



Chariot of the Frauds

Just because you can't figure out how ancient civilizations built stuff, doesn't mean they got help from aliens.

Neil deGrasse Tyson

IN 1968, A BOOK WAS PUBLISHED IN Germany with the odd title, *Memories of the the Future: Unsolved Mysteries of the Past*.

The book put forth the theory that extra-terrestrials had had a major influence on early human technology and culture, and —retitled *Chariots of the Gods?*— it would go on to become an international sensation, eventually selling over 70 million copies.

Perhaps it would have put a crimp in sales if readers knew that even as the book was climbing the bestseller lists, its author —a bankrupt hotel manager and petty thief —was serving a prison sentence for serial embezzlement, fraud, and forgery.

While Erich von Däniken was hardly the first to promote the idea that aliens once intervened in human history, he was largely responsible for popularizing it, almost single-handedly creating a new field of pseudoscience that would come to be known as ‘paleo-contact’ —or more commonly, ‘ancient astronauts’ theory.

Never mind that virtually all reputable scientists categorize the claims of ‘ancient astronauts’ proponents as—depending on their area of expertise—pseudohistory, pseudoarchaeology, pseudoanthropology, or just plain old pseudoscience.

Von Däniken’s influence lives on in such travesties as the History Channel’s long-running series, *Ancient Aliens*. (Von Däniken made a—presumably paid—appearance in the show’s 2009 pilot episode, perhaps to set aside bail money for his next felony.)

Despite ample evidence to the contrary, ‘ancient astronauts’ proponents claim that Stonehenge, the Easter Island statues, the Pyramids of Giza, and similar megalithic structures could not have been built without help from aliens. (While the precise means of construction for many of these structures are debated, a number of perfectly credible theories have been put forward, some of which engineers have even demonstrated and none of which require alien assistance.)

Among the many other examples that ‘ancient astronauts’ proponents claim as evidence of extraterrestrial visitors are the Nazca Lines (landing strips for alien spacecraft), images on the Sarcophagus of Palenque (an alien spaceman sitting atop a rocket-powered spaceship), and artifacts such as the Antikythera mechanism.

These are all easily explained by similar examples in the same cultures which more readily betray their human origin.

The Nazca lines, for example, are ceremonial pathways that were still in use in the recent past by the Nazca people that created them. (In any case, it’s not at all clear why alien spacecraft would require a jumbled mess of runways up to 2km long.)

The images appearing on the Sarcophagus of Palenque are, in fact, serpents, common symbols of the Mayan underworld.

And while the Antikythera mechanism is an extraordinary device (constructed in Greece in the first century BCE, devices of similar complexity did not appear again until the 14th century) and was used to predict astronomical positions and eclipses, it’s unlikely that it’s purpose was to provide a navigational aid to spacefaring aliens.

Proponents also claim that the founding texts of major religions—especially the Bible—bear references to alien visitors:

Ezekiel’s vision of the throne of God held aloft by angels becomes an alien spaceship, the Ark of the Covenant becomes a device for communicating with an alien race, the destruction of Sodom by fire and brimstone becomes a nuclear explosion, and so on.

In a particularly brazen claim, the legendary quartz crystal skulls—various examples of which are displayed in museums around the world—are purported to hold records from alien civilizations. (They were actually carved by an enterprising German art dealer in the 1870s.)

Far from being a harmless, entertaining fantasy, ‘ancient astronauts’ theory is, as one skeptic noted, “a slap in the face to the ingenuity of the human race,” and an affront to the indigenous cultures which it depicts as being too primitive to have accomplished such extraordinary things on their own.

It’s telling that no one assumes that the ancient Greeks needed alien help in building the Parthenon, or the Romans in constructing magnificent feats of engineering like the aqueducts, Colosseum, or Hadrian’s Wall.

Undaunted by the rejection of his theories by virtually the entire academic and scientific community, in 2003 von Däniken opened a theme park in Switzerland, showcasing ‘great mysteries’ of the world, with exhibits on Stonehenge, the Nazca Lines, and in a special exhibition, crop circles.

The attraction—called Mystery Park—went bankrupt after a few years and is now an event venue and amusement arcade.

The only real ‘mystery’ is how von Däniken, now nearing 90, continues to draw a credulous audience for his discredited ideas on the international lecture circuit.

But as he himself wrote in *History is Wrong* (2007), “Ideas have a dangerous tendency to spread like wildfire.” ■