

This issue of Expedition grew out of a symposium held at The University Museum on October 5, 1985, entitled "Archaeology: Fact and Fantasy." The articles that follow discuss popular but fanciful ideas about the past—myths—that are in some way related to archaeology. In some cases, archaeology has recovered evidence of events or historical periods that might have served as the basis of stories that have persisted in Western thought for many generations (Atlantis, King Arthur). In other cases, archaeologists themselves have created the myths—vivid and imaginative reconstructions of the past that are not supported by more recent (and careful) studies of the evidence (King Solomon's copper mines, the cult of the cave bear).

But it is a third group of tales that can truly be described as "fantasies" or "pseudo-archaeology." This group includes myths that "account for" visible archaeological monuments as the work of exotic visitors rather than long-term residents within an area (mound builders, ancient astronauts), as well as myths that account for modern woes (King Tut's curse). Because such stories are more a matter of faith and deeply held values than of evidence, they present a real challenge for the archaeologist and anthropologist, a challenge that Brian Fagan takes up with considerable enthusiasm.

# Archaeology and Pseudo-Archaeology

BRIAN FAGAN

It would be a mistake to think that, this issue of Expedition is strictly about archaeology, or even about the past. Most of the articles that follow take us into a fantasy world, a world of unexplained mysteries and remarkable adventures—the world of pseudo-archaeology.

What is pseudo-archaeology? Why does it flourish so as underbrush on the academic vine? Why do fables and fantasies about the past sell so well and excite normally quite sane people to obsessive

passions about lost civilizations and buried kings? Something is involved here beyond the musings of an archaeological lunatic fringe. Pseudo-archaeology has been a phenomenon for centuries, but is enjoying something of a renaissance in the 1980s. It is well to ask why this should be so before we probe some particularly common (not to say virulent) examples.

Let us start with an example of my own. Some months ago I received a telephone call from a gentleman in Nevada, an Englishman to judge from his accent. He was eloquent, persuasive, with the

sort of rotund voice one associates with the old-style insurance sales person or today's politicians. The conversation lasted 45 minutes and was about Ancient Egypt, or a semblance thereof. Unable to get a word in edgeways, I listened to a torrent of verbiage about pyramids and pyramid power. It turned out that the gentleman wanted me to collaborate with him on a book about pyramids. I would contribute the Egyptology, and he would handle the mathematics. The book would be a best-seller, he knew, for pyramid power could be harnessed to develop the perfect

golf swing. . .

This type of conversation is not unusual in the life of an archaeologist who attempts to present the past to the general public. For many people, our discipline is still a world of lost treasures, grinning skeletons, mysterious civilizations, and the Curse of the Pharaohs. They believe that archaeologists have a strange preoccupation with mystery and adventure, that everyone involved with digging up the past is a romantic adventurer. In fact, their perception reflects 19th century stereotypes of an archaeology that has long vanished, a relic of the days when you could go out and discover a long-forgotten civilization in a week.

Like all forms of scientific eccentricity, pseudo-archaeology knows no intellectual boundaries, and affects people from every walk of life. Doctors, lawyers, scholars with impeccable academic credentials, the rich and the poor, the famous and the obscure—none are immune from infection with this strange disease. Buried gold, royal tombs, the words Tutankhamun, Atlantis, Ten Lost Tribes of Israel—these are some of the catch phrases that set off a bout of pseudo-archaeology. One prime symptom of the disease is obsession, sometimes to the degree of paranoia.

Such obsessions are based upon belief, upon faith rather than upon scientific data and method. The pseudo-archaeologist makes assumptions first, then assembles all manner of data as "proof" of said assumptions. These assumptions are *the truth*, derived from a moment of sudden inspiration that very often "solves" a problem that has perplexed scientists for generations. But, you may ask, don't scientists too have inspirations? Don't they too assemble data to prove their theories? They do, of course, but their manner of proceeding is only superficially similar. In reality, it is profoundly different.

The scientist—in our case the archaeologist—starts with a hypothesis about the past, and then tests

this hypothesis against archaeological data that is already available or is subsequently gathered in the field. Few hypotheses thus tested are accepted or rejected outright; usually they are seen to be not so much "true" or "false" as more or less plausible, depending on their degree of "fit" with the data. Less plausible hypotheses will be set aside, more plausible ones refined and re-tested, perhaps many times. And any hypothesis may require revision as new data comes to light. In short, modern archaeology relies upon formal scientific method.

But, alas, the scientific method can be tedious; it can be boring; it can, and usually does, require considerable training. Scientists even have their own special language and write in jargon that is often incomprehensible to the ordinary reader. The simple and dramatic solutions to the unknown and the unexplained offered by pseudo-archaeology may be far more appealing. Hence, for example, the appearance of the extra-terrestrial as propounded by Erich von Däniken.

In von Däniken's works, the major innovations of our species are attributed to visitations by advanced beings from outer space (see Epstein this issue). No need to expend energy and thought in trying to unravel and explain the intricate and complex processes by which humans invented, modified, and adapted over so many thousands of years. Pseudo-archaeology provides alternative explanations of human history that require little effort to follow, beyond the suspension of one's disbelief.

Many people enjoy pseudo-archaeology and its fantasies on a much less serious level—that of pure entertainment. Epic tales of heroes and their travels, of two-headed beasts, of wars of conquest, and of blood contacts with outer space are enthralling book and movie material. The success of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* is proof enough that fantastic adventure attracts huge audiences, including serious and scientific archaeologists. Every excavation library is well stocked with science fiction, and hanging behind office doors in museums and anthropology departments are wide brimmed hats and bullwhips—joke presents from students or friends that are kept as reminders of a romantic, mythical colleague.

Such adventures can provide more than a few hours of pleasure, and fulfillment of peoples' need to escape. They may also yield insights into the way that the human mind and human society work, serving as metaphors that illuminate our understanding of real life. Thus, as Nicholas Hartmann argues in his article, the lost continent of Atlantis was used by Plato as a vehicle for ideas that are still of value to us today. That Atlantis never did exist is irrelevant in this perspective.

What, then, is harmful about pseudo-archaeology? Not that it can entertain, as it often does. Instead, harm occurs when the past is explained by a resort to the irrational. And that should be recognized for what it is—an insult to our intelligence. **21**

Brian M. Fagan is a professor of anthropology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. After receiving his doctorate in archaeology from Cambridge University, he spent six years in

Central Africa excavating early farming villages and studying Iron Age societies that had flourished 1000 years ago. He is the author of a number of books about the history

of archaeology, including *Return to Babylon, Elusive Treasure, The Rape of the Nile*, and *Adventures in Archaeology*. His latest book is *The Great Journey*, an account of the first Americans.