

Crusading against Straw Men: An Alternative View of Alternative Archaeologies: Response to Holtorf (2005)

Author(s): Garrett G. Fagan and Kenneth L. Feder

Source: *World Archaeology*, Vol. 38, No. 4, Debates in "World Archaeology" (Dec., 2006), pp. 718-729

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40024068>

Accessed: 05-09-2017 21:56 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*Taylor & Francis, Ltd.* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *World Archaeology*

# Crusading against straw men: an alternative view of alternative archaeologies: response to Holtorf (2005)

Garrett G. Fagan and Kenneth L. Feder

*Judith:* Well, why do you want to be Loretta, Stan?

*Loretta:* I want to have babies.

*Reg:* You want to have babies?!

*Loretta:* It's every man's right to have babies if he wants them.

*Reg:* But . . . you can't have babies.

*Loretta:* Don't you oppress me.

*Reg:* I'm not oppressing you, Stan. You haven't got a womb! Where's the foetus going to gestate?! You going to keep it in a box?!

This bit of silliness from the Monty Python movie, *The Life of Brian*, came to mind while reading Cornelius Holtorf's (2005) recent article in these pages, 'Beyond crusades: how (not) to engage with alternative archaeologies'. We all laugh at this scene because we know that Stan, now calling himself Loretta, cannot have babies. We didn't reach this conclusion as the result of some socially mediated process, or by imposing the will of the ruling class, or through some cultural negotiation. There are actual, observable facts and materially testable propositions that inform our conclusion: for babies to be conceived and to gestate, there must be a womb; females have wombs and males do not; Stan is a male; Stan cannot have babies. As the old saying goes, 'facts are stubborn things', which, we agree, is predicated on our assumption that there are such things as independent facts and that facts matter.

Is Stan-Loretta's desire to have babies merely an 'alternative' to an inflexible biological worldview being imposed by Reg as a form of undemocratic, scientific indoctrination? Is Reg really oppressing Stan-Loretta? Or is that claim just silly? We think it's the latter. We also think many of the preceding (pretty fundamental) observations can be applied to Holtorf's article.

### Holtorf's position

In his paper, Holtorf (2005) makes three core points:

1. Archaeology does not uncover the past: 'academic knowledge is constructed in the present and not directly related to past realities' (ibid.: 546) and 'it is a truism that every past is the construct of a particular present-day context' (ibid.: 548). Rather, the significance of archaeology lies in the ways it makes the past meaningful to contemporaries: 'different visions and experiences of the present constitute a range of contexts in which the past and its remains are given meaning' (ibid.: 549). Therefore, 'alternative' archaeologies legitimately exist alongside rational archaeology: '[alternative] views and aspirations are significant in themselves: as different manifestations of a widespread fascination with both the past and archaeology' (ibid.: 549).
2. Archaeologists (and others) who issue sharp criticism of 'alternative' archaeologies are crudely imposing a 'narrow scientific approach', making 'seemingly arbitrary value judgements reflecting personal preferences', and are resorting to 'ideological fundamentalism and verbal violence'. They are 'opinionated and patronizing'. They hurt archaeology (ibid.: 545, 547).
3. Given the disputed status of scientific knowledge in some academic circles, we ought to eschew making value judgments about 'alternative' archaeology. Rather, we should engage in 'critical understanding and dialogue' with the purveyors of 'alternative' pasts. Holtorf advocates 'a commitment to multiple approaches and values simultaneously brought to bear on archaeological landscapes, sites and objects' (ibid.: 548).

Holtorf's first point, it seems to us, is an overblown assertion of a valid observation: people, naturally, will make of the past what they will, and different groups may adhere to different versions of it. The study of those differences, and why people hold them, is an intrinsically interesting topic of study, we agree. We part company with Holtorf on his insistence that the mosaic of contemporary interpretations is all there is to archaeology. In our view, we should of course reflect on how we engage with the material record, and seek to limit our biases, but always with the end in mind of improving the accuracy of our conclusions about what actually happened in the past, whatever it may have been and whatever people will make of it today. Otherwise, archaeology becomes an exercise in self-obsessed navel-gazing.

To his credit, Holtorf recognizes that 'all accounts [of the past] are not *equally* valid or legitimate' (emphasis in original). But how would Holtorf distinguish validity from invalidity, legitimacy from illegitimacy? Well, it seems, by means of civil discussions, in which people committed to conflicting pasts debate their preferences:

The implications and consequences of each approach and interpretation need to be scrutinized. . . . Certain viewpoints which some of us may feel compelled to refute and dismiss others will see a strong need to respect and defend, each reaction based on specific values and personal choices. . . . For evaluating different versions of the past and

their impact it is essential to understand the local contexts which they reflect and within which they originate. Similarly, when conflicting interpretations directly compete with each other, all local sensitivities need to be carefully studied and pragmatic solutions found that allow peaceful coexistence.

(Holtorf 2005: 549)

Note the apparent absence of any consideration of evidence (or lack of it), logic or even superficial plausibility in these assessments. Rather, it is the ‘implications and consequences’ of the competing accounts that matter, to be assessed on the basis of ‘specific values and personal choices’ set against ‘local contexts’ and ‘local sensitivities’. Such conversations are thus not only parochial but firmly presentist, exploring matters of expedience, of the utility or attractiveness of divergent accounts to different constituencies. Methodology – the not irrelevant matter of *how* competing ‘viewpoints’ have been arrived at in the first place – is nowhere on the agenda. Archaeology becomes politics.

Holtorf’s second point seriously misunderstands the nature of ‘alternative’ archaeology. He uses the term ‘alternative’ – once in the title, four times in the abstract, and no fewer than seventeen times in the text – to characterize claims or constructs that other archaeologists commonly refer to as ‘fantastic archaeology’ (Williams 1991), ‘pseudoarchaeology’, ‘cult archaeology’ (Cole 1979, 1982; Fagan 2006), ‘fringe archaeology’ and even ‘bullshit archaeology’ (Daniel 1979). We agree that the term ‘alternative’ imparts a warmer, fuzzier feel. After all, the notion of ‘alternatives’ appeals to our higher angels and progressive inclinations. Certainly most of us in academia, perhaps especially those trained in anthropology, are sympathetic to ‘alternative lifestyles’, recognizing their intrinsic value and celebrating them as reflections of diversity in human behavior. So what’s not to love about ‘alternative’ archaeologies? Well, lots, actually. ‘Alternative’ archaeologies are not necessarily innocuous expressions by perfectly nice people searching for a salubrious past, and, hey, who are we to criticize their beloved pasts anyway? Mixed into the panoply of ‘alternatives’ are a host of reconstructions that are anti-reason and anti-science, or, worse, hyper-nationalistic, racist and hateful. They are also demonstrably false.

The crux here is that ‘alternative’ archaeology, or more properly, ‘pseudoarchaeology’, is not an endeavor with *bona fides*. Books in the genre present themselves as if they were the real thing, with charts, diagrams, notes, appendices, bibliographies and even the semblance of rational argument based on evidence (as has been noted by others, e.g. Schadla-Hall 1999: 154–5, 2004: 256, 260–1). They are written, billed, advertised, stocked and sold as books about the real past, usually found in the archaeology section of bookstores (when they really belong alongside screeds on alien visitations, psi-factor and the Bermuda Triangle). They often claim to be presenting cutting-edge research by eminent scientists (e.g. Hancock 2005). Yet even the mildest critical scrutiny reveals that such works are farragoes of misdirection, fallacious logic, manufactured evidence, misrepresentation of carefully selected data, quotes taken out of context, rhetorical sleight-of-hand and outright error (all ‘methods’ documented in detail in Fagan 2006; Feder 2006; James and Thorpe 1999; Jordan 2001; Williams 1991). This is no more a justifiable

'alternative' to rational archaeology than so-called intelligent design is to evolutionary biology.

It is important to be crystal clear about this. People who cheat at poker are not playing 'alternative' poker. They are manipulating play to ensure a beneficial outcome, all the while presenting themselves to the table as regular poker players. The same can be said of pseudoarchaeology. Most works of the genre break the most basic tenets of rational investigation, *while pretending not to* (although some practitioners do not even make a pretense at rationality – see below on Blavatsky and Cayce). Further, pseudoarchaeology is offered directly to the public, which cannot be expected to be *au fait* with all the disciplines and sub-disciplines habitually ransacked in such books, as the authors thrash about in search of data, *any* data, that can be presented as buttressing their claims. Unsurprisingly, Holtorf's castigation of critics of this dubious enterprise as people who hurt archaeology is music to the ears of pseudoarchaeologists, as demonstrated by the republishing of Holtorf's article at Graham Hancock's website (see <<http://www.grahamhancock.com/forum/HoltorfC1.php>>). To set that fact in context: Hancock believes that monuments on the surface of Mars can be connected to terrestrial counterparts (Hancock 1998a); that a precocious 'Lost Civilization' of the Ice Age seeded all the world's more familiar ancient civilizations but tragically disappeared beneath rising floodwaters, or Antarctic ice (the details are flexible; Hancock 1995, 1998b, 2002); that the course of human history has been influenced by a cult of heretics with roots in ancient Egypt, whose clandestine workings can be decoded from urban monuments (Hancock and Bauval 2004); and that humankind's development has been guided by supernatural entities best encountered by ingesting psychotropic drugs (Hancock 2005).

In his third point, Holtorf reaches sweeping conclusions about the status of scientific knowledge, a matter of ongoing dispute among scientists, sociologists and philosophers. He presents hotly debated issues as if they were settled, and the arguments of the one side of the debate as if they were demonstrated facts. He cites a five-page article in a neuroscience journal as justification for dismissing the entire process of peer review in all disciplines (Holtorf 2005: 546). He concludes by urging archaeologists to engage in 'critical understanding and dialogue' with the 'multiple pasts and alternative archaeologies in contemporary society' (*ibid.*: 550).

In our experience, attempts at 'critical dialogue' with pseudoarchaeologists almost instantly devolve into slanging matches in which the expertise and motives of the critic become the main focus of attention. The self-proclaimed champions of the open mind are not above threatening legal action to intimidate their critics. As argued recently (Fagan 2006: 363–7), such political posturing on the part of pseudoarchaeologists is a crucial element in their *modus operandi*, as it (1) solidifies their standing among their supporters as the 'little men' fighting the big, bad university establishment and (2) deflects attention away from the gossamer-thin 'evidence' they proffer in support of their preferred scenarios. The basic point here is that you cannot reason with unreason. It is about as likely that archaeologists and pseudoarchaeologists can engage in 'critical understanding and dialogue' as it is that astronomers and astrologers can.

How would the archaeologist engage in ‘critical understanding and dialogue’ with the chap who believes that lost super-civilizations lie undiscovered under the Antarctic ice only to be abused and insulted when the flaws with this notion and the ‘evidence’ offered in support of it are pointed out? Or with the person who possesses a passing acquaintance with Greek, offers gross mistranslations of Herodotus on Egypt, excoriates published translators for missing the words he imagines are there and, when corrected, insists that Greek grammar and vocabulary are matters of opinion? Or the person who denies the validity of well-established archaeological dating techniques, or stratigraphy, or the value of associated finds? What kind of dialogue should we expect with the claimant who asserts that the archaeology of the Belzec concentration camp must be a fraud because there was no Holocaust? We invite Holtorf to engage with genuine true believers who hold views like this, most of which we have encountered in the course of adventures on the internet. The results of such a sociological study might be quite interesting, though, in all honesty, we are not sure how conversations about the ‘implications and consequences’ of such delusions advance our understanding of the past, or of archaeology, or of anything beyond the strange obsessions of their proponents.

### **Men of straw**

Quite apart from its flawed core points, Holtorf’s article is densely populated by straw men. For instance, he asserts early in his essay (2005: 545) that: ‘Some professional archaeologists have suggested that nothing is more important than proving such alternative archaeologies and their results wrong.’ But Holtorf cites no one as actually having said this. We do not think he can. As an archaeologist and a historian who have been among the more active in our disciplines regarding a response to the claims of pseudoarchaeology, one might think we have said or believe this, but neither of us has or does, nor do we know anyone who has or does. We ask Holtorf to cite an archaeologist who claims that ‘nothing is more important than proving such alternative archaeologies and their results wrong’. If he finds one, we will agree with him that this is a foolish position. Some, like us, may think it is important, even crucial to respond to claims about the human past unsupported by evidence, but we do not agree that ‘there is nothing more important’.

Holtorf asserts (*ibid.*: 547) that archaeoastronomy ‘was once considered the playing field *par excellence* of alternative archaeology’ but is now an accepted mainstream procedure, thus proving that rational and ‘alternative’ archaeologies are not so far apart. This is both an exaggeration and a misdirection. First, archaeoastronomy long predates the emergence of academic archaeology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; there were dubious forays into archaeoastronomy, such as those of William Stukeley (1687–1765) about Stonehenge, long before there was an archaeological science to test them. That archaeologists have been skeptical of this approach is thus entirely reasonable. Second, the latter-day openness of archaeology to archaeoastronomy in no way justifies the pseudoarchaeological abuse of the technique as a stand-alone interpretative (let alone dating) tool, where it is routinely presumed, rather than argued, that star alignments

perceived by modern minds were intentionally established by ancient builders. Matters get worse when acceptance of the speculated alignments requires throwing out large quantities of other relevant, verified and contextualized data. So, at heart, the utility of archaeoastronomy is a matter of degree.

But, for the sake of argument, let's accept Holtorf's claim. What would the movement of archaeoastronomy from the fringe to the mainstream tell us? To Holtorf, it shows archaeology and pseudoarchaeology are blood brothers. In our view, it reveals one of the core processes that underpin rational analysis: new ideas are met with skepticism *until convincing data are forthcoming*. Even if archaeoastronomy was at first treated skeptically by archaeologists, that is precisely as it should have been, until its practitioners supported their claims with data. And the partial acceptance of archaeoastronomy by the mainstream does not offer a blank check to other 'alternative' claims, such as Erich von Däniken's notions that ancient monuments were inspired by aliens from outer space. Finally, the case of archaeoastronomy belies the notion, freely bandied about by pseudoarchaeologists and their supporters, that archaeological professionals are narrow-minded nay-sayers who refuse to consider new ideas or different perspectives.

Holtorf takes Fagan to task for criticizing the 'mythic motif' of 'The Vindicated Thinker' in pseudoarchaeology, when real archaeologists and scientists often exploit this *dramatis persona* themselves (ibid.: 545, 547). We agree, since that was Fagan's point. Fagan (2003) observed that the 'The Vindicated Thinker' is a useful narrative motif for *all* science on television, but that it serves to blur the distinction between genuine and bogus material when employed by 'alternative' speculators. On the surface, there is little to distinguish a narrative based on solid data and one based on flimsy or non-existent data, when the focus is on 'The Vindicated Thinker' and his/her journey to vindication (a point made even more forcefully by Hale (2006)).

Holtorf's question 'Are scientifically informed statements always more true or useful than others?' (2005: 546) is another straw man, breathtaking in its misdirection. Science is, at its very core, explicitly and self-consciously a process of trial and error, so of course scientists do not claim that 'scientifically informed statements' are 'always more true' than others. Science admits its limitations. What would a scientific analysis of the poetry of W. H. Auden look like? Could such thing even exist?

Scientists, however, *do* assert that skeptical inquiry is the most effective way to arrive at true statements about various real-world matters, such as the nature of the universe, our planet, life on earth and the human past. While it is true that the historical sciences for the most part lack the reproducible experimental testing used in the natural sciences, standard historical/archaeological investigative method has at its core the trial and error process of hypothesis proposal, testing against data, refinement, rejection and reconsideration. Rational archaeologists recognize that hypotheses are justified by reliance on imperfect and incomplete knowledge, and that we need to be ready to change our views when new data force us to do so (Kosso 2001, 2006). This last step, tellingly, is something pseudoarchaeologists are singularly incapable of doing. This is because, in their case, the data have been press-ganged into the service of a favored conclusion, a conclusion reached by any number of intuitive means, such as hunches, revelation, superficial observation or nationalist and religious dogma. No amount of countervailing

evidence can change such a conclusion which, in reality, is an article of faith adhered to with quasi-religious fervor.

The question 'Are scientifically informed statements always more . . . useful than others?' contains another misdirection because, in this case, the term 'useful' has no meaning. Certainly, when the family dog dies, it may be quite 'useful' to tell your child that Fido is happily chasing rabbits in dog heaven. But adhering to the scientifically based suggestions of your veterinarian concerning an MRI, a surgical procedure or radiation therapy would certainly be more 'useful' in forestalling the pet's departure to doggie paradise than prayer, chakra massage or altering the feng shui of the kennel. To use an archaeological example, an Afrocentrist perspective on the origins of the Olmec in Mesoamerica sees the development of this indigenous New World society as inspired by valiant, culture-bearing explorers from West Africa (Van Sertima 1976). In the short run, such a perspective might be quite 'useful' in raising the self-esteem of African-American schoolchildren, regardless of the fact that there is not much in the way of archaeological evidence to recommend it. However, would it not be a lot more useful to raise the self-esteem of these same kids by informing them of the glorious history of ancient African cultures, such as Great Zimbabwe, Jenne-Jeno and Meroë, all of which *can* be archaeologically verified? And what about the self-esteem of Native American schoolchildren when, without evidence, the accomplishments of their ancestors are ascribed to foreign interlopers?

Here we return to a point raised above. The validity and legitimacy of archaeological propositions are not secondary issues to be thrown into the mix while debating the 'implications and consequences' and 'local sensitivities' of competing scenarios. Rather they are *the absolutely vital matters* that ought to be every archaeologist's core concern, the very starting point of any meaningful debate that aims at true understanding. We gain nothing in the long run by promulgating dubious or false 'facts' about the past to make a certain demographic feel better about itself, whether that demographic is a disadvantaged minority harboring legitimate grievances or a triumphalist majority brimming with jingoistic fervor.

The past will always be manipulated for political ends, but we only exacerbate such manipulation if we espouse suspect claims out of political expediency. Rather, it is essential to insist on the rigorous application of skeptical inquiry to probe the degree of justification of competing pasts (with regard to logic, plausibility, evidence and overall coherence in our network of understanding). This route can bring us to as true a picture of the real past as possible, and perhaps help to avoid the worst travesties and tragedies thrown up by politicized pasts. The alternative is nothing more 'useful' than conflicting but untested scenarios that, in their worst forms, have a proven capacity to set populations on a collision course, as horribly demonstrated in places like Northern Ireland, India/Pakistan, inside India itself, the Middle East and the Balkans, to say nothing of pseudoarchaeology's role in bolstering the state racism of the Third Reich.

Rational archaeology is no panacea for the world's problems, of course, but it may at least allow us to spike one cannon in the extremists' arsenal: the telling of unjustified tales about the past to justify contemporary atrocity. The many, many corpses left behind by violent conflicts fueled by competing views of history offer a macabre counterpoint to Holtorf's rosy picture of polite conversations about 'implications and consequences' leading to the 'peaceful coexistence' of disputed pasts, at least when those conversations



are conducted in the absence of the evidentiary and logical requirements of reasoned discourse. Insistence on the rigorous standards of scientific inquiry and skepticism is surely infinitely preferable to polarized creed wars over 'local sensitivities', the blood-spattered results of which are all too evident.

### **Mind police**

Holtorf ends on this note: 'The true danger lies not in the epistemological relativism inherent in my proposition but in the indefensible absolutism that is the alternative' (2005: 550). Elsewhere he states that state science education is 'undemocratic' (ibid.: 546) and, in a particularly purple passage, he pulls out all the stops:

Archaeologists do not serve as a special state police force dedicated to eradicating interpretations that are considered false or inappropriate by a self-selected jury. Neither students nor other audiences should be indoctrinated with a particular version of the past or an exclusive approach to its proper study.

(Holtorf 2005: 549)

This is astonishing stuff. It bears a remarkable resemblance to the arguments made by supporters of intelligent design, who maintain that high school biology students should not be indoctrinated with a 'particular version of the past', i.e. an evolutionary version.

In truth, rational archaeology offers no 'particular version of the past'. There are many competing versions, argued over endlessly in books and journals, as scholars critically debate different propositions about evidence, methods, interpretations, indeed practically every aspect of the discipline. But recognition of this plurality of opinion does not mean that anything goes, or that 'the division between mainstream and alternative becomes less clear' (Schadla-Hall 2004: 267). What underlies the scholarly discussions is a near-universal adherence to the conventions of rational discourse, a respect for tried and tested methodologies which have proven their utility (and which are always being refined in the search for improved utility) and an unspoken acknowledgement that the coherence of our overall understanding of the past must be enhanced by new hypotheses, not demolished and replaced by already disproven propositions (such as hyperdiffusionism). Adherence to the procedures of rational inquiry does not constitute dogma or doctrine. Rather, they are the basic guidelines for how to reach verifiable results. There is no 'indoctrination' going on here.

We and other critics of pseudoarchaeology are cast by Holtorf's rhetoric in the roles of elitist Inquisitors, anti-democratic absolutists or thought police bent on eradication. We ask Holtorf to cite the passages in the work of pseudoarchaeology's critics where calls are made for the 'eradication' of alternative beliefs or works. Where are the mobs of angry archaeologists marching on libraries and bookstores demanding that pseudoarchaeological tracts be banned or burned? For the record: people are free to hold whatever views they like about the past, no matter how whacky. All that we insist is that when such views are presented to the public on television or in books claiming to be about archaeology, are

offered up as scientifically based or verified, such propositions be capable of withstanding the same rigorous scrutiny routinely applied to our own work, which is the same rigorous scrutiny the public imagines is applied in real archaeology. Indeed, the public perception of archaeology as a rational and scientific enterprise is precisely why pseudoarchaeology goes to such great lengths to disguise itself as the real thing: it seeks to don the mantle of scientific legitimacy while eschewing the very methods that confer that legitimacy in the first place. Pointing this out does not make us the Gestapo.

Some practitioners of the pseudoarts are quite up front about the 'alternative' sources of their information about the past, such as theosophist Helene Blavatsky, who claimed to learn about our astral jellyfish ancestors from (conveniently lost) Tibetan tablets written in the otherwise unknown language Senzar (Blavatsky 1888–1938), or the 'sleeping prophet' Edgar Cayce, who learned about Atlantis while asleep (Cayce 1968). Most pseudoarchaeologists, however, are not so forthcoming about their agendas and bury their anti-reason, anti-science worldview under a ton of scientific-looking verbiage. For instance, according to his website, Graham Hancock's recent book, *Supernatural* (2005), has 'an exciting basis in the latest science' and presents 'the discoveries and views of eminent scientists doing cutting-edge research'. We do not think it undemocratic or absolutist to insist on the accountability of such claims to the evidence.

## **Two realms**

It is possible to take a charitable view of all this. On the one hand, there are people like us who are concerned with the archaeological methods used in investigating a real past and insist that only those propositions which meet rigorous standards of justification be presented to the public as scientifically valid. Other ways of knowing the past are certainly possible (see Blavatsky and Cayce), but we just do not happen to find those ways particularly helpful or productive. Certainly, when compared to the staggering achievements of rational archaeology, they have produced no new lines of inquiry and have not expanded our knowledge of the past. The quests for Atlantis, Mu, Lemuria, the Lost Civilization, the Original Pyramid Builders, the Spaceman Civilizers or whatever have been ongoing for decades with no notable results. It is clear that some people find quests like this intriguing and exciting. That's fine by us. We simply say this: if such quests are not scientific and rational, they ought not to parade about as such or be sold to the public as such. Still less should they be accepted as the basis for calls to rewrite the history books from page one, followed by shouts of 'persecution!' or 'inquisition!' when those calls fall on deaf ears. They have no place in the university lecture hall or school textbook.

On the other hand, there are people like Holtorf, who are concerned with how information about the past is processed in contemporary society. We agree with him that this is a matter worthy of investigation. But Holtorf's contemporary focus leads him to the view, which we dispute, that the main business of archaeology is not finding out about a real past but in respectfully examining multiple pasts constructed in the present.

Our essential point here is that, methodologically speaking, there is no comparison between rational archaeology and pseudoarchaeology. They are two separate realms, and they need to be recognized as such. It has nothing to do with credentials or professional status (another straw man in Holtorf's article), but everything to do with method (Fagan 2006).

We humbly suggest that, if presenting your scenario requires you to keep your readers in the dark about volumes of pertinent but disconfirming data, to ignore completely the local contexts of those data you do find useful, to make gross cross-cultural comparisons without regard for context, geography or chronology, to misrepresent the state of knowledge about sites or cultures, to rely on outmoded or disproven explanatory models, to employ rhetorical tricks and 'common-sense' arguments in the place of well-evidenced reasoning, to disparage long-established disciplines or jettison whole sciences – if this is what you have to do to make your case, you are not just innocently operating 'within different discourses' from rational archaeology (Holtorf 2005: 544) but perpetrating a travesty. The propositions of such material ought to be sharply differentiated from conclusions reached by rigorous, abundantly evidenced and carefully argued studies, whose authors respect all the data (not just those which fit their case) and who pay close attention to things like local context and overall coherence in formulating their interpretations.

People can believe what they will, or write what they will about the past. But, if they wish to present their beliefs as verified by evidence and advanced by rational argument, those beliefs ought to pass the same litmus tests all liberal scientific works are expected to pass. If they do not, but nevertheless try to pass their beliefs off as scientific and rational, then we are free to point that discrepancy out and to issue informed critiques of what is, ultimately, shoddy speculation. We do not think this makes us agents of Orwell's Ministry of Truth.

When V. Gordon Childe titled one of his masterworks *What Happened in History?* (1985 [1942]) he was not using metaphor. The title's implications are clear enough: there is a history (and a prehistory) during which time things actually happened. Historians and prehistorians (professional or otherwise, it makes no difference to us) go about the task of attempting to recover, retrieve, reveal and, perhaps even, explain what actually happened. Holtorf is certainly correct in maintaining that people do not always agree on precisely what happened or why, but, can we please not throw out the baby with the bathwater? The ultimate irony in Holtorf's underlying perspective is that, when the successful application of rational method allows us to reject a previously considered hypothesis, Holtorf appears to conclude that this invalidates rational archaeology or makes it no better than any other way of knowing. This gets things precisely back to front, in our view. The ability to reject previous explanations with the discovery of new data and the application of new methodological procedures is a hallmark of the scientific method and one of the ways rational inquiry is distinguished from religion, fantasy or superstition.

The methods of rational archaeology have led to a tremendous deepening of our knowledge about the past, as the discipline has addressed questions of eternal interest to all of humankind: who are we, where did we come from, why do we live the way we do,

and what is our relationship to each other and to the world around us? Pseudoarchaeology, in contrast, engages in quests after chimeras but makes a pretense at rationality while doing so. Which process hurts archaeology more: diverting limited time and resources into investigative dead-ends or pointing out the abundant flaws of the diversions?

Garrett G. Fagan,  
Penn State University, PA, USA,  
ggf2@psu.edu

Kenneth L. Feder,  
Central Connecticut State University, CT, USA,  
harpofeder@comcast.net

## References

- Blavaksty, H. 1888–1938. *The Secret Doctrine*. Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House.
- Cayce, E. 1968. *Edgar Cayce on Atlantis*. New York: Hawthorn Books.
- Childe, V. G. 1985 [1942]. *What Happened in History*. New York: Viking Press.
- Cole, J. R. 1979. Inscriptionmania, hyperdiffusionism and the public: fallout from a 1977 meeting. *Man in the Northeast*, 17: 27–53.
- Cole, J. R. 1982. Western Massachusetts ‘Monk’s caves’: 1979 University of Massachusetts field research. *Man in the Northeast*, 24: 37–70.
- Daniel, G. 1979. The forgotten milestones and blind alleys of the past. *Royal Anthropological Society News*, 33: 3–6.
- Fagan, G. G. 2003. Far-out television. *Archaeology*, May–June: 46–50. In *The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2004* (eds S. Pinker and T. Folger). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2004, pp. 62–8.
- Fagan, G. G. (ed.) 2006. Diagnosing pseudoarchaeology. In *Archaeological Fantasies: How Pseudoarchaeology Misrepresents the Past and Misleads the Public* (ed. G. G. Fagan). London: Routledge, pp. 23–46.
- Feder, K. L. 2006. *Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries: Science and Pseudoscience in Archaeology*, 5th edn. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Hale, C. 2006. The Atlantean box. In *Archaeological Fantasies: How Pseudoarchaeology Misrepresents the Past and Misleads the Public* (ed. G. G. Fagan). London: Routledge, pp. 235–58.
- Hancock, G. 1995. *Fingerprints of the Gods*. New York: Doubleday.
- Hancock, G. 1998a. *The Mars Mystery: The Secret Connection between Earth and the Red Planet*. New York: Three Rivers.
- Hancock, G. 1998b. *Heaven’s Mirror: Quest for the Lost Civilization*. London: Michael Joseph.
- Hancock, G. 2002. *Underworld: Flooded Kingdoms of the Ice Age*. London: Michael Joseph.
- Hancock, G. 2005. *Supernatural: Meetings with the Ancient Teachers of Mankind*. London: Century.
- Hancock, G. and Bauval, R. 2004. *Talisman: Sacred Cities, Secret Faith*. London: Element.
- Holtorf, C. 2005. Beyond crusades: how (not) to engage with alternative archaeologies. *World Archaeology*, 37(4): 544–51.
- James, P. and Thorpe, N. 1999. *Ancient Mysteries*. New York: Ballantine Books.

- Jordan, P. 2001. *The Atlantis Syndrome*. Stroud: Sutton.
- Kosso, P. 2001. *Knowing the Past: Philosophical Issues of History and Archaeology*. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books.
- Kosso, P. 2006. Introduction: the epistemology of archaeology. In *Archaeological Fantasies: How Pseudoarchaeology Misrepresents the Past and Misleads the Public* (ed. G. G. Fagan). London: Routledge, pp. 3–22.
- Schadla-Hall, T. 1999. Public archaeology. *European Journal of Archaeology*, 2: 147–58.
- Schadla-Hall, T. 2004. The comforts of unreason: the importance and relevance of alternative archaeology. In *Public Archaeology* (ed. N. Merriman). London: Routledge, pp. 255–71.
- Van Sertima, I. 1976. *They Came Before Columbus*. New York: Random House.
- Williams, S. 1991. *Fantastic Archaeology: The Wild Side of North American Prehistory*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.