

Review

Garrett G. Fagan (Editor), *Archaeological Fantasies: How Pseudoarchaeology Misrepresents the Past and Misleads the Public*. Routledge, 2006. Pp. 440, 20 line drawings and 6 black and white photographs. ISBN: 978-0-415-30592-1 (Hardback); ISBN 978-0-415-30593-8: (paperback). Price £80.00 (hardback); £28.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by Steven R. W. Gregory

It is one of those things which happens when browsing through the library – a serendipitous delve into the stacks and an opening line on a flyleaf which reads: ‘Did aliens build the pyramids?’. Irresistible! Yet perhaps not the light-hearted romp you might expect. The book proved to be a serious and well thought out treatment of an ever-present, burgeoning phenomenon that has the potential to undermine academic study – pseudoarchaeology. The more extreme theories of the ‘extra-terrestrial’ and ‘Atlantean advanced civilization’ kind are given ample consideration together with some of the less obvious, and thereby inherently more dangerous, variety. Therefore, while this book was published sometime ago now, there is much to recommend it to a present audience.

In the Foreword, Colin Renfrew [xii] sets out the problems which the book seeks to highlight. These are simple, two-fold, and probably already clear to all involved in the study of ancient history at an academic level: the misuse and misrepresentation of archaeological data by the ‘forces of bigotry and ... those of crass commercialism’. Renfrew also stresses the ever-present danger that pseudoarchaeology is liable to overwhelm and sweep along even serious scholars, as happened in Nazi Germany [xiv] – a point highlighted by Professor Schneider in his opening address to CRE VIII at Swansea in April 2007. On that occasion, Schneider pointed to influence exerted by the National Socialist Party in Germany during the 1930s and 1940s, concluding that it may be necessary to conduct a critical analysis of the output of certain scholars, perhaps working as late as the early 1950s, to identify political bias in the opinions and inferences made so as to prevent ‘forces of bigotry’ becoming embedded in present received wisdom. In similar vein, it is worthy of note that if one should think that such political manipulation of archaeological data in support of nationalist or fascist policies is a thing of the past, the paper of Harvard Professor of Sanskrit, Michael Witzel, entitled ‘Rama’s Realm’ [203-227] demonstrates that – at the time of writing – it was alive and gaining momentum India, with many colleagues already being ‘intimidated or thrown out of their posts’ [226].

The manner in which the earlier European version of such political manipulation of archaeology is preserved, and fed to an often unwitting public audience in the service of commercial gain, is covered in depth by Bettina Arnold, Associate Professor of Anthropology at Wiconsin-Milwaukee. In her case study, ‘Pseudoarchaeology and nationalism’, Arnold draws attention to the ““archo-errors” in Hollywood films and television programs’ [157] and focuses particularly on Spielberg’s ‘sins of both omission and commission ... with the portrayal of archaeology in the Indiana Jones trilogy’ in the section headed: ‘Pseudo-Nazi archaeologists: the curse of Indiana Jones’ [158-160]. While the described example appears to relate to the more popular sphere of historical representation, and one unlikely to trouble most students of ancient history, it nonetheless draws attention to matters which may often appear in somewhat less obvious guise.

The book opens with a paper by Peter Kosso, Professor of Philosophy at Northern Arizona University, entitled ‘The epistemology of archaeology’. The writer discusses the standards of challenge requisite in the differentiation of opinion and knowledge, and in distinguishing ‘plausible from implausible theories’ [3]. Having established some parameters regarding the appropriate use of material and textual evidence in discussing the past, Kosso applies them to a specific example: the Giza Pyramids – providing a brief summary of the data relating to those monuments which seems to leave the Hancock/Bauval School in an epistemological desert! Perhaps particularly worthy of note in this paper is the emphasis placed on the need to continue the search for knowledge, not to settle for the existing theory but to continually expose present ideas of past events to the challenges offered by new

evidence or theories; a point he summarizes with the remark: 'No claim in the system is foundational in the sense of being immune from doubt, rejection, or revision' [12]. The remainder of the book is divided into three parts, the first dealing with the phenomenon of pseudoarchaeology.

'Diagnosing pseudoarchaeology' is the paper of Garrett Fagan, Associate Professor of Classics and Ancient Mediterranean Studies and History at Penn State University. Fagan begins with quotations from von Däniken and Hancock before setting out the principal questions informing his contribution: 'What is pseudoarchaeology? And what are its defining characteristics?' [24]. Fagan goes on to outline the difficulties encountered through the variance in archaeological methodologies, but emphasises the common factors necessary in all cases – the 'absolute centrality of the data' and the 'conceptual flexibility' applied to its interpretation [25]. These principles, allied with 'the centrality of context to archaeological interpretation' [26] define archaeology, and are the factors which distinguish the discipline from pseudoarchaeology wherein such aspects are demonstrably absent. In the light of such precepts, Fagan demonstrates the flawed methodologies of pseudoarchaeologists – with the works of Graham Hancock and Robert Schoch being afforded particular attention.

'The Attraction of non-rational archaeological hypotheses: the individual and sociological factors' is the work of Nic Flemming, a marine archaeologist. He considers the popular lure of pseudoarchaeology and asks: '... why is a sector of the media industry so enthusiastic in promoting this junk?' – a good question; a number of enlightening answers are presented. Of these, one which stands out, for me, is summarized in the consideration of general debate between the academically rigorous and the pseudo-inclined in which – more often than not – the former is forced to acknowledge that nothing is absolutely certain while the latter 'radiates an almost religious conviction and certainty' [58].

Kenneth Feder's 'Skeptics, fence sitters, and true believers: Student acceptance of an improbable prehistory' focuses on the preconceptions held by many students when first embarking on the academic study of archaeology. Feder, Professor of Anthropology at Central Connecticut State University, discusses surveys conducted to establish student perceptions relating to the human past; his results are revealing, if not altogether surprising. From those results it seems that pseudoarchaeologists are not without influence within the student body, and that perhaps too many accept the possibility that human technological advancement was not without the aid of visiting 'Aliens from other worlds' [77]. Perhaps more alarming is the evidence demonstrating that a high proportion of the students surveyed agreed that the first human beings were Adam and Eve [90].

Concluding Part 1, Katherine Reece's paper, 'Memoirs of a true believer', gives the viewpoint of a convert. Once an avid supporter of pseudoarchaeological theory, Reece is now the owner and moderator of the 'Hall of Ma'at',¹ a website where theories of alternative archaeology are exposed to some examination by scholars. Coming from one who once belittled archaeologists and historians, accepting 'without question what the "alternative" historians were offering' [96], Reece offers some valuable insights regarding the efficacy of pseudoarchaeology. It is also comforting to see that the effects of pernicious, deliberate misinformation can be overcome!

Part 2 of the book contains five case studies, the first of which, 'Esoteric Egypt', relates specifically to ancient Egypt. Here, Paul Jordan, an author and BBC producer who read archaeology and anthropology at Cambridge, challenges those who would seek to claim secret knowledge encoded in the mysterious practices of the ancient culture by explaining that, while the religion may have been complex, its rites were 'conducted with a pragmatism characteristic of Egyptian civilization' [109].

The other chapters in this section are: 6 'The Mystique of the Ancient Maya'; 7 'Pseudoarchaeology and Nationalism: Essentializing Difference'; 8 'Archaeology and the Politics of Origins: The Search for Pyramids in Greece'; and 9 'Rama's Realm: Indocentric Rewritings of Early South Asian Archaeology and History'. In each case, arguments presented by the alternative school of archaeology are, as far as I can tell, dealt with in a

¹Online at: <http://www.hallofmaat.com>

reasoned manner, although I would not profess to any great knowledge of the Maya or the history of South Asia.

Part 3 of the book examines 'Pseudoarchaeology in its wider context'. The first paper is written by Christopher Hale, the television producer who made 'Atlantis Reborn' for the BBC series, *Horizon*, in 1999. Perhaps surprisingly the paper, 'The Atlantean box', seemingly destroys the credibility of practitioners of pseudoarchaeology in the West; more specifically, that of Graham Hancock. However, Hale begins by offering some criticism of scholars who 'stand warily on the sidelines of television exposure', a position which puts 'television in danger of being overwhelmed by ... "alternative history"' [236] (has this not already happened?). Hale makes some suggestions which may justify the motivations of television programmers, one of the primary factors being television's requirement for narrative, thereby allowing that 'Evidence is sacrificed to story' [238]. The stories must also relate to some 'mystery', and while genuine research abounds with that, the allure of the pseudoarchaeological version is that it tends to 'promise a final revelation... [it provides] an answer. This is something that genuine history can never produce' [240]. In his final summation, Hale sounds a warning to academics: 'Is it enough for ideas to be circulated among a peer group while other public constituencies are left to rot?' [256].

In 'The colonization of the past and the pedagogy of the future' Norman Levitt, Professor of Mathematics at Rutgers University, begins with perhaps more subtle corruptions of history in such unexpected sources as the poetry of Edward Fitzgerald. While Fitzgerald's treatment of Omar Khayyám contains nothing 'malicious or mercenary ... the example reminds us that the displacement of true history by ersatz history is something that takes place very frequently, in all sorts of contexts for all sorts of reasons' [260]. Levitt continues with a discussion of some of the more pernicious forms of archaeological fake in a skilful and erudite manner which includes such literary gems as: 'A single compost of credulity sustains a highly varied population of intellectually noxious weeds' [261]. Poetry in itself! Levitt also offers some opinion on how to combat fake history, one which I found especially pertinent is: 'we ought to temper some of our enthusiasm for dramatic displays of idols and icons, those that manage to convey through stagecraft and showmanship the idea that the ancients possessed uncanny powers that we have yet to remaster'; a somewhat difficult task as it is 'precisely such theatrically shrewd legend-mongering that brings the big crowds and their cash to exhibitions – and museum shops' [273].

'Pseudoscience and postmodernism: Antagonists or fellow travelers?' is the paper of Alan Sokal, Professor of Physics at New York University. Sokal defines 'science' as rational empirical methodology as applied to any discipline, and sets out parameters by which pseudoscience may be determined [287]. He makes little distinction within the ranks of pseudoscience, astrology being bundled with several of the major religious groups – John Paul II is unceremoniously described as 'the leader of a major pseudoscientific cult' [291, 343]. An in depth study of postmodernist ideology follows, an ideology which might be summarized as one in which 'the purported objective knowledge provided by science is largely or entirely a social construction' [291]. Already, the possible support which pseudoscience may draw from postmodernist theory becomes evident, and Sokal's 'principle aim is to investigate the logical and sociological nexus' between these perspectives [292], which he does, more than adequately, in a series of case studies which often identify frightening examples of credulity in the public audience.

In his 'Concluding observations', Fagan emphasises what will have become apparent to, I suspect, most readers: 'pseudoarchaeology and its allies in the pseudosciences represent an insidious cultural phenomenon' [362]. The hope is that by bringing such problems to the fore the book will go some way towards stimulating resistance to them. In this respect it does go some way to achieving its aims by offering some convincing, and soberly presented, explanations for the recent successes in alternative history. One of the most often cited reasons is the assistance provided – albeit, in most cases, unwitting – by postmodernist ideology; a view which seemingly denies the possibility of historical 'fact' or 'truth' thereby lending credence to the alternatives, however unlikely they seem. While it is undeniable that past events are constantly open to review, particularly in the light of new evidence, there are

surely, in any event, degrees of truth. For each case of historical enquiry there are notions which, by the support of contextually considered evidence, are more reasonably 'true' than, for example, some spurious claim based purely on myth or wishful thinking.

In presenting many apposite examples drawn from a range of pertinent spheres of investigation which demonstrate the pseudoarchaeological phenomenon – in which clearly acceptable 'truths' are denied – the book provides a very useful collection of essays which deserves a place in the reading list for students of history and archaeology. It serves to remind the reader of what may reasonably be asked of the past and, in addition, it provides a useful guide to the pitfalls awaiting the exponent of historical and archaeological disciplines when confronting the wider media and public audiences.