

Module: Unravelling Heritage: Theories, Methods and Practice

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Down the rabbit hole; Pseudoarchaeology, Heritage and the clammer for the public's attention.

Pseudoarchaeology is the ugly reflection behind the mirror, constantly harrowing and marking the study of archaeology and heritage. It is an aspect of the study which we all engage in that the sector has struggled to face. The aim of this discussion paper is threefold; to set out what pseudoarchaeology is, the challenges it presents to heritage studies, and how we as heritage professionals should address it. While this paper cannot solve the challenges presented by this phenomenon, it is hoped that this discussion will lead to new avenues of exploration and ways of improving the outlook.

Pseudoarchaeology is a tricky subject to define, mainly because it covers a myriad of topics all with their own theories, proponents, and methodologies. As a starting point to this discussion, I thought it pertinent to consider what I thought of when considering pseudoarchaeology and how does this agree or differ with the academic studies into this topic. When I first think of pseudoarchaeology the first, and most prevalent theory that I think of is that of the Ancient Alien or Ancient Astronaut theory popularised by Erik von Daniken, which I will discuss in more detail later. Following on from this I also think of the quest for "lost" continents or civilisations such as Atlantis, Lemura and Mu otherwise known as *hyperdiffusionism*¹, followed by the search for religious evidence and finally the topic which has been particularly on the rise of late that of internet conspiracy theories.

The topic of pseudoarchaeology has been investigated by several scholars both within heritage studies and outside. One of the most prolific scholars who has written on this is Garrett G Fagan (2003, 2005, 2006). However, the search to define the term and its key characteristics has a longer history. Steibing (1987) characterised pseudoarchaeology by three elements found in all theories regardless of their context. They defined these characteristics as having:

"Unscientific methods and evidence, a tendency to provide simple, compact answers to complex, difficult issues and a tendency to present itself as being persecuted by the archaeological establishment."²

¹ The claim that all major inventions and all cultures can be traced back to a single culture. <https://www.andytheargumentativearchaeologist.com/hyperdiffusionism> [accessed 30/11/2021 @ 16:39pm]

² Stiebing Jr., William H. (1987) The Nature and Dangers of Cult Archaeology. In *Cult Archaeology and Creationism: Understanding Pseudoscientific Beliefs about the Past*, ed. Francis B. Harrold and Raymond A. Eve, pp. 2. University of Iowa Press, Iowa.

A further definition of pseudoarchaeology that I found particularly useful is that of B Piercy who defines it as:

“a counterfeit version of true archaeology whose proponents rely on bias, ignoring accurate scientific methodology and evidence to produce unrealistic ideas about the past.”³

This is further elaborated on by Fagan in Basset (2013):

“The pseudo-archaeologist can only be defined as such when he or she wilfully ignores countervailing data instead of rethinking their position in the face of it, or when contextual considerations are deliberately bypassed or left unexplored for fear of destroying a preferred conclusion. Both of these failings must also be applied systematically (2006: 28-29).”⁴

The question to consider is what do pseudoarchaeological theories hope to achieve? This question can only be answered by looking at a few examples from across the spectrum of theories. As discussed above, the most well-known are those pertaining to Ancient Aliens; the idea that human history has been influenced, shaped, and directed by extra-terrestrial beings. While this theory was popularised by Von Daniken in 1968 it has in fact a long history dating back to the 19th century.⁵ At its heart this theory claims that non-European, non-white cultures were incapable of building the monuments which archaeology shows they most certainly did.⁶ Other theories within pseudoarchaeology aim to provide legitimacy to religious or cultural groups such as the belief that, beneath Muslim temples in India and Pakistan lie remnants of lost Hindu temples giving validity and strength to the claim of *Hindutva*.⁷ Finally, another category within pseudoarchaeology is the apparent rise in internet conspiracy theories that claim that either, civilisations never existed⁸ or that lost civilisations existed and ‘seeded’ the ones we see today.⁹ As argued by Anderson and Card (2012) the significant “overlaps among the many alternative theories makes them difficult to understand in isolation.”¹⁰ But why should we study these theories? To paraphrase Tim Schadla-Hall the “study of alternative archaeology helps us to understand and justify to others...what are reasonable and rational

³ <https://pages.vassar.edu/realarchaeology/2017/10/01/the-dangers-of-pseudoarchaeology/>

⁴ Bassett, Alecia (2013) "Pseudo-archaeology: The Appropriation and Commercialization of Cultural Heritage," Spectrum: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 6. pg 62

⁵ <https://hyperallergic.com/470795/pseudoarchaeology-and-the-racism-behind-ancient-aliens/> [accessed 26/11/2021 @ 12:38pm]

⁶ <https://theconversation.com/racism-is-behind-outlandish-theories-about-africas-ancient-architecture-83898> [Accessed 26/11/2021 @12:42pm]

⁷ Humes, Cynthia Ann. "Hindutva, mythistory, and pseudoarchaeology." *Numen* 59.2-3 (2012): 178-201.

⁸ TikTok content creator Momlennial_ made repeated claims that the Roman empire did not exist stating that Roman monuments were either Greek, Phoenician or altogether fake.

⁹ Graham Hancock's claims to this effect (1995,1998b, 2002) are laid out in Fagan, G (2006) "*Crusading against straw men*"

¹⁰ Anderson, David S., and Jeb Card. (2012) "From Ancient Wisdom to Alien Architects: The Varieties of Pseudoarchaeology. Pg 5

conclusions...and what constitutes unreasonable and irrational conclusions.”¹¹ In other words, without understanding what it is we are arguing against we will be facing an uphill struggle.

However, it is not just the theories which are “advanced by outsiders and usually dismissed by professionals”¹² that can fall under the term of pseudoarchaeology. Professional museums across the world use archaeology to inform their pseudoarchaeological world view. For example, the Museum of the Book in London claims that the archaeological artefacts it holds in its collection “serve to emphasise the historical accuracy of the Word of God.”¹³ The Pseudoarchaeology Research Archive established at McGill University in 2007 states on their website several principles and characteristics applicable to pseudoarchaeology and argues that “*Pseudoarchaeology is defined by its practices, not by its practitioners.*”¹⁴ In another example, some museums, often of national and international reputation can fall foul of pseudoarchaeological fallacies when their intention is to do the opposite. For example, Ramirez (2021) in his investigation of colonial representations of race in alternative museums sets out how The Jorvik Centre, York was “inspired by the Archaeological Open Air Museum (AOAM), namely those of Colonial Williamsburg and Plimoth Plantation...sites that seek to display the past as alive, with reconstructed buildings and –often-customed interpreters, not a past encased in museum displays.”¹⁵ In their exploration of Skeleton 3397, the “African”, “The Arab” or “The Black Viking” Ramirez highlights how, following Smith (2006), that the individual has been ‘recreated and renegotiated’ mostly through a colonial lens.¹⁶

But what harm can the belief in aliens, giants, lost civilisations truly have on heritage? Heritage can be defined as “the use of the past to construct ideas about the present.”¹⁷ This can of course also be applied to the aims of pseudoarchaeology. Proponents seek to construct ideas about the world, even when or especially if those ideas fly in the face of academic thought. This can cause extensive damage in the perceived capabilities of past peoples and at its heart,

¹¹ Schadla-Hall, Tim. “The comforts of unreason: the importance and relevance of alternative archaeology.” *Public archaeology*. Routledge, 2004. Pg 256

¹² Holtorf, Cornelius. “Beyond crusades: how (not) to engage with alternative archaeologies.” *World archaeology* 37.4 (2005): Pg 544

¹³ <https://www.museumofthebook.com/1611-king-james-bible> [accessed 26/11/2021 @13:12pm]

¹⁴ <https://phrontistery.info/para/whatis.html> [emphasis in original. Accessed 26/11/2021 @ 13:57pm]

¹⁵ Montgomery Ramírez, Paul Edward. “Colonial representations of race in alternative museums: The ‘African’ of St Benet’s, the ‘Arab’ of Jorvik, and the ‘Black Viking’.” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* (2021): pg 938

¹⁶ Ramirez (2021) *Parisim*

¹⁷ Bassett, Alecia (2013) “Pseudo-archaeology: The Appropriation and Commercialization of Cultural Heritage,” *Spectrum*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 6. pg 1.

“Misrepresentation of artefacts to fit modern stereotypes of past cultures and peoples disenfranchises those groups and creates a racist view of their capabilities.”¹⁸

On discussions of colonial power Quijano (2000) and Mignolo (2011) have created a matrix of colonial power, normalising Eurocentric perspectives on the world and marginalising others.¹⁹ Colonial viewpoints are an integral component in the majority of pseudoarchaeological theories, premising that one group is superior to another through religious belief, cultural longevity, or most disgustingly race. The insidious nature of colonial and racial influence within pseudoarchaeology is one of many reasons it needs to be combated.

Another impact of the popularity of pseudoarchaeology is that often it seeks to “appropriate or commercialise heritage to ends that are not scientific or beneficial to the conservation of heritage.”²⁰ This commercialisation of pseudoarchaeological thought in the form of books (*Chariot of the Gods?*), movies (*Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*), and TV shows (*Ancient Aliens*, *Hunt for Atlantis*) is when it is most “damaging to cultural heritage as it becomes popularised and spread more widely”.²¹ By becoming prominent in the popular imagination, pseudoarchaeology can not only erode the trust in the heritage sector, but it can also lead to damage of tangible heritage sites as was the case in 2014 at the Great Pyramid²² as well as the historical and ongoing harm to First People cultures in the American Southwest with the propagation of the myth of the Moundbuilders throughout the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries.²³ In modern society we are now “quite literally drenched in media...archaeology has not been ignored...but archaeologists by-and-large have been.”²⁴ In essence this highlights how our subject matter has always been of keen interest, even more so with the advent of social media, but as a profession we have failed to put our case across to the public. Schadla-Hall further posits that “the void left by archaeologists is being filled by alternative archaeology.”²⁵ If we allow ourselves to be left behind in the race to disseminate information through the growing and popular route of social media then we are at risk of having alternate theories fill the curiosity of the public.

¹⁸ <https://pages.vassar.edu/realarchaeology/2017/10/01/the-dangers-of-pseudoarchaeology/> [accessed 25/11/2021 @20:04pm]

¹⁹ Ramirez, P (2021), pg. 939

²⁰ Bassett, Alecia (2013) “Pseudo-archaeology: The Appropriation and Commercialization of Cultural Heritage,” *Spectrum*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 6. pg 1.

²¹ Bassett, Alecia (2013), pg 5.

²² <https://www.news.com.au/why-did-two-german-hobbyists-deface-a-cartouche-of-khufu-inside-the-great-pyramid-and-what-does-it-have-to-do-with-atlantis/news-story/7db71b6e1e74976cdbe7736c0e5af4c4> [Accessed 26/11/2021 @ 15:38pm]

²³ Sayre, Gordon M. “The Mound Builders and the Imagination of American Antiquity in Jefferson, Bartram, and Chateaubriand.” *Early American Literature*, vol. 33, no. 3, University of North Carolina Press, 1998, pp. 227. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25057127>.

²⁴ Anderson, David S., and Jeb Card. (2012) “From Ancient Wisdom to Alien Architects: The Varieties of Pseudoarchaeology. Pg 2

²⁵ Schadla-Hall, Tim. “The comforts of unreason: the importance and relevance of alternative archaeology.” *Public archaeology*. Routledge, 2004. pg 263

On the other hand, one scholar argues that the field should “embrace the inquisitiveness of alternate theories.”²⁶ Cornelious Holtorf argues that heritage professionals, particularly archaeologists should avoid rude, opinionated, and patronizing language²⁷ when discussing these alternate theories. He posits that “some professionals resent the fact that ‘fringe’ archaeologists are better at telling stories.”²⁸ In a small regard he is right, but not in the way he set out. Archaeologists are not resentful of the way presenters of pseudoarchaeology in the media are ‘better’ at telling their stories, but they are frustrated with the way pseudoarchaeology is given airtime especially to the detriment of the real discoveries. Cusack identifies that in the “contemporary west’ personal identity has undergone significant modification...in how people determine who they are.”²⁹ As explained by Rosenzweig and Thelen (1998, 178) “people want a history that ‘can be used to answer pressing current-day questions about relationships, identity, immortality and agency.’”³⁰ Pseudoarchaeology, especially regarding nation-building can often contribute to a person or groups’ sense of self regardless of the accuracy behind the heritage they have produced. However, some academics would argue that “Pseudoarchaeology is an emotive term, as it asserts the absolute authority of professional archaeological discourses and dismisses all other interpretations.”³¹ It is this image which should be moved away from, as if we continue to present as an absolute, immutable authority – the authorised discourse – then we will lose not only the trust, but the interest of the public.

By applying the characteristics laid out above, it can be easy to distinguish fact from fiction. However, the scientific community including those within the field of heritage studies have struggled to capture the popular imagination of public. Cusack, a scholar focusing on New Age Religions, argues that the dense nature of scientific publications and the degree of specialisation required to understand them combined attitudes to self-selecting an explanation of identity which suits an individuals’ needs and their ability to disregard this identity when required provides strength to the argument that individuals will choose theories of inference and personal agency, over those reliant on impersonal forces or complex interrelated factors.³²

At a meeting of the Society of American Archaeologists (SAA) Anderson et al argue that “in the eyes of the public, pseudoarchaeological claims compete directly with

²⁶ Holtorf, Cornelius. "Beyond crusades: how (not) to engage with alternative archaeologies." *World archaeology* 37.4 (2005): pg 544

²⁷ Holtorf, C (2005). Pg 545

²⁸ Holtorf, C (2005). Pg 547

²⁹ Cusack, Carole M. "New Religions and the Science of Archaeology: Mormons, the Goddess and Atlantis." *Handbook of Religion and the Authority of Science*, Brill: Leiden (2011): pg. 768

³⁰ Ramirez, P (2021)., pg. 940

³¹ Cusack, Carole M. "Charmed circle: Stonehenge, contemporary paganism, and alternative archaeology." *Numen* 59.2-3 (2012): pg 151

³² Cusack, Carole M. (2011)., pg. 768

mainstream interpretations.”³³ However, they caveat this statement by stating that “debate can create the appearance of a genuine controversy.”³⁴ As heritage professionals it is our role to balance on this knife-edge, to avoid providing legitimacy to damaging, pseudoarchaeological theories while at the same time garnering a love for and enjoyment of the ‘genuine’ archaeological record.

How then can we, as heritage professionals best combat the perfidious influence of pseudoarchaeology? As discussed above there are multiple factors influencing pseudoarchaeology including racism, human desire for simple explanations, individual desire for a sense of place and, commercial gain. The examples discussed in this paper cover the wide spectrum of pseudoarchaeology, address the core characteristics, critiques and explanations found within the field and exploring arguments from key scholars both for and against critical engagement. Our role should be to better communicate inside and outside of our field, not just in our face-to-face engagements, but in our written publications; that need to be accessible, readable, and engaging without assuming that this involves ‘dumbing down,’ our tv programmes which should engage in much the same way and finally our museums that need to decolonise, re-evaluate, and develop new ways of engagement. Social media is a tool of pseudoarchaeology, but it can also be an excellent tool in combating its influence; it allows for the spread of information quickly and to as wide an audience as possible. Tuuli Matila puts this succinctly “it is a form of new heritage, that allows interactions with one’s past through remaining material traces...social media are sites of ‘participatory heritage’ or ‘alternative heritage engagements’ that allow audiences more personal encounters with history.”³⁵

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³³ Anderson, David S., Jeb J. Card, and Kenneth L. Feder. "Speaking up and speaking out. Collective efforts in the fight to reclaim the public perception of archaeology." *SAA archaeological record* 13 (2013): pg 24

³⁴ Anderson, David S., Jeb J. Card, and Kenneth L. Feder. "Speaking up and speaking out. Collective efforts in the fight to reclaim the public perception of archaeology." *SAA archaeological record* 13 (2013): pg 25

³⁵ Matila, Tuuli. "White death: Finnish World War Two narrative and alternative heritage work in social media." *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 27.6 (2021): pg. 617

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