

“I’m Not Saying it was Aliens”: An Archaeological and Philosophical Analysis of a Conspiracy Theory

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Abstract

This chapter draws upon the archaeological and philosophical literature to offer an analysis and diagnosis of the popular “ancient aliens” theory. First, we argue that ancient aliens theory is a form of conspiracy theory. Second, we argue that it differs from other familiar conspiracy theories because it does distinctive (and distinctively problematic) ideological work. Third, we argue that ancient aliens theory is a form of *non-contextualized inquiry* that sacrifices the very thing that makes archaeological research successful, and does so for the sake of popular accessibility. Rather than merely dismissing ancient aliens as “pseudoarchaeology” on demarcationist grounds, we offer a more complicated account of how the theory works, and what ideological work it does.

Keywords: aliens, archaeology, conspiracy theory, demarcation, pseudoarchaeology

1. Introduction

According to what we will call the “ancient aliens” narrative, extraterrestrials visited Earth long ago and interacted with people in ways that help explain the material remains studied by archaeologists today, as well as various myths and scriptural texts.¹ Popular sources such as Erich von Däniken’s 1970 book, *Chariots of the Gods?* and The History Channel’s *Ancient Aliens* series have helped to establish the ancient aliens theory in the broader culture, much to the chagrin of professional archaeologists.² Indeed, purveyors of the ancient aliens narrative often portray professional archaeologists as closed-minded and turf-protective, unwilling or unable to acknowledge the evidence of ancient aliens that is staring them in the face. Sometimes they portray archaeologists as conspiring together to keep the public in the dark. Some professional archaeologists, in turn, have taken great care to explain why the evidence simply does not support the ancient aliens narrative (see especially Feder 2020). There has also been considerable debate among professional archaeologists with respect to whether and how to engage with ancient aliens theory and other forms of “alternative archaeology” (Anderson 2019; Fagan and Feder 2006; Feder 1984, 2016; Feder et al. 2016; Holtorf 2005; Derricourt 2012; Holly 2015; Card and Anderson 2016; Wilson 2012).

Scholars may scoff, but ancient aliens theory is a significant cultural phenomenon, one that overlaps with familiar science fiction narratives while tapping into broader interest in UFOs.

¹ We will sometimes refer to the “ancient aliens narrative,” with the idea that it is the sort of narrative explanation that is quite common in historical science. At times, we’ll refer to “ancient aliens theory,” though we do not mean to use ‘theory’ as an honorific term. Calling something a theory need not imply that it is scientific or well-supported.

² For some discussion of the history of ancient aliens theory, see Grünschloss (2007), and for more on its place in the popular media, see Parker (2016).

In January 2020, the *Ancient Aliens* series premiered its 15th season. Its website lists 177 episodes (History Channel 2020). Its viewership, though waning after so many seasons, remains sizeable; the September 6, 2019 episode had over a million live viewers according to Nielsen ratings (Rejent 2019). Ten thousand people paid to attend the 2018 “AlienCon” conference to meet personalities from the show (Kurutz 2018).³ For many viewers, it is likely that this show or similar sources are the first place they heard about a particular archaeological site, and perhaps their only source of information about it. As the popular “I’m not saying it was aliens...” meme implies, the show functions less by providing a coherent narrative of the aliens’ activities and motives than by sowing doubt about whether mainstream explanations are really sufficient to explain human accomplishments in the past. Viewers might say they watch it for its entertainment value, but after 14 years of questioning mainstream archaeology, the show has built a following of true believers. It is part of a general trend. Chapman University’s (2018) Survey of American Fears has documented a rising wave of belief in ancient aliens. In 2018, 41.4% of participants agreed with the statement “aliens have visited Earth in our ancient past,” up from 27% in 2016. Respondents who agree with this statement might not necessarily think that aliens interacted with or shared technology with ancient people, and 2016-18 is a fairly narrow time interval; nevertheless, the results do at least suggest that some version(s) of the ancient aliens narrative could be growing in popularity. Archaeologists who work with the public routinely field questions about ancient aliens. And it is far from a harmless idea; watchdog groups have noted an overlap between people who espouse ancient alien narratives and those who espouse white supremacy (Zaitchik 2018).

In this paper, we offer a diagnosis of ancient alien narratives that draws upon insights from both the archaeological and the philosophical literature. Philosophers who write about pseudoscience have not engaged much with the archaeological literature or with issues specific to archaeology (see, e.g., the papers collected in Pigliucci and Boudry 2013, which scarcely mention archaeology). And philosophers who have written on the epistemology of historical reconstruction have not been sensitive to the distinctive ideological functions that certain historical narratives can play in archaeological contexts (see, e.g. Cleland 2002; Turner 2007; or Currie 2018). On the other hand, archaeologists such as Derricourt (2012) who are interested in the appropriateness of the term “pseudoarchaeology” do not engage with the extensive philosophical literature on the demarcation problem, especially as it pertains to other popular challenges to historical science, such as creationism and intelligent design theory (e.g. Kitcher 1983; Ruse 1988; Pigliucci and Baudry 2013). And although some archaeologists have observed that ancient aliens theory is a bit like a conspiracy theory, they seem unaware of relevant philosophical discussion of the structure of conspiracy theories (Keeley 1999; Basham 2003; Keeley 2003).⁴ We offer an analysis of ancient alien narratives that combines ideas from both disciplines.

³ The AlienCon conference reminds one of Koertge’s (2013) contrast between different kinds of social and institutional set-ups that characterize the scientific community vs. other communities that might look like science but aren’t.

⁴ In this paper, we draw primarily on the philosophical discussion of conspiracy theory, especially Keeley (1999). However, researchers in other disciplines have had much to say on the topic. See Hofstadter (1964) for one classic historical discussion of conspiracy theory in the American context. From a political science perspective, Barkun (2013) traces the recent explosion of conspiracy theory in American cultural and political life. And see Harambam and Aupers (2015) for interesting sociological research on conspiracy theory.

From the direction of philosophy, we draw upon Brian Keeley's (1999) analysis of conspiracy theories, and we argue that the ancient aliens theory is a good example of a conspiracy theory. Consider Keeley's first pass at a definition of conspiracy theory:

What is a conspiracy theory? A conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons—the conspirators—acting in secret (1999, p. 116).

The ancient aliens theory fits this description quite well, with the extra-terrestrial visitors playing the role of conspirators who are carrying out a specific plan with respect to Earth and/or humanity. Although the aliens themselves are the primary conspirators, proponents of the ancient aliens theory often also cast professional archaeologists as (possibly unwitting) abettors of the conspiracy. There are some differences between the ancient aliens theory (in its various versions) and other paradigmatic conspiracy theories, but we argue in section 2 that the ancient aliens theory is indeed best understood as a conspiracy theory.

Keeley argues that conspiracy theories are popular “because they exhibit several well-known explanatory virtues” (1999, p. 119). Many philosophers of science think of explanatory unification as a theoretical virtue, and it is easy to point to examples of scientific theories that did this well: Famously, Darwin's theory provided a unified explanation of adaptation, homologous traits, and the biogeographical distribution of populations. Historical conspiracy theories, Keeley observes, also have great unifying power. Proponents of ancient alien narratives have used them to explain everything from the Nazca lines, to the Biblical story of Ezekiel and the wheel, and even the extinction of the dinosaurs.

While we agree that some of the appeal of the ancient aliens theory is a matter of its unifying explanatory power, we do not think that this is the whole story. Here archaeologists have had much more to say about the ideological function(s) of ancient aliens, and we explore some of those ideas in section 3. Where philosophers of science have focused a great deal on the nature and testability of explanatory narratives, archaeologists have been far more sensitive to the ways in which historical narratives often get conscripted to do political and ideological work.

In short, our analysis of ancient aliens theory focuses on two questions:

- (1) How does the ancient aliens theory work?
- (2) What work does the theory do?

Our answer to the first question is that it works like a conspiracy theory. Our answer to the second question is that in addition to the explanatory work that one might expect of a conspiracy theory, ancient aliens narratives do a great deal of ideological heavy lifting—for example, they diminish the cultural achievements of non-European societies, and at the same time they offer reinterpretations of religious narratives that seem to retain much of the religious content while jettisoning the supernatural metaphysical commitments. The gods, it is alleged, are extra-terrestrial but still “this-worldly” beings. Our central claims are that these two questions need to be addressed in tandem, and that the best answers draw upon insights from both archaeology and philosophy of science.

In section 4, we build on this analysis and develop a fuller diagnosis of ancient aliens theory. There we draw upon recent work in the philosophy of historical/archaeological research

(Chapman and Wylie 2016; Currie 2018). One theme of that work is that successful archaeological investigation has everything to do with epistemic context. Background knowledge of sites, regions, and methods is paramount. Archaeologists make progress by leveraging things that they already know. And this is precisely what ancient aliens enthusiasts refuse to do. Ancient aliens theory exemplifies what we will call *non-contextualized inquiry*. This very defect, however, helps explain the popularity of ancient aliens, because the refusal to engage with or to leverage epistemic context also makes ancient aliens thinking accessible to non-specialists.

2. How the Ancient Aliens Theory Works

According to Keeley (1999), a conspiracy theory offers a potential explanation of some historical event(s) in terms of the secret activities of a group of conspirators. The conspirators, he observes, need not be all-powerful. And the group of conspirators is typically fairly small. In order for there to be a conspiracy at all, there must be many of us who are not in on it. Keeley then seeks to characterize what he calls UCT's or unwarranted conspiracy theories. Noting that some conspiracy theories (like the Watergate conspiracy) turn out to be both warranted and true, he argues that there is nevertheless a pattern of features that co-occur in UCTs. These include:

- (1) A UCT is an explanation that runs counter to some received, official, or "obvious" account.
- (2) The true intentions behind the conspiracy are invariably nefarious.
- (3) UCTs typically seek to tie together seemingly unrelated events.
- (4) [T]he truths behind the events explained by conspiracy theories are typically well-guarded secrets, even if the ultimate perpetrators are sometimes well-known public figures.
- (5) The chief tool of the conspiracy theorist is what I shall call *errant data* (Keeley 1999, pp. 116-117).

Ancient aliens theory very obviously has features (1) and (3). Proponents of ancient aliens, such as the "ancient astronaut theorists" who appear as talking heads in The History Channel's series, often present it as an alternative to the official accounts of "mainstream" archaeology. What's more, the structure of each episode is designed to highlight the way in which the ancient aliens theory offers a surprisingly unified account of seemingly unrelated phenomena, such as archaeological sites on different continents, or religious narratives from different cultural traditions.

The way in which ancient aliens theory ties together seemingly unrelated events deserves a bit more careful scrutiny. Some philosophers of science have pointed out that historical scientists often give *common cause explanations* of disparate historical traces (Cleland 2002, 2011). Indeed, Carol Cleland argues that "prototypical historical science" involves formulating and testing common cause explanations of trace patterns. The thought is that where two things, *A* and *B*, are correlated, *A* could be the cause of *B*, or *B* could be the cause of *A*. A third possibility is that there is a distinct prior common cause, *C*, that is responsible for both. To revert to one of

Cleland's stock examples, the asteroid collision at the end of the Cretaceous period, ~66 million years ago, was the common cause of the iridium spike and shocked quartz spherules observable in the clay layer formed at the very end of the Cretaceous, as well as the Chicxulub crater. One need not accept Cleland's account of prototypical historical science in order to appreciate that common cause explanations are very common.

Thus, insofar as it offers a common cause explanation of disparate phenomena, the ancient aliens theory works in pretty much the same way that many other good historical theories work. If there is a difference, it is that the ancient aliens theory looks like an overexuberant common cause explanation. An asteroid colliding with the earth at a certain moment in the past is only capable of generating certain sorts of biological and geological effects. There are many things that asteroids can't do. However, when the causal agents are secretive extraterrestrials with unimaginably advanced technology, the range of phenomena attributable to them is far less constrained.

One feature of UCT's that the ancient aliens theory does not necessarily share is (2) the suggestion that the conspirators have nefarious intentions. Indeed, one of the most interesting features of ancient aliens theory is that the aliens' intentions vis-à-vis humanity are somewhat inscrutable. One can find all sorts of shifting, ambiguous narratives about the aliens' "plan": On the more nefarious end of the spectrum, one can find the suggestion that aliens have been running secretive extraction operations on Earth, and that they are particularly interested in precious metals such as gold. Out on the nefarious extreme, one can find suggestions that ancient aliens bred humans to work as miners in these operations. But some speculations about the aliens' intentions skew in a much more benign direction, with some saying that aliens shared technology with (some) people in the past, with the aim of guiding and cultivating human civilization. The possibility of nefarious intent does loom over ancient aliens theory, but it could well be, in this case, that the lack of clarity about the aliens' intentions is part of the appeal. In many other more mundane conspiracies, whether imagined or real, the conspirators' goals involve acquiring and maintaining power, and that's what makes them a bit nefarious. Most versions of the ancient aliens theory, though, treat the aliens as so far superior to us, technologically, that acquiring and maintaining power is not really an issue.

Keeley observes that in most UCT's the truth is "a well-guarded secret," and that is also the case with ancient aliens. But one especially interesting feature of ancient aliens theory is just how it says the secret is guarded. In earlier times, the aliens were not exactly hiding from anyone. In fact, ancient aliens theory assumes that at certain times in the past, the aliens were not being terribly secretive at all. Consider how the theory explains certain scriptural passages. In the first chapter of Ezekiel, the prophet describes a vision involving four strange glowing humanoid creatures in the air. And then there is the famous wheel:

Now as I beheld the living creatures, behold one wheel upon the earth by the living creatures, with his four faces. The appearance of the wheels and their work was like unto the colour of a beryl: and they four had one likeness: and their appearance and their work was as it were a wheel in the middle of a wheel (Ezekiel 1: 15-16).

Von Däniken (1970) treats this as a veridical report of an encounter with an alien spacecraft, but one where the observer has little idea what they are actually seeing, and so describes both the craft and the aliens in metaphorical terms. The ancient aliens theory "take" on passages such as

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this one clearly implies that aliens did not mind much if people saw them, at least on occasion. And yet the whole theory nevertheless treats alien activity on Earth as the great secret that is key to understanding history. What “guards” the secret is an interesting combination of factors:

- i. The aliens only selectively appeared to some people who were “in the know.”
- ii. People in the past misinterpreted what they were experiencing, and ended up describing the aliens in religious or mythological terms.
- iii. The only traces left by the aliens are indirect ones, via their impact on human art, architecture, and material remains, as well as myth and religious scripture.
- iv. The aliens, for whatever reason, are not sharing information with us, today, about their previous activities on Earth. The aliens presumably know what they did, but they are keeping that a secret.
- v. Professional archaeologists are working in a coordinated way to discredit ancient aliens theory and brand it as illegitimate and unscientific.

One thing, perhaps, that distinguishes the ancient aliens narrative from other conspiracy theories is that it asserts a kind of double conspiracy. On the one hand, believers in ancient aliens must think that the aliens themselves are withholding information. They aren’t telling us when they visited Earth in the past, or what they did, or why. On the other hand, there is the academic establishment: professional archaeologists are using their institutional authority to try to suppress the ancient aliens narrative. Believers in ancient aliens interpret this as a coordinated effort by professional insiders to thwart investigation.

Finally, ancient aliens theory is, in a sense, all about what Keeley calls *errant data*. According to Keeley, errant data come in two varieties. First, there are data that the going, mainstream explanation just fails to account for. Second, there are data which, if true, would contradict the mainstream account. Some of the data that proponents of ancient aliens theory cite are errant data in these two senses. To take the second kind of errant data first, there is at least one episode of the History Channel’s *Ancient Aliens* series devoted to crystal skulls. These crystal skulls are errant data in the second sense: If they really were as old as claimed, and if they really had some of the properties alleged, then they might indeed cause problems for the mainstream account. The stories about them are not true, however (Feder 2020, pp. 291-292).

The first sort of errant data is potentially more important. We think the issue is not so much that there are data that mainstream archaeological narratives fail to account for, but rather that actual archaeological explanations are often messy, complex, contested, and fraught with historical contingency. This is very much what one should expect in historical reconstruction. For example, Currie (2014) argues that progress in historical science often involves a shift away from simpler explanatory models to more complex explanations. One challenge that archaeologists face, for example, is explaining the appearance of monumental architecture at a particular site at a particular moment. Why did people at this place and time begin building temples or royal tombs? Of course, archeologists have much to say about these sorts of questions, but their explanatory narratives are messy and complicated, and vary regionally. They might cite local environmental conditions, or migration, or cultural traditions, or gradual

development of knowledge, or technological innovations, or any number of other contributing factors. Because such questions have no simple answers, it can look—especially to someone *expecting* a simple story—like mainstream archaeology has not fully accounted for the data. And of course the ancient aliens theory does offer a simple sounding story: monumental architecture arose because the aliens started coaching people, showing them how to live, and sharing technological secrets. For someone expecting explanatory simplicity, it might look like the ancient aliens theory is accounting for errant data, in Keeley’s first sense.

We think there is even a third kind of errant data: Data that show up as errant only given certain background assumptions that professional archaeologists rightly reject. Consider the background assumption that only some people (say, white Europeans) are capable of developing sophisticated technology, solving difficult engineering problems, doing astronomy, and creating great art and architecture. Against that racist background assumption, an awful lot of archaeological sites in non-European parts of the world will look like errant data that mainstream archaeology has failed sufficiently to account for. The racist background assumption need not be stated explicitly. In practice, though, ancient aliens theorists often treat the material remains of non-white, non-European cultures as errant data, which they then account for by supposing that aliens imparted their wisdom to indigenous communities.

Overall, then, ancient aliens theory fits Keeley’s description of conspiracy theories very well. The only exception is that unlike many other conspiracy theories, ancient aliens theory is flexible with respect to the intentions of the alien conspirators.

Keeley argues that the popularity of conspiracy theories reflects many people’s yearning for an orderly, manageable, world. As he puts it:

Conspiracy theorists are, I submit, some of the last believers in an ordered universe. By supposing that current events are under the control of nefarious agents, conspiracy theories entail that such events are *capable of being controlled* (1999, p. 123).

It can be difficult to accept the thought that things just happen, and not necessarily for any particular reason. And it’s hard to accept the fact that historical events are highly contingent, with many contributing causes that are difficult to disentangle (Gould 1989; Beatty 1995). If ancient aliens theorists are committed to anything, it is that important events and trends in human history have been under the control of others, even if the intentions of the controlling conspirators are a little unclear. Keeley goes on to suggest that conspiracy theories represent a secularized version of the same sorts of tendencies that, historically, have led many people to believe in divine providence. We think that Keeley is basically right about this, but that this observation is just the first step toward understanding what’s really behind ancient aliens theory. Even if conspiracy theories have this feature in common, different conspiracy theories may yet do different kinds of ideological work. In the section, we augment Keeley’s account with some observations drawn from the archaeological literature. We argue that ancient aliens theory does some very distinctive ideological work that sets it apart from other familiar conspiracy theories.

3. The Ideological Work that Ancient Aliens Theory Does

In the late 19th and early 20th century, many archaeologists were themselves in the business of seeking grand theories that explained technological advances across vast spaces.

Lacking good dating technologies or scientific methods to study material remains, they explained cultural change largely in terms of cultural diffusion. Pottery could not have been invented more than once, it was thought, so after it was developed in one place, it must have spread out from there as cultural groups adopted their neighbors' marvelous new technology. Some extreme versions of these theories essentially proposed a single origin point for the entirety of human accomplishment and are now seen as "hyperdiffusionist." Grafton Elliot Smith, an anatomist and early Egyptologist, theorized that agriculture, pottery, clothing, architecture, and politics all diffused out of Ancient Egypt to both the Old World and the New World. Ideas like his became highly influential; University of London cultural anthropologist W.J. Perry made similar claims in the 1920s (Storey and Jones 2011; Trigger 2006, pp. 218-221). As archaeologists professionalized, developed new dating methods that undermined the evidence for hyperdiffusionist theories, and increasingly saw themselves as empirical scientists, they came to recognize that cultures change and develop in many ways other than diffusion. Many archaeologists today embrace a particularism that focuses on specific social groups or sites rather than the more sweeping narratives of diffusionism, and transoceanic hyperdiffusionism is largely discredited (Wilson 2012).

But non-archaeologists had already seized on hyperdiffusionist theories. Most notably, a lawyer and congressman named Ignatius Donnelly wrote the 1882 blockbuster book *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*. He argued that that lost continent's ancient, advanced civilization was the source of all agriculture and all advanced knowledge worldwide. The appeal of theories that explain so much of human history is clear, and as archaeologists have stopped offering them, others have stepped up to provide them (Wilson 2012). Graham Hancock's 2019 book, *America Before: The Key to Earth's Lost Civilization*, was a New York Times bestseller in the summer of 2019. It argues for an Atlantis-like ancient civilization (but based in Antarctica) that brought sophisticated knowledge to Native Americans (Hoopes 2019).

The tradition of hyperdiffusionist thinking in archaeology has a close relationship to one feature of conspiracy theories that we noted in section 2. Conspiracy theories typically offer common cause explanations of disparate evidential traces. In doing so, they seek explanatory unification by means of an appealingly simple story about the activities of the conspirators. Diffusionist explanations in archaeology are also good examples of common cause explanations: the appearance of a certain cultural trait—say, a certain architectural style—at two distant sites can be explained by supposing that there was a common source in the past. There is nothing wrong with diffusionist explanations *per se*, but hyperdiffusionists and conspiracy theorists alike carry this mode of explanation to implausible extremes.

The idea that it was specifically aliens who brought knowledge or technology to humans has fairly clear roots in the space race and the Cold War. Aliens first appeared in popular culture in the late 1800s, with early stories like H.G. Wells' book *The War of the Worlds*. UFO sightings became common beginning with the Roswell incident of 1947 (Sagan 1996), and aliens really came into their own in the 1960s. Carl Sagan (1996, p. 101) traces the first alien abduction stories to 1961. Certainly the space race, Sputnik, and the Cold War fear of attack and invasion from above were part of the brew in which ancient alien theory appeared. Secretive U.S. Cold War government projects involving missiles and weather balloons were the likely sources of both UFO sightings and a growing suspicion that the government was not sharing everything it knew (Sagan 1996). But ancient alien theory can largely be traced to one man, Erich von Däniken, whose book *Chariots of the Gods?: Unsolved Mysteries of the Past* (written in 1968 and translated to English in 1970) set forth much of the basis for ancient alien theory. The

television show and other recent sources all draw broadly on von Däniken's thinking, scholars have recently noted a new strain of ancient alien thinking in which the aliens did not actually come to Earth but instead are "extra-dimensional, trans-dimensional, hyper-dimensional paranormal, shape-shifting entities" (Feder 2020, p. 211, citing Colavito 2005). In von Däniken's version, the aliens were physical, naturalistic beings with fancy technology; in some more recent versions, the aliens are made to seem a lot more like traditional spiritual or supernatural beings.

One important strand of ancient alien theory, of course, is that the feats that prehistoric people performed were too difficult for "primitive" humans to have pulled off on their own. Ancient alien theory functions mostly by asking questions that seem compelling to a non-archaeologist audience. How could humans possibly have moved such huge blocks of stone, how could they have such a clear understanding of astronomy, why would people build pyramids all over the world? Meanwhile they ignore extensive archaeological evidence of how it was all done and of the gradual cultural processes by which humans developed their knowledge and technologies and learned to achieve these marvels of engineering.

Importantly, the monuments that require explanation in this narrative are not the medieval churches of Europe or the temples of the Greek city states. The ability of those people to build their structures is not in serious doubt. Instead, the question is how ancient Egyptians could build pyramids, how the Nazca of South America could create their massive geoglyphs, how the Ancestral Puebloans of Chaco Canyon could understand astronomy so well. Where European structures are called into question, they are very ancient ones such as Stonehenge or the neolithic mounds of Ireland. But in spite of some puzzling unevenness—why, for example, did people need extraterrestrial help building Stonehenge but not gothic cathedrals?—there is a clear white supremacist angle to the theory. For ancient alien theorists, European innovation and skill generally require no particular explanation, but non-European prehistoric people could not possibly have accomplished what they did on their own (Bond 2018; Feder 2020, p. 216).

Moreover, the idea of alien intervention must be viewed in the context of a long history of denying the abilities of non-Europeans. In North America, for example, we have the Moundbuilder myth, a long tradition of European and American settlers proposing alternate explanations for what we now know were the products of Native American knowledge and skill. Much of the North American continent was dotted with enormous and elaborate mounds and earthworks built by Native Americans, often with exquisitely worked artifacts buried in them. Hernando de Soto and other Spanish and French explorers observed Native American communities building and using such mounds. But those communities and others like them were decimated by the diseases brought by the explorers, and by the time that 18th and 19th-century settlers began moving into these areas, Native American communities had stopped building mounds. Many had also already been pushed out of their ancestral lands. Some settlers were content to merely plunder the mounds for artifacts, but others sought to understand their origins, theorizing that they were built by a superior, now absent, race (Colavito 2020; Feder 2020, pp. 138-167; Silverberg 1968).

Discovering the true identity of the Moundbuilders was a major preoccupation of 19th century anthropologists and amateur excavators. Sometimes the "Moundbuilders" were ancient lost tribes of Israel, or Scandinavians, or Welshmen, or Phoenicians, or even biblical giants. They were not, however, the local Native people, who were widely considered too "primitive" to have built such structures. Moundbuilder theories were sometimes bolstered by a single artifact, later revealed as a hoax, with Hebrew or Phoenician script. An important element of the Moundbuilder myth was the inevitable conclusion that this ancient, superior race had actually

been displaced by Native Americans, who were therefore recent interlopers on their land. So the Moundbuilder myth not only served to separate Indigenous people from their ancestors' monuments and land but also offered balm on the conscience of the new settlers. The Native Americans they encountered, it seemed, had only been there a little while longer than themselves and had driven away other, earlier residents (Feder 2020, p. 159; Silverberg 1968).

Ancient alien theory functions in essentially the same way as the Moundbuilder myth. It questions the abilities of earlier people, especially the non-European ones, and replaces their accomplishments and knowledge with mysterious advanced technology from outer space. Aliens in pop culture have long been a metaphor for thinking through encounters with the Other—consider Star Trek and its prime directive, meant to prevent just the kind of ill-fated colonial encounters that took place here on Earth. Or Stephen Hawking's explicit prediction that "If aliens visit us, the outcome would be much as when Columbus landed in America, which didn't turn out well for the [N]ative Americans" (Grier 2010). Ancient alien theory uses the same metaphor to offer a kind of comfort—Europeans were not the first worldwide colonialists after all. And by extension, the monuments of the past really don't belong to Indigenous people any more than they do to the rest of us, since they could only have been built with extraterrestrial assistance. It also reframes colonialists as bringing "the gift of civilization" (Bond 2018). The Southern Poverty Law Center has warned that ancient alien theory is widely discussed on white supremacist forums, where it often overlaps with racist and antisemitic conspiracy theories (Zaitchik 2018).

Ancient alien theory also clearly has a religious undertone. Von Däniken (1970) views all of humanity's deities as representations of ancient alien visitors who our primitive ancestors could not explain except in religious terms. He explicitly explains Biblical miracles such as Ezekiel's wheel as the work of aliens, and the TV series follows his lead, proposing an alien nuclear reactor that produced manna from heaven, for example. But even when not concerned specifically with Biblical stories, there is often a sense in watching *Ancient Aliens* that the aliens are essentially angels, come to help humanity, or maybe demons come to exploit and manipulate us. As noted above, the ambivalence about the aliens' intentions may be part of the appeal. Are benevolent ancient aliens easier to believe in than angels? Ancient alien theories seem, for some people, to be stepping into the place of a religious belief that is somehow less tenable. Like a religion, it also offers a sense of being part of something bigger than one's self, of being in on secrets, and it provides a community of fellow believers who find each other on internet discussions and even at conventions. The alleged alien intervention in human history, combined with their apparent absence today, also seems like a transposition of distinctively Christian themes. Just as some Christians anticipate a second coming, believers in ancient aliens might wonder what will happen when the aliens return.

In short, viewing ancient alien theorists as just another set of crackpots fails to recognize the intellectual history and cultural milieu in which their views have arisen, as well as the ideological work that this theory does for people in a modern world. It supports a resurgent white supremacy, soothes religious anxieties and colonialist guilt, plays into a growing suspicion of experts and intellectuals and, of course, offers a much more interesting and accessible worldview than do archaeologists with their nuanced and particularist explanations.

4. Why Ancient Aliens Theory Doesn't Work

So far, we've argued (in section 2) that ancient aliens theory is a conspiracy theory, *sensu* Keeley (1999). That is our answer to the question about how ancient aliens theory works. In section 3, we argued that ancient aliens theory differs from other conspiracy theories because it does distinctive (and distinctively problematic) kinds of ideological work. But there is more to say about why exactly it is wrong to believe in ancient aliens theory, and why ancient aliens theory goes off the rails when it comes to historical scientific and archaeological investigation. In further developing this diagnosis of ancient aliens theory, we shall try to avoid the quick move of dismissing it as "pseudoscience" or "pseudoarchaeology" (see also Derricourt 2012). We're skeptical that the traditional Popperian project of drawing a sharp line of demarcation between science and pseudoscience is a very useful one (Popper 1959). For one thing, it's hard to find a principled way of drawing the boundary that gets the right results: traditional demarcationist proposals have tended to either include or exclude too much (Laudan 1988; although see also Pigliucci 2013, Mahner 2013, and Baudry 2013, for a variety of efforts to update the demarcationist project in ways that meet Laudan's challenge). However, one does not need an account of the essence of science, or of archaeology, in order to point to some features of archaeological investigation that contribute to its success. If it were to turn out that the appeal of ancient aliens theory has to do (perversely) with the rejection of one of the things that makes archaeology so successful, that would be a problem.

To help us get our bearings, it may help to begin with Keeley's (1999) diagnosis of UCT's, or "unwarranted conspiracy theories." One might be tempted to dismiss conspiracy theories in general on the grounds that they are unfalsifiable. But Keeley argues that we should resist this temptation. Such an approach could lead us to reject true theories. Here it is important to bear in mind that some conspiracy theories turn out to be correct (e.g. Watergate).

Richard Nixon and [Oliver] North actively sought to divert investigations into their respective activities and both could call upon significant resources to maintain their conspiracies. They saw to it that investigators were thwarted in many of their early attempts to uncover what they accurately suspected was occurring. Strictly hewing to the dogma of falsifiability in these cases would have led to a rejection of conspiracy theories at too early a point in the investigations, and may have left the conspiracies undiscovered (1999, p. 121).

Unfalsifiability is something that the unwarranted conspiracy theories (the UCT's) will generally have in common with the true ones. Thus, it might be a mistake to reject conspiracy theories *tout court* on grounds of unfalsifiability. Keeley thinks that falsifiability is an unreasonable standard to apply in cases where the theory in question asserts that powerful agents are working to obstruct investigation.

Keeley's own diagnosis of unwarranted conspiracy theories focuses on the intellectual consequences of sticking by one's favorite conspiracy theory in the face of the accumulation of apparently contradictory evidence:

It is this pervasive skepticism of people and public institutions entailed by some mature conspiracy theories which ultimately provides us with the grounds with which to identify them as unwarranted. It is not their lack of falsifiability per se,

but the increasing amount of skepticism required to maintain faith in a conspiracy theory as time passes and the conspiracy is not uncovered in a convincing fashion. As this skepticism grows to include more and more people and institutions, the less plausible any conspiracy becomes (1999, p. 123).

Keeley's point here is just that over time, the intellectual costs of upholding a conspiracy theory can become exceedingly—perhaps ridiculously—high. To take a contemporary example, someone who believes that the Sandy Hook massacre in Newtown, Connecticut, did not really happen, will be committed to a kind of blanket distrust of huge numbers of ordinary people (including victims' family members and many others who were impacted), institutions (including virtually all respectable news organizations), and government officials. Keeley argues, quite plausibly, that these high intellectual costs help explain why so many conspiracy theories are unwarranted and irrational.

Keeley's diagnosis of unwarranted conspiracy theories certainly gets things right in a wide variety of cases.⁵ It's not totally clear, though, whether belief in ancient aliens necessarily leads to the "pervasive skepticism of people and public institutions" that Keeley is so concerned about. The mistrust that goes with enthusiasm for ancient aliens is more localized. A believer in ancient aliens has to be skeptical of academic archaeologists and academic institutions, but that localized skepticism could turn out to be fairly easy for many people to maintain. Indeed, many creationists and climate change deniers seem to have little trouble maintaining localized skepticism about academic expertise. Without necessarily disagreeing with Keeley's diagnosis of many unwarranted conspiracy theories, we think more needs to be said about how and why ancient aliens theory goes off the rails.

In recent years, philosophers of science have had much to say about how historical researchers make progress when confronted with incomplete evidence and/or faint and difficult-to-interpret evidential signals (see especially Chapman and Wylie 2016; Currie 2018). One common theme of this work is the paramount importance of contextual background knowledge. When archaeologists are investigating a particular question about a particular site, they do so in a rich informational context that includes established investigative practices and lots of relevant background knowledge, as well as multiple lines of evidence. This is a way of leveraging previous epistemic successes. Understanding the imagery on a Mayan ruler's tomb does not involve just looking at it, as von Däniken did with Lord Pakal's sarcophagus lid before declaring it to be an image of an ancient astronaut. Instead it requires understanding context such as the identity of the dead king and his place in Mayan history as revealed by past research on Mayan texts. Understanding how Mayans adorned their bodies might be relevant to understanding the object near Pakal's nose. Also highly relevant are Mayan cosmology, symbolism and artistic conventions as understood from texts, inscriptions, thousands of objects of art, and architecture at many other sites. One might want to consider the social and political nature of the city where Pakal ruled, as understood from texts and excavations, as well as the layout and social meanings of the pyramid in which the king was buried. Studies of the bones found inside the tomb and the tools and materials used to make the sarcophagus might also be relevant (Feder 2020, pp. 231-235). These are good examples of what Adrian Currie (2018) calls investigative scaffolding. When archaeologists seek to interpret something like Lord Pakal's sarcophagus lid, they rely

⁵ See, however, Basham (2003) for an interesting critical response to Keeley. Basham is not convinced that Keeley's account explains why we should not believe in a "global malevolent conspiracy."

heavily on a supporting structure of previous research, even if very little of that previous work actually focused on the artifact in question.

One fascinating feature of ancient aliens theory is that it operates in a way that is almost entirely disconnected from relevant contextual archaeological information. This is especially evident in the History Channel series, where instead of bringing to bear all that's known about a particular site, the show often focuses on only one artifact or building at a site that fits the narrative, then jumps from site to site around the world. Rather than reading past excavation reports or analyzing thousands of potsherds or understanding how one site fits into an entire cultural context, ancient alien theorists presume that they need only the evidence of their own eyes to interpret what a winged artifact represents or what an image of a figure with antennae means. We might refer to this as *non-contextualized inquiry*. Non-contextualized inquiry means investigating an artifact or a site more or less from scratch, with minimal reliance on what's already known. This is one of the most serious defects of ancient aliens theory. It's a defect because contextualization—scaffolding, reliance upon background knowledge—contributes so heavily to success in archaeological and other historical scientific research.

Of course, the very thing that makes non-contextualized inquiry defective also explains its popular appeal. The non-contextualized nature of ancient aliens theory makes it fully accessible to non-specialists. No one needs any background knowledge about particular sites or regions, or any expertise in archaeological research methods, or any grasp of the history of archaeological theory, in order to be fully up to speed with “research” focusing on ancient aliens. Ancient aliens theory sacrifices the very thing that's crucial for successful historical investigation, and it does so for the sake of accessibility and popular appeal.

Note that our argument here is not a demarcationist one, at least not in the narrow sense. There is an important difference between the following two claims:

- (i) Leveraging background knowledge is a necessary condition for research activity to count as real archaeology.
- (ii) Leveraging background knowledge is one of the things that professional archaeologists do that contributes to their investigative success.

Claim (i) is a narrower demarcationist claim, and the sort of claim that Laudan (1988) was concerned about. Our suggestion is that claim (ii) is the one that matters, and that it is possible to diagnose ancient aliens theory without defending an essentialist picture of archaeology. (For further anti-essentialist reflections about historical science, see Currie and Turner 2016.) Our diagnostic proposal, rather, is that there is a feature of (most) professional archaeology that contributes to its investigative success, but which ancient aliens theory lacks, and that is the leveraging of epistemic context.

5. Conclusion

Analysis of ancient aliens theory represents an opportunity for mutual engagement between archaeologists and philosophers. In section 2 above, we argued that archaeologists interested in understanding how ancient aliens theory works would do well to draw upon the philosophical literature on conspiracy theory (especially Keeley 1999). But in section 3, we argued that the case of ancient aliens theory also highlights the need to augment Keeley's

account. That is because ancient aliens theory has some features that set it apart from other conspiracy theories: it draws on a longer tradition of diffusionist thinking in archaeology, and it does some distinctively problematic ideological work. Ancient aliens theory is a conspiracy theory that works subtly in the service of colonialism, white supremacy, and religious demythologizing. Finally, in section 4, drawing upon recent work in the philosophy of historical science, we've offered a fresh diagnosis of where ancient aliens theory goes off the rails as a form of historical investigation. We've resisted the temptation to dismiss it out of hand as "pseudoarchaeology." Instead, we've argued that it trades one thing for another: It purchases accessibility and popular appeal at the price of the very thing that makes historical reconstruction successful—namely, the reliance on a rich epistemic context.

In this chapter, we've sought to offer an analysis and diagnosis of ancient aliens theory from the perspectives of professional archaeology and philosophy. However, there is a lingering worry that no such account—neither Keeley's, nor ours—could ever get any traction against a conspiracy theory. The problem is that virtually any critique of a conspiracy theory can be interpreted, from the perspective of someone in the grip of that theory, as part of the conspiracy. But it is nevertheless worthwhile to try to understand, from an external perspective, why ancient aliens theory is so gripping, and also why it is problematic that so many people are in the grip of it.

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