”. The perspective in Fagan and Feder (2005, 720) on the whole phenomenon boils down to the fact that such ideas are “demonstrably wrong”. The introduction to Harrold and Eve’s (1995) *Cult Archaeology and Creationism* similarly characterizes the field as made up of claims that are “simply wrong – sometimes spectacularly so”, and are “ludicrously incorrect” (p. ix).

Polemics usually go both ways, and the opinions of the alternative archaeologists regarding their academic competitors are equally dismissive. →Graham Hancock, for instance, portrays writers on the alternative side of the fence as bold investigators, and directs a number of sly digs at conventional archaeologists. Apparently, the typical representative of the profession is "an astigmatic archaeologist sieving his way through the dust of ages" (Hancock 1995, 343). The defect in vision is presumably a symbol of the intellectual astigmatism of a whole profession, so blinkered by prejudice that they are unable to see the plain truth uncovered by their more courageous competitors.

Besides mutual dislike, is there anything substantive that can unequivocally distinguish "mainstream" from "alternative" archaeology? As in the case of many other pre-theoretical notions, the distinction between mainstream and alternative is often easy to spot when it comes to individual issues, but nevertheless turns out to be quite difficult to pin down in principle. Archaeology is just one of many scientific mainstream fields that have alternative counterparts, and the problems of delimiting the mainstream from the alternative are analogous within each of these fields. One useful way of conceptualizing attempts at demarcation sees them in terms of three fundamental approaches (cf. Asprem 2015).

Firstly, mainstream science can be understood as a particular set of *methods*, and alternative approaches can be distinguished by not adhering to these methods. Few alternative archaeologists have the resources or perhaps the inclination to adopt the methods characteristic of academic investigators of prehistory: surveying and conducting controlled excavation of sites, radiocarbon dating, dendrochronology, pollen analysis, DNA analysis, and so forth. Much of the literature in the alternative camp consists of a reanalysis of existing finds. There are, however, also methods rejected by conventional archaeologists but accepted by at least some representatives of the alternative side. Psychic archaeology is a set of practices in which extrasensory perception is used to locate and understand archaeological sites (Goodman 1976). Various versions of psychic archaeology involve dowsing or psychometry, and have predecessors in the clairvoyant investigation of prehistory found in occultist milieus, not least the once influential but now largely forgotten writings of Joseph Rodes Buchanan (1814-1899) (Hanegraaff 2017). Another controversial method is the reliance of some alternative archaeologists on prophetically revealed texts as guides to

prehistory. Examples include the use of clues from Genesis to locate the remains of Noah's ark, or the close reading of passages from the Book of Mormon as a map of prehistoric Mesoamerica (Hammer, forthcoming).

Secondly, the scientific mainstream may be definable by its contents, i.e. as a *body of knowledge*: a set of theories, themes, and fundamental claims that practitioners of a given scientific field have decided to accept. Although the idea that science is a body of knowledge seems unpalatable to many scientists (who prefer seeing science as a method of inquiry), and although it is often said that scientific findings are provisional and open to refutation and revision, a stable and widely shared body of background understandings does characterize most or all fields.

Alternative archaeology also has its body of widely shared presuppositions. Much of the literature presupposes that similarities between various cultures are due to the diffusion of cultural traits from one single source. The existence of pyramids in Egypt and in Mesoamerica can be taken as evidence for transoceanic contacts, or for the migration of people from Atlantis to the Old and New World. Another frequently shared topic is the belief that complex societies emerged many millennia earlier than the dates commonly presented in academic publications. The example of the pyramids at Giza has already been mentioned. A third common suggestion is that these ancient civilizations were technically at least as advanced as ours. For instance, a number of human skulls fashioned from quartz are claimed to be ancient artefacts produced by means of a technology we are today barely able to match. Conventional researchers, by contrast, insist that they are modern fakes manufactured with the aid of power tools. A fourth claim commonly found in the sources is that these prehistoric cultures were also spiritually superior. The technical prowess of the ancient Egyptians is in this perspective paralleled by their lofty wisdom.

Finally, science can be approached *socio-historically*, i.e., as the activity of people working within a profession, who agree on particular ways of socializing younger scholars into their ranks (by such means as university education, the conferral of degrees, and academic positions), protecting their brand (by according importance to one's institutional affiliation, titles, and so forth), and disseminating their findings (in journals and academic publishing

houses that have a peer review process, at conferences hosted by academic institutions). Most proponents of alternative archaeology operate outside the academic circuit, may prefer to publish with mass-market publishing houses or on the internet, and attend conferences attended exclusively by other alternative archaeologists. Nonetheless, there are exceptions, scholars affiliated with mainstream academic institutions, who present theories rejected by the vast majority of their academic peers and typical of the alternative genre. Examples include van Sertima, mentioned above, who was associate professor at Rutgers, and became known for the theory that the Olmecs of Guatemala and Mexico originally came from West Africa.

As the examples and list of shared traits shows, alternative archaeology is a very diverse field. It resembles the cultic milieu defined in a seminal article by sociologist Colin Campbell (1972): a loosely coordinated group of people who are primarily united by positioning themselves in opposition to a dominant mainstream, and who eclectically borrow and combine ideas from each other. To the extent that shared methods, beliefs, and social formations have emerged, it is as a result of their rejection of established scholarship and their willingness to seek inspiration in each other's work.

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