

Graham Hancock, Prometheus for a New Age

Alternative Archaeology as Modern Mythmaking

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ABSTRACT: The Netflix show *Ancient Apocalypse* revolves around British writer Graham Hancock's claim that he has uncovered evidence indicating that there was an advanced, spiritually attuned civilization during the last Ice Age that brought key elements of culture to peoples around the world. Critics, professional archaeologists in particular, characterize Hancock as a pseudoarchaeologist and a pseudoscientist. A less commonly explored perspective is to see Hancock as a bricoleur who creates a myth from a motley selection of cultural elements. A quintessentially modern feature of his Ice Age myth is its tension in relation to scientific archaeology. A story that has the characteristics of a culture hero myth is presented as evidence-based and empirically more valid than the accounts of professional archaeologists. A narrative analysis based on the work of literary theorist Algirdas Greimas shows how this claim results, on the one hand, in a pervasive vagueness in the account of the Ice Age heroes and, on the other, in a far more sharply drawn story of Hancock as a present-day Promethean culture hero who fights the dogmatism of academics and reveals the insights of the ancient Ice Age sages to a world afflicted with amnesia about its true history.

KEYWORDS: alternative archaeology, religion and science, bricolage, mythmaking, *Ancient Apocalypse*, Algirdas Greimas, narrative analysis, hyperdiffusionist theory

In November 2022 Netflix released *Ancient Apocalypse*, a documentary series consisting of eight episodes featuring the British writer Graham Hancock (b. 1950). Presented on IMDb (Internet Movie Database) with the tag line, "What if everything we know about prehistory is wrong?" the show revolves around Hancock's claim of having uncovered evidence indicating the existence of an advanced civilization during the last Ice Age, a claim he posits is rejected by "mainstream archaeologists" who are so entrenched in their dogmatic beliefs that they refuse to take it seriously.¹

Prior to the release of *Ancient Apocalypse*, Hancock was already a successful writer on controversial topics. During his three decades-long career in this field, he has authored a dozen books presenting his unconventional views on history, held numerous public lectures, and established a presence on social media—for instance, by appearing on the immensely popular podcast, *The Joe Rogan Experience*.² The Netflix series, however, reached a much broader audience, and soon after being released *Ancient Apocalypse* became one of the most widely streamed Netflix productions, reaching the top ten in thirty-one countries.³

Critics—professional archaeologists in particular—have long characterized Hancock as a pseudoarchaeologist and a pseudoscientist. The release of the series was met with a renewed barrage of criticism, not only in academic circles but also in the media. Unsurprisingly, Hancock and his supporters vehemently reject such responses, and even the most cursory search of the internet will attest to the intense polemical battle raging between those who are intent on debunking his claims and those who regard him as an intrepid investigator of a forgotten truth. Our aim in this essay is not to add yet another voice to the many debunkers who have evaluated Hancock's claims in terms of what archaeologists have uncovered about the artifacts and sites to which he refers in his show. Instead, our focus is to examine how the narrative of *Ancient Apocalypse* is constructed. Although our analysis inevitably impinges on the issue of the facticity of that narrative, the primary purpose of this article is both to depart from and significantly extend a basic insight in recent literature that sees Hancock and similar authors as engaged in mythmaking. First, we contextualize Hancock's work within the category of alternative archaeology. Second, we identify the underlying structure and basic building blocks of the *Ancient Apocalypse* narrative. Third, we examine the way in which his construction of a culture hero myth functions as a bricolage of existing cultural elements. Finally, we conclude by pointing to the way

in which this bricolage is a product of a quintessentially modern context characterized by the dominant position of science as an arbiter of truth, and by rapidly shifting cultural attitudes toward a racialized discourse depicting the purported spreaders of global civilization as being white.

HANCOCK AS A PRODUCER OF ALTERNATIVE ARCHAEOLOGY

The prefix pseudo- in “pseudoarchaeology” is not only derogatory but deliberately so. A term with a less disparaging connotation that has become increasingly widespread in recent years, “alternative archaeology,” also refers to understandings of the past that differ from those widespread within the archaeological community. Although the term designates what British sociologist Colin Campbell has called a “cultic milieu,” i.e., a diffuse milieu comprised of diverse, heterodox opinions rather than a group of people who share a specific view of prehistory, we have elsewhere proposed a set of four criteria that apply to the vast majority of those who engage in producing alternative archaeology, which Hancock clearly meets.⁴

First, alternative archaeologists work within institutional settings that differ significantly from those of mainstream academics. They are either autodidacts or are employed by organizations infused by a religious or political ideology. Hancock studied sociology at Durham University in England, one of the most prestigious universities in the United Kingdom and proceeded to work as a journalist writing about such matters as socioeconomic development in developing nations. Despite the lack of training in any immediately relevant field, he began in the early 1990s to turn his attention to speculative historical and archaeological topics.

Second, alternative archaeologists accept methods that science rejects, for instance the reliance on intuitive hunches, or the interpretation of myths as symbolic renditions of historical truths. Rarely, if ever, do they have the training, resources, or perhaps even the desire to operationalize the methods of scientific archaeology. Hancock’s work, like that of many other alternative archaeologists, is based largely on an imaginative reinterpretation of artifacts and myths that divorces them from their immediate cultural and religious contexts.

Third, the bulk of alternative archaeological literature focuses on a small set of basic topics that go against the archaeological consensus. Three of the most prevalent themes are the hyperdiffusionist claim that major cultural innovations arose in one locality and spread from there to the rest of the world;⁵ that the origin and function of famous sites or artifacts have been misunderstood by academics; and that ancient peoples were far more technologically or spiritually advanced than archaeologists give them credit for having been. *Ancient Apocalypse* is the latest iteration of a narrative in which Hancock combines all three themes.

Fourthly, alternative archaeologists construct their narratives in ways that fundamentally differ from those found in academic works. Writing about the past can, to borrow a distinction made by philosopher Pauliina Remes, proceed either in a bottom-up or a top-down fashion.⁶ The former approach involves collecting an ever-increasing amount of data and piecing together a narrative that relates these data to what is already known about the relevant cultural context. A top-down approach, by contrast, begins by adopting a master narrative, for instance that prehistoric people had access to advanced technology matching our own, and assembles references to various striking objects or suggestive myths in a way that serves to support the initial thesis. The main topic of our study is precisely this characteristic of Hancock’s narrative.

Although Hancock repeatedly stresses that *Ancient Apocalypse* reflects a career spanning three decades, he does not refer specifically to any of his previous works. The Netflix series, in this sense, stands on its own, and we will begin our study by treating it as a self-contained production. Nonetheless, *Ancient Apocalypse* builds on material from his books, especially *Magicians of the Gods* (2015) and to a lesser extent *America Before* (2019).⁷ A comparison between the Netflix production and Hancock’s writings provides an instructive view on his role as narrator, and opens up a discussion of how Hancock navigates the complex cultural context of the contemporary west.

At a most basic level, stories about a time in the distant past when beings endowed with capabilities beyond the ordinary brought fundamental elements of culture to various peoples are usually labeled myths. Recent work has reframed “pseudoarchaeology” in such terms, and a collection of articles on

“Archaeology and New Religious Movements” in *Nova Religio* has highlighted the field as entangled with religious or metaphysical beliefs.⁸ Our own previous work examines the myth-like structure of narratives that attribute major cultural advances to visits made by space aliens.⁹ Archaeologist Jeb Card has concluded that because Hancock is best understood as a mythmaker rather than a “failed archaeologist,” critics’ attempts to assess the truth of his claims constitute a “grievous category error.”¹⁰ In what follows, we will expand on the reframing of Hancock’s narrative as a myth by investigating how it is constructed, and we will subsequently argue that the relationship of that narrative to the world of scientific, empirical investigation is more complex than a dichotomy between two distinct categories.

THE FORMAT OF *ANCIENT APOCALYPSE*

Each of the eight episodes that make up *Ancient Apocalypse* has a duration of roughly thirty minutes. With the exception of an interview with Hancock introducing the first episode, and a summary of his ideas at the end of the eighth, each episode follows the same format. Hancock visits one or two specific locations, often presented to viewers in spectacular footage captured by a drone. Against the backdrop of dramatic music, the camera follows him as he travels by boat or car, walks on trails meandering through archaeological sites, dives off the coast of an exotic island, climbs up a steep incline, or navigates a narrow passageway to get a closer look at the site. Meanwhile, he points out to his audience that not all is as it seems—or at least not as it seems according to scholars and scientists, whom he frames as “so-called experts” and characterizes as “extremely defensive, arrogant, and patronizing,” because they refuse to even consider investigating evidence indicating the site has been misdated and misunderstood by scientific “orthodoxy.” The exact turn of phrase varies, but the polemics run through all eight episodes.

In each episode, Hancock presents clues that for him suggest that a temple, ruin, or mysterious object is far older than generally recognized or builds on ideas that go back to a very ancient time, which he pinpoints again and again as 10,800 B.C.E. He has conversations with persons who also embrace a view that differs radically from the understanding of the site espoused by archaeologists and geologists, thereby serving to back up Hancock’s views. These maverick promoters of controversial ideas range from individuals with academic degrees—albeit within fields having no bearing on the investigation of human prehistory (e.g., Anton Mifsud, a pediatrician who supports Hancock’s views on ancient Malta¹¹)—to people whose approach to the distant past may strike academics as not only unconventional, but wildly eccentric (e.g., Marco M. Vigato, the author of a book entitled *The Empires of Atlantis*¹²). Occasionally, representatives of academia are also interviewed, their perspectives invariably framed or edited either as voices supporting Hancock’s project or as representatives of a misguided orthodoxy whose views are afterward contradicted by Hancock.

The nature of the purported clues varies from site to site and from episode to episode. Despite the many diatribes against “mainstream science,” the rhetoric of science and technology can be invoked, as when a volcanic hill on the Indonesian island of Java is investigated by a local team using a range of technical devices. Other clues emerge through a kind of intuitive insight, as when iconography on a Mexican pyramid is interpreted impressionistically by Vigato. The train of thought can be quite complex and can strike a less convinced viewer as presupposing the conclusion of the argument: for instance, the layout of Maltese megalithic sites is plotted on a map, and the wildly divergent orientations are interpreted as signs that they presumably did point at the same star, but that axial precession made the apparent position of the heavenly body shift considerably over the span of thousands of years. Other arguments can be reduced to the basic premise that facts are immediately available to common sense and first-hand visual impressions. In episode four, Hancock and marine biologist Michael Haley go scuba diving to inspect an underwater feature just off the coast of the Bimini Islands in the Bahamas, a long string of aligned rocks often referred to as the Bimini Road. These have been studied in detail by geologists who have concluded that they are natural formations caused by well-known geological processes. What Hancock and Haley see during their dive, and what one of their team members records via sonar equipment, leads the two to conclude that the geologists are obviously wrong and that the formation must be humanmade.

Although each episode follows a format that the audience will soon learn to recognize, viewers who have never read Hancock’s books or watched his online appearances may find the overall narrative difficult to extract from the show. The fact that each episode seems to start anew with a visit to yet

another site, another purported mystery, and a further round of complaints about the folly of “mainstream archaeologists” who disregard yet another contrarian opinion makes *Ancient Apocalypse* feel quite disjointed. What soon becomes apparent as one follows Hancock from one episode to the next is that Hancock, rather than presenting one single and reasonably coherent narrative, weaves together two stories, and that these are constructed in very distinct ways. The difference becomes particularly apparent if one attempts to identify the structural grammar and basic building blocks of each story.

TWIN NARRATIVES

Based on the work of Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp (1895-1970), French-Lithuanian literary theorist Algirdas Julien Greimas (1917-1992) formulated a model of how various elements (ranging from people to abstractions) together provide the most basic skeleton undergirding a narrative. The model has been reworked and extended to other domains, and for the present purposes we make use of a bare-bones version that can be summarized as follows.¹³ A narrative is structured around six fundamental roles or *actants*. The *sender* is the ultimate origin or cause of a particular course of action, but may remain behind the scenes in the world of the narrative. Instead, it is the *subject* who carries out the various actions required to obtain an *object*. These actions benefit a *receiver*, who either may be identical with the subject, or instead be somebody or something else. The quest for the object is furthered by *helpers* and is hindered by *opponents*.¹⁴

Narrative One

The basic premise of the series, announced by Hancock at the outset of the first episode, is the presentation of the true but forgotten story of an advanced Ice Age civilization. Viewers are invited to piece together the clues, and the summary toward the end of the last episode helps to provide more narrative coherence; but, in Greimasian terms, some truly fundamental building blocks of the narrative are left vague, unstated, or contradictory. Consider the nature of the subject: Thousands of years ago, long before any of the high cultures known to archaeologists entered the scene, there was a civilization that had reached an advanced level within various areas. We are told in episode four that echoes of their civilization have reached us via Plato’s story of Atlantis. The clues in episode eight suggest that their homeland was in the Americas, perhaps in the northwestern part of what is today the United States. They were apparently highly skilled architects and builders, mathematicians, and astronomers, and had mastered the principles of agriculture. Beyond repeated assertions of these basic claims, the show barely provides viewers with any concrete details about these people or the society they purportedly built up. They sailed all over the globe, but the clues of how they accomplished this feat come from myths and symbolic representations that reveal nothing about the routes they followed or the nature of their ships. Were the seafarers a larger wave of migrants or were they a few intrepid individuals? Again, we are not told.

Since we have no concrete information about these Ice Age culture heroes, there are no clear indications of who their helpers and opponents may have been. The superior technology and science of the refugees from Atlantis, it seems, were transferred to the more “primitive” locals, but Hancock only provides hints as to how he imagines this to have happened. In episode three, the Neolithic farmers who arrived on Malta had been preceded by the Ice Age architects and found megalithic temples already in place; hence, no narrative helpers are needed, and little is said of a transfer of skills to what Hancock calls “people with a very simple material culture.” Clearly, the Ice Age people are no longer among us, so the narrative implies that they must have somehow disappeared into the mists of time as the result of some narrative opponent. Nothing in the show provides any hint as to when or how this might have happened.

The *sender* of the narrative, i.e., the cause of their global dispersal, is the most detailed element: it is the ancient apocalypse of the title of the series, a rain of comets that ushered in a period of glacial temperatures and flooding. Here, Hancock leaves the world of imaginative narration, and instead references a theory discussed in the scientific literature, the Younger Dryas Impact Hypothesis, according to which one or several comets exploded over North America roughly 12,900 years ago and caused significant climate change.¹⁵ The object of the narrative seems to shift between episodes in the series. The ancient Ice Age refugees, we are told, imparted their knowledge to the hunter-gatherers they

encountered and seem in Hancock's narrative to have been particularly preoccupied with passing on their understanding of celestial phenomena, but various clues and suggestions are presented as to what they observed and why. Some monuments are aligned with the position of the sun on the equinoxes and solstices, others are aligned with the cardinal directions, and yet others are said to point at Sirius. Perhaps part of the reason for their interest was quite pragmatic: living in a world where no artificial lights prevented them from having a clear view of the night sky, Hancock suggests, their attention was naturally drawn to the magnificent spectacle overhead. Other clues indicate that these were a people spiritually attuned to the cycles of the cosmos. Yet other sections of the show imply that the apocalyptic event that crushed their civilization made them construct monuments that encoded astronomical information, presumably as a warning to others.

The identity of the *receivers* of this information, who throughout most of the episodes are identified as various hunter-gatherers or farmers, shifts dramatically at several points in the series. In episode four, we have become the recipients of a warning from bygone times. The Atlanteans, once a spiritually attuned people, had lost their connection to the cosmos and were destroyed as a result. Illustrated by such images as congested freeways, sewage gushing out of an open pipeline, and trash polluting the sea, we are told that we, too, have lost that spiritual connection and that we are destroying our planet. In episode five and again in the final segment of the show, the narrative also insists that it is in fact we who are the receivers of the message of the Ice Age sages. The comets that devastated their world belong to a cluster of cosmic debris that the Earth passes through every 13,000 years, placing us in danger of looming annihilation. Yet again, puzzles abound. The narrative tacitly assumes that a civilization capable of such feats nonetheless never developed a system of writing enabling them to leave less ambiguous messages to posterity. Why was this apparently vital information encoded in a way that is so hard to crack that "mainstream archaeologists" have remained completely blind to its existence? Why did it get encoded so differently in different locations? We are not told.

Narrative Two

The vagueness of much of the Ice Age story stands in contrast to the second narrative of the show. As we are repeatedly reminded, humanity suffers from collective amnesia and the great Atlantean Ice Age civilization is all but forgotten. A vital part of our history is thus lost to us, especially since there is a message (however vaguely delineated) left behind by the sages of that ancient culture that we need to heed. One resolute investigator has spent thirty years sifting through the evidence. By assiduously examining various archaeological sites and by comparing myths and uncovering their historical kernel, the subject of the narrative, Graham Hancock, has exposed the truth. He has many helpers, but each of them contributes merely one piece to a much larger puzzle: a bold theory about an eroded landscape in the state of Washington, an astronomical interpretation of earth mounds in Louisiana and Ohio, or a speculative reframing of underground dwellings as bunkers in Cappadocia. Hancock, as he proclaims at the beginning of the first episode, has made sense of all the clues. The opponents, the forces of ignorance and darkness in this story, are the dogmatic academics, guardians of scientific orthodoxy. If the story of the Ice Age people is vague, it is, by implication, the fault of these pseudo-experts who refuse to investigate the clues he has so laboriously uncovered, perpetrate a false picture of the past, and ridicule him when he points out the evidence they have failed to see. The Ice Age narrative builds on the assumption that oral traditions from around the globe that tell of culture heroes, such as the Titan Prometheus (mentioned in episode two), are memories of real events. In the narrative we have just analyzed, Graham Hancock is cast as a present-day Prometheus who brings the culture and insights from Atlantis to our own dark and ignorant world.

BRICOLAGE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE ICE AGE NARRATIVE

Hancock's Ice Age narrative may superficially resemble genres such as documentaries or investigative journalism, but it obeys a different set of rules. His story is built up like the work of French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss' *bricoleur*, the handyman who fashions something seemingly new by using whatever happens to be at hand.¹⁶ In this case, the raw materials include controversial theories about prehistory as a whole or about particular sites or objects that can be traced back to earlier literature and narratives provided by a variety of people who are Hancock's conversation partners in the show.

The recurring diatribes against the “mainstream” and the preference for incorporating ideas that are truly contentious indicate that alternative archaeologists, as mentioned at the outset of this article, function as a cultic milieu. Since a cultic milieu comprises vastly different and even contradictory opinions united by little more than their oppositional stance toward accepted scientific knowledge, Hancock in his role as *bricoleur* rules in sovereign fashion over the assemblage of elements, selecting bits and pieces that fit his master narrative, leaving others out, and, if necessary, making the building blocks mean what his overarching narrative requires them to signify. As long as the assemblage of elements does the job—to construct a sufficiently persuasive story—it does not matter to a *bricoleur* if the narrative is accurate, consistent, or fair. Hancock’s description of his approach confirms this image:

[I]t’s not my job to be “balanced” or “objective”. On the contrary, by providing a powerful, persuasive single-minded case for the existence of a lost civilisation, I believe that I am merely restoring a little balance and objectivity to a previously unbalanced situation.... [I]t’s my job—and a real responsibility to be taken seriously—to undermine and cast doubt on the orthodox theory of history in every way that I can and to make the most eloquent and persuasive case that I am capable of making for the existence of a lost civilisation.¹⁷

Hancock’s selective reliance on earlier narratives is evident throughout the series. To take just one example among many, episode four prominently features the Piri Reis map, dated 1513, which represents the southern tip of South America extending farther south into what looks like a large landmass. The Piri Reis map is a fixture of alternative archaeology. An entire family of thematically related stories about it centers on the conviction that the extended contour line depicts part of Antarctica, a continent that was not discovered until around 1820. According to a variation on this basic trope, one promoted by writers such as Arlington H. Mallery (1877-1968), Charles H. Hapgood (1904-1982), and Graham Hancock, the map draws upon knowledge that comes from superbly capable seafarers and explorers from an ancient civilization.¹⁸ The other major variation, connected especially with Erich von Däniken, author of *Chariots of the Gods* (1968), attributes the inclusion of Antarctica on the map to a visit to Earth in the distant past made by space aliens, since he contends that only an aerial view of the continent could have resulted in a depiction of such accuracy.¹⁹

Another and very different family of narratives starts with the fundamental premise that a sixteenth-century map needs to be understood in terms of its cultural context, i.e., how what is present on the map can be related to what is known of early modern cartography and of the cultural context more generally. This family of narratives concludes that the extension at the bottom of South America is a graphic element found on numerous early sixteenth-century maps and was intended to render imaginatively the idea that a large land mass in the Northern Hemisphere had to be counterbalanced by a large landmass in the south.²⁰ In *Ancient Apocalypse* episode four, while granting that seeing the map as including Antarctica is “one of the most controversial aspects” of its interpretation, Hancock does not acknowledge the existence of the second, context-sensitive interpretation.

An example of Hancock’s ability to impose his meaning on the contributions of others is the way, in episode one, he describes a site on the island of Java, named Gunung Padang, as putative evidence for his theory. Archaeologists understand this site as a cluster of courtyards resembling other examples of early Javanese architecture perched atop a hill of volcanic origin. In 2011, a multidisciplinary team of Indonesian researchers with a nationalistic agenda put forth the claim that not only the courtyards but also the hill of Gunung Padang itself were humanmade and that the latter was in fact an extremely ancient pyramid.²¹ Hancock interviews people associated with these claims, who believe that the site is evidence of Indonesia being the cradle of civilization 24,000 years ago, but he uses their story as a building block in his own narrative, suggesting that the ancestors of the Javanese learned how to construct megalithic structures from Atlantean master builders who arrived there some 12,800 years ago.

RACIALIZED DISCOURSE IN A SHIFTING ICE AGE MYTH

Although *Ancient Apocalypse* builds its narrative on ideas that are in part culled from earlier sources, such precursors are not explicitly mentioned in the show. His books, however, acknowledge the contributions of at least some of his predecessors, especially other creators of oppositional narratives

that extend the timeframe of the cultic milieu back to the last decades of the nineteenth century. Trying to impose meaning on heterogeneous building blocks that can date back to an epoch with different cultural norms is certainly not unproblematic. Hyperdiffusionist theories can suggest that local populations were incapable of producing much of value until an outside impulse had a civilizing effect. There are racist implications in this line of thought that earlier audiences and readers could be remarkably blind to but can seem glaringly obvious today. As a parallel example, the fact that the Norwegian adventurer Thor Heyerdahl's 1947 balsa raft journey from Peru to the Tuamotu Islands was based on similar hyperdiffusionist ideas about a white culture-bearing race did not prevent his book *Kon-Tiki* (1948) from becoming a bestseller, or his exploits from being celebrated in a museum in Oslo. Historian Axel Andersson, who studied the response to Heyerdahl, notes that for several decades there was barely any recognition of the problematic ideology at the core of the Kon-Tiki project.²²

Hancock's hyperdiffusionist bricolage has similar ideological roots but shows signs of having been adapted to changing sensibilities. The acknowledgments section of his 1995 book, *Fingerprints of the Gods*, includes Arthur Posnansky, an autodidactic naval officer and civil engineer who was fascinated by the Tiahuanaco site in Bolivia, which he idiosyncratically claimed was 12,000 to 17,000 years old. The fringe dating of the site fits Hancock's timeline, but Posnansky also interpreted Tiahuanaco within the context of a blatantly racist ideology, claiming that there had originally been two "races" in South America and that the master builders of Tiahuanaco were a different race than the present-day indigenous peoples, whom Posnansky characterized as being "completely devoid of culture."²³ Although Hancock's prose in *Fingerprints of the Gods* is more subdued, he also refers to the Ice Age people on page 104 of that book as a "distinctively non-Indian ethnic type (bearded, white-skinned, etc.)." More than a quarter of a century later, the promotional text for the book on Hancock's website still refers to myths from South and Mesoamerica that have white-skinned gods as their protagonists, and since he presupposes that such myths refer to encounters with people from his Ice Age civilization, readers are left to connect the dots and understand that the Atlanteans must also have been white. In *Ancient Apocalypse*, however, Hancock acknowledges that the cultural heritage of Native Americans has for ideological reasons been grossly misrepresented by white people. In episode six, he visits an astronomically aligned earthen mound in Ohio and explains that "I'm not saying the ancient Americans living here weren't capable of discovering and incorporating these astronomical observations into their sites by themselves. On the contrary." Hancock distances himself from the racist mound builder myth that insisted that Native Americans were unable to create such sophisticated sites, but the result is that viewers are left to guess how a monument in Ohio built by a fully competent local population can serve as a putative argument for the existence of a lost, culture-bearing, seafaring, and presumably bearded people.²⁴

DIS/ENCHANTMENT AND THE PSEUDOSCIENTIZATION OF MYTHOLOGY

As argued by religious history scholars such as Egil Asprem and Jason Ā. Josephson-Storm, the supposed transition from an enchanted to a disenchanted worldview is largely an illusion.²⁵ The Ice Age narrative in *Ancient Apocalypse* may come across as a disenchanted version of a culture hero myth since it features far more mundane central characters than the gods and other superhuman agents of more traditional mythologies. That impression is dispelled, however, by Hancock's account of them in writing. Chapter 30 of *America Before* presents a picture of a people who mastered a paranormal dimension that we cannot even begin to comprehend. How, he asks, were they able to construct monuments in which some of the stones used as building blocks weighed many tons? The suggestion that manpower and mechanics could account for these feats of engineering is dismissed as utterly unconvincing. The answer, as Hancock sees it, is that the ancient sages had access to a spiritual technology involving meditation, "special" and presumably psychoactive plants, and sound vibrations produced by means such as chanting. Their remarkable powers enabled them to make large stones malleable and to levitate them. *America Before* does not discount the impressive achievements of the Ice Age mathematicians and astronomers, but the truly remarkable aspect of their culture, according to this book, is that their technology was primarily spiritual.

The intense polemics against the scientific community in general and archaeologists in particular can of course be attributed to Hancock's own confrontation with a barrage of criticism, but there is an apocalyptic message in this enchanted version of the story that adds a further dimension to the extremely

hostile representation of archaeologists. Hancock has expressed his belief that our culture is in a state of crisis that is rooted in our materialistic mindset and can be addressed by using psychoactive substances such as the plant-based ayahuasca brew.²⁶ Since the sages from the mythic past are portrayed as a people whose way of life was spiritual and based on precisely such substances, acknowledging their existence and reconnecting with their insights would contribute to healing our own broken world. The main barrier that prevents this from happening is the resistance from “mainstream archaeology.”

This strident opposition to the scientific mainstream, however, is only part of the story. Much modern mythmaking lives in a state of tension vis-à-vis science.²⁷ Whether they are Young Earth Creationists or Latter-day Saints, heirs to the Theosophical worldview or representatives of various new religious movements, mythmakers routinely argue that their own narrative is more scientific than science as understood within the cultural mainstream. They may be scornful of scientific theories that contradict their own views, but can nonetheless quote scientists and academics, sprinkle their texts with footnotes and graphs, and refer to scientific findings. Since references to science are part of a mythic bricolage, cutting-edge scientific advances can coexist with outdated models, and both can either be characterized fairly or misrepresented by the mythmaker. The resulting way of arguing tends to get branded by outside critics as pseudoscientific, and we can coin the term pseudoscientization for this way of seeking legitimacy for one’s views.²⁸

This desire to find rhetorical support in science is also a feature of Hancock’s work. Despite his recurrent attacks, Hancock’s books are studded with references to scientists whose views can be fit into his overarching plot. In *Ancient Apocalypse*, even representatives of that despised scientific coterie, academically trained archaeologists, appear in brief segments and provide statements that are placed in a context that allows them to be readily interpreted as an endorsement of Hancock’s views. What differentiates Hancock from the other mythmakers mentioned above—Creationist writers, Latter-day Saint apologists, and promoters of Theosophical mythology—is that they seek to legitimize their beliefs by adding references to science to what are either already existing religious narratives or their own revelatory insights, whereas his narrative bricolage is characterized by a more pervasive pseudoscientization, i.e., by being pieced together from what he insists is compelling empirical evidence and scientific theories.

CONCLUSION

There is thus no opposition between being a “pseudoscientist” and a mythmaker. A myth that builds largely, even exclusively, on a process of pseudoscientization, however, comes at a cost. On the one hand, pervasive pseudoscientization can lead to the kind of narrative vagueness that we remarked upon earlier. A Mormon apologist or a writer who attempts to defend a literal understanding of biblical Great Flood mythology, for instance, has a text with a detailed plot and a vivid gallery of characters to stick to. A panorama of prehistory that is rooted in revelation, such as the Atlantis myths of Theosophist Charles W. Leadbeater (1854-1934), founder of the Anthroposophical Society Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), or American clairvoyant Edgar Cayce (1877-1945), can comprise a baroque profusion of particulars that are beyond any empirical investigation.²⁹ On the other hand, a narrative that is presented as a factual account of a bygone people, but which has no concrete, empirical evidence to refer to—no graves, tools, houses, pottery, ships, or even the everyday detritus left behind by any group of people—will inevitably be riddled with holes. Further, the desire to borrow legitimacy from science by claiming that more circumstantial evidence can be derived from a bold reinterpretation of the dates and functions of specific sites and objects means that one’s claims are empirically testable and invite scrutiny that they are ill equipped to withstand.

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ENDNOTES

¹ “Ancient Apocalypse, TV Series, 2022” IMDb, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt22807484/>.

² The Joe Rogan Experience podcast episodes are available on a number of podcast platforms, such as Spotify and Apple, and also on Rogan’s YouTube channel named “Powerful JRE,” https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=Joe+Rogan+Experience, accessed 4 January 2024.

³ Jason Colavito, “The Strange and Dangerous Right-Wing Freakout over *Ancient Apocalypse*,” *The New Republic*, 5 December 2022, <https://newrepublic.com/article/169282/right-wing-graham-hancock-netflix-atlantis>.

⁴ Colin Campbell, “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization,” in *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 5, ed. Michael Hill (London: SCM Press, 1972), 119-36; Olav Hammer and Karen Swartz, “Ancient Aliens,” in *Handbook of UFO Religions*, ed. Benjamin E. Zeller (Boston: Brill, 2021), 151-77.

⁵ Hyperdiffusionist theories posit that seemingly similar cultural practices across the globe are the result of diffusion from one single, advanced civilization. Hyperdiffusionism tends to be characterized as pseudoscientific by archaeologists and anthropologists for its lack of concrete evidence, western bias, and oversimplification of complex cultural processes. For an introduction to and critical discussion of this theory, see Glyn Daniel, *The Idea of Prehistory* (London: C. A. Watts, 1962), 104-19.

⁶ Pauliina Remes, *Neoplatonism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁷ Graham Hancock, *Magicians of the Gods: The Forgotten Wisdom of Earth’s Lost Civilization* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2015); Graham Hancock, *America Before: The Key to Earth’s Lost Civilization* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2019).

⁸ See special issue guest-edited by Jeb J. Card, “Archaeology and New Religious Movements,” *Nova Religio* 22, no. 4 (2019).

⁹ Hammer and Swartz, “Ancient Aliens.”

¹⁰ Jeb J. Card, “America Before as a Paranormal Charter,” *SAA Archaeological Record* 19, no. 5 (2019): 26-30, http://onlinedigeditions.com/publication/?i=634462&article_id=3531896&view=articleBrowser.

¹¹ In the show, Hancock identifies him as Dr. Anton Mifsud, president of the Prehistoric Society of Malta. On Hancock’s website, <https://grahamhancock.com/mission-in-malta-mifsud/>, we learn that Mifsud is a pediatrician who has co-authored or edited several books on Malta’s prehistory.

¹² Marco M. Vigato, *The Empires of Atlantis: The Origins of Ancient Civilizations and Mystery Traditions throughout the Ages* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2022).

¹³ For instance, Greimas’ model has been lifted from its original academic context in the study of folklore and adapted to analyze corporate narratives in business contexts. See, e.g., the contributions in Barbara Czarniawska and Pasquale Gagliardi, eds., *Narratives We Organize By* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2003). The model has been extended to the study of narratives in religious organizations in other publications by the present authors, especially Karen Swartz, *Management Matters: Organizational Storytelling Within the Anthroposophical Society in Sweden* (Åbo, Finland: Åbo Akademi University Press, 2022), available at https://www.doria.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/185670/swartz_karen.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

¹⁴ We are using a pared-down version of the actant model. For instance, Greimas saw these six actants as connected in pairs in ways that we have not pursued in this article as we did not find this aspect useful for our purposes.

¹⁵ Although an early version of this hypothesis was formulated in 2001, the Younger Dryas Impact Hypothesis became a major topic of discussion within the broader scientific community after it was presented at a meeting of the American Geophysical Union in 2007. The history of the hypothesis is summarized in Nicholas Pinter, Andrew C. Scott, Tyrone L. Daulton, Andrew Podoll, Christian Koeberl, R. Scott Anderson, and Scott E. Ishman, “The Younger Dryas Impact Hypothesis: A Requiem,” *Earth-Science Reviews* 106, nos. 3-4 (June 2011): 247-64, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0012825211000262>.

A sizeable literature supporting or attacking the hypothesis has been published over the years. A survey article published as recently as 2020 was cautiously skeptical in its conclusions, stating that the causes of the Younger Dryas climate change remain poorly understood and that an impact from space “might not be the trigger for the [Younger Dryas] onset.” See Hai Cheng, et al., “Timing and Structure of the Younger Dryas Event and Its Underlying Climate Dynamics,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America (PNAS)*, 117, no. 38 (September 2020), 23408-17. Three years later, in 2023, scientific majority opinion seemed to have turned more decisively away from the Younger Dryas Impact Hypothesis: a substantial article surveying the issues involved in the debate was already in the title framed as a “comprehensive refutation.” See Vance T. Holliday, et al., “Comprehensive Refutation of the Younger Dryas Impact Hypothesis (YDIH),” *Earth-Science Reviews*, 247 (December 2023): 1-75.

¹⁶ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 16.

¹⁷ Graham Hancock, “Introduction,” <https://grahamhancock.com/books/>, accessed 31 December 2023.

¹⁸ Arlington H. Mallery was a Marine Captain and industrial engineer. Charles H. Hapgood was a Harvard-educated college professor of anthropology and the history of science.

¹⁹ Erich von Däniken, *Chariots of the Gods? Unsolved Mysteries of the Past* (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), 14-15.

²⁰ Gregory C. McIntosh, *The Piri Reis Map of 1513* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000) is a context-sensitive interpretation of the Piri Reis map that includes a section on the two alternative narratives (52-68).

²¹ The nationalist interpretation of Gunung Padang is discussed in Dian Sulistyowati and Aldo W. Foe, “Indonesia’s Own ‘Pyramid’: The Imagined Past and Nationalism of Gunung Padang,” *International Review of Humanities Studies* 6, no. 1 (2021): 125-37.

²² Axel Andersson, *A Hero for the Atomic Age: Thor Heyerdahl and the Kon-Tiki Expedition* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 6.

²³ Arthur Posnansky, *Tihuanacu: The Cradle of American Man*, vols. 1-2, trans. James F. Sheaver (New York: J. J. Augustin, 1945), 33.

²⁴ Critics have been sharp in their condemnation of the racist subtext they have identified in Hancock's work. See Andreas Grünschloß, "Unmasking Hegemonial 'Fingerprints of the Fraud': Disinformation, Data Manipulation and Discursive Silencing of Native Perspectives in Graham Hancock's Netflix-Series *Ancient Apocalypse*," *Göttingen Research Online Publications* (Göttingen: Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, 2023), available at <https://publications.goettingen-research-online.de/handle/2/121325>, for an in-depth analysis. The gendered description of most of his culture heroes as masculine has not resulted in a similar barrage of critique against the assumption that such heroes are primarily male.

²⁵ Egil Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Rationalism and Esoteric Discourse, 1900-1939* (Boston: Brill, 2014); Jason A. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017). The term disenchantment (*Entzauberung der Welt*, "disenchantment of the world," in the original German) was used by the sociologist Max Weber to denote the increasing rationalization and the rejection of religious perspectives that he believed characterized the modern world.

²⁶ Hancock has presented such views on many occasions, not least in a 2013 TED^x talk that has been uploaded on YouTube and seen by millions of viewers. See "Graham Hancock – The War on Consciousness BANNED TED TALK," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0c5nIvJH7w>.

²⁷ The response of new religions to the rhetorical power and cultural dominance of science has been discussed in a growing literature that includes publications such as Mikael Rothstein, *Belief Transformations: Some Aspects of the Relation Between Science and Religion in Transcendental Meditation (TM) and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1996); James R. Lewis, *Legitimizing New Religions* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003); and Benjamin E. Zeller, *Prophets and Protons: New Religious Movements and Science in Late Twentieth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

²⁸ For a more detailed dissection of how an alternative archaeological bricolage can incorporate references to (what authors perceive as being) science, see Olav Hammer, "Myth, Materiality, and Book of Mormon Apologetics: A Sacred Text and Its Interpreters," *Postscripts: The Journal of Sacred Texts, Cultural Histories, and Contemporary Contexts* 8, no. 3 (2012): 261-88.

²⁹ Leadbeater's visionary exploration of Atlantis was transmitted to fellow Theosophist Walter Scott-Elliot (1849-1919) who compiled an extended narrative in his *The Story of Atlantis* (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1896; with innumerable reprints). Rudolf Steiner reproduces countless details found in Scott-Elliot's book in his *Aus der Akasha-Chronik*, translated into English as *The Submerged Continents of Atlantis and Lemuria, their History and Civilization* (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1911), but his account is presented as the result of his own clairvoyant investigation. Cayce's psychic "readings" on the topic were compiled in Edgar Evans Cayce, *Edgar Cayce on Atlantis* (New York: Paperback Library, 1968).