

Episode 17: Why Didn't the Ancient Aliens Give Us Indoor Plumbing?

When I was a child, I desperately wanted to be an archaeologist – I think possibly because I watched Indiana Jones at an impressionable age and thought that at least part of the role would involve uncovering radios to talk to God in exotic locations while occasionally punching Nazis. I also would have settled for palaeontology as a career, which again was the result of a dinosaur obsession and early exposure to Jurassic Park. Tragically, both of these careers were stymied by average grades in history, abysmal grades in science, and a total distain for all the hiking I would have to do to get to the aforementioned exotic locales. I also hate to be hot – I remember going to Chichen Iza as a child and beyond it being one of the coolest things I've ever seen, the other thing I remember is how humid it was and how miserable that made me.

To compensate, I spend a lot of time watching documentaries on various archaeological discoveries. The problem with that is that at some point, TV executives decided that actual cool discoveries of ancient pottery and farming techniques was not exciting enough for the general public. Which means that when you go looking for these things now, you're met with almost wall-to-wall conspiracy theories. Which is what happened to me – I wanted to check in on the Mayans, see if anything interesting

had happened in the last 5 years or so, especially because the passage of time has meant that archaeologists are actually engaging with Indigenous communities on digs and allowing them to guide areas of study. And instead, I got side tracked by aliens.

I'm Alex – this is Pop Culture Boner, the podcast edition – and today, I'm thinking about Ancient Aliens.

For those of you not in the know, Ancient Aliens is a show on the History Channel that has been running since 2009 and is currently onto its 16th season with no real signs of stopping. The show is based on the 'ancient astronauts' theory which says that throughout antiquity and pre-historic times, aliens regularly visited earth in order to introduce humanity to civilisation and technology. Essentially all ancient wonders, including the Sphinx, the Pyramids at Giza, Stonehenge, the Easter Island heads and pretty much everything the Mayans did, was all down to extra-terrestrial influence. This theory was first popularised in 1968 by Swiss author and convicted fraudster, Eric von Daniken. Von Daniken also frequently appears on the show to provide commentary.

Even if you haven't watched the show, if you were online in the mid-00s you've probably encountered one of the shows producers and regular contributors in

meme form – a man with hair standing completely on end, hands gesturing, mid-explanation, half-smug, half-stoned expression on his face, with some large white text over it that says 'ALIENS' or 'I'm not saying it was aliens, but it was aliens'. That's Giorgio A. Tsoukalos, a former body building promoter, turned conspiracy magazine founder and ancient astronaut theory advocate.

From all that information, it's already pretty obvious that Ancient Aliens is fairly far out-there in its interpretation of global history, and that the people behind it have some colourful backstories as people interacting with the world. So, I thought it would interesting to take a bit of a deep dive into the show's content and its creators, as well as some of the responses from the archaeologists and academics who have long-standing concerns with this particular brand of pseudoscience. I'm not going to spend a lot of time debunking the theories put forward on the show – there's hundreds of hours of YouTube content from everyone from large creators, to tiny history channels unpacking why none of these things actually withstand any investigation. Even the tiniest amount of critical thought or engagement with historical texts really knocks them out of the water. But I do think it's interesting to examine the show post the QAnon conspiracy's jump into the spotlight, to think about why there this tendency to disengage with mainstream scientific and critical thought, and this desire to push toward the fantastic, or the unbelievable. What does Ancient Aliens' long-running status say about the types of history we engage with? How do these theories gain such traction? And do they actually have

an impact on the world? Let's get into it. Ancient Aliens is a pretty entertaining watch if you know that you're not a true believer. It's got beautiful footage of ancient sites, some of which are still in use by the local people today, and some really lovely archival footage of archaeological digs. But all that is intercut with these cheap CGI renderings of alien crafts and images of seemingly innocuous carvings or artefacts which slowly morph into images of little green men or flying saucers as if to draw a connection between the objects. Then some guy in coke-bottle glasses or a cowboy hat with a title like 'cryptozoologist' or 'investigative journalist and founder of Wake Up Sheeple Magazine' will appear and say something about how dragons were real and the direct result of alien experimentation on megafauna, and how they found a dragon skeleton in China. You don't see that guy again for the rest of the episode and no one ever shows you the alleged dragon skeleton. It's objectively silly, and probably great if you've been ripping bongos for four hours and that light paranoia about the government watching you is starting to set in. The format alone definitely makes it hard to internalise any of the information as somehow being truthful. Except people definitely do, and these guests who come on to provide commentary about the objects in question are serious as a heart attack about their belief in alien interference.

Now, I want to preface this episode by saying that I am not averse to the idea of aliens. The size and scope of the universe and the amount that we don't know about it makes it seem likely. I also think there's something charmingly optimistic

about the way that humans really want to interact with aliens – we keep sending out hopeful messages with images of earth, recordings of its ambient noises, and our musical contributions. There have even been invitations to the opera beamed out into the void. It's so hopeful. Sheri Wells-Jensen, who is a linguist, sums it up really nicely – she says that launching these messages into space is “just a beautiful and poetic, lovely, brave attempt that really did sum up kind of the best of us, even if it's pointless in terms of actually communicating... I think the most important thing that we've ever said is just that we exist.” Scientifically, we don't necessarily think we're alone in the universe, and we're just keen to say hello. But do I believe that we have been repeatedly visited by extra-terrestrials who wanted to show us how to build pyramids? No. No I do not.

For those of you who have never actually watched the show, I'll do a quick rundown of some of the popular theories just to give you a bit of a taste. So, megalithic sites attract a lot of attention from ancient astronaut theorists because of their size and the technical precision used to construct them. When I say megalithic sites, I'm talking about things like the Pyramids at Giza, or Machu Pichu in Peru, or Baalbek in Lebanon. The ancient astronaut theory of these sites says that there is no possible way that ancient humans could have had the technical skill to quarry the stone needed, transport it, cut it with precision and construct enormous structures that have withstood thousands of years. The ancient astronaut theory also disputes the use of these particular sites – the accepted convention in relation to the pyramids for example,

is that they're burial structures used to house mummified royalty. Not the case, says a guy with a goatee and a cowboy hat – the Great Pyramid at Giza was used as a radio to communicate with intergalactic visitors and satellites. The city of Teotihuacan in Mexico is an incredible example of an ancient city, with its pyramids, Avenue of the Dead, multi-family residential buildings and well-preserved murals. “Not so!” says a man with glasses so thick that his eyes appear huge and cartoonish and a moustache that almost completely obscures his mouth. The presence of mica, a type of rock which can conduct electricity and withstand huge temperatures, on the site suggests that the city was an intergalactic landing pad, because why else would they need the rock to be there.

One of the great things about megalithic structures, is that because they're often so huge and prevalent, people have done heaps of research on exactly how they could be put together and why. Which is understandable – human beings at any given moment in history consider themselves to be extraordinarily advanced, and certainly more advanced than whoever was there before them. Which means I can tell you my favourite fact that I found while writing this – I don't know about you by whenever I thought about the cutting of the stone to build the pyramid, I pictured a bunch of poor slaves chipping away with little pick axes or whatever. I guess because I'd never really looked specifically into how the pyramids were built because I was too interested in the details of how you would embalm somebody. Anyway, the stones were cut using wood and water. Basically, wood gets extremely dry in

the desert heat, but expands when it's wet. So, if you crack the rock enough to embed wooden pieces, and then soak the wood, it'll expand and place pressure on the rock and eventually crack it. From there you can refine it so that it's the precise size you need and you can build a pyramid. Which I thought was really cool, and also extremely human. It shows a good knowledge of the environment they were working in, and techniques to use it to their advantage.

Now ancient astronaut theorists are not only fixated on pre-historic megastructures. They're also interested in connecting ancient religions, rulers, folklore and mythology with aliens. In some cases they even go so far as to point to aliens as being responsible for modern doomsday cults, like Heaven's Gate or Oumu Shinrikyo. One episode I thought was interesting pointed to the practice of artificial cranial deformation, or the changing of the skull shape to elongate it in Egypt and Peru as an example of our ancestors mimicking the appearance of aliens, which they saw as gods. Now, there isn't a singular reason as to why people engaged in cranial deformation as a practice. Generally, it's believed that they were used to signify status as part of a group, or to represent desirable cultural traits like intelligence or spirituality. There is also some speculation that an elongated head shape was naturally occurring in some family lines (in Egypt, for example). What Ancient Aliens doesn't touch on is that artificial cranial deformation was actually a fairly wide-spread practice and the preference skull shape wasn't just elongated, but rounded or flattened depending on the culture. The earliest

written record traces to 400BC in Africa, but there's evidence of its appearance across Central Asia (possibly originating with the Huns) and the Americas (with the Maya, the Inca and some First Nations tribes undertaking the practice). Notably, the practice was also prevalent across many parts of Europe, including Russia, Scandinavia and the Caucasus for a variety of reasons, including aesthetics, and a belief that the brain could hold some types of thought better in different skull shapes. Head binding was even practiced in France up to the early 20th Century as a way of protecting the heads of peasant babies from damage after birth, with the deformation of the skull considered an unwanted but necessary side effect of love and care.

The obvious omission of the white European examples from the cranial deformation practices in the episode is part of a much wider pattern on Ancient Aliens. When exploring ancient sites, religious practices and architectural feats, the show has a fairly centralised focus on sites that could be considered mysterious or foreign to the show's primarily American audience. The show tends to focus almost exclusively on South America, Africa and Asia. In one episode I watched, they hopped from Ethiopia, to India, to Lebanon, to Saudi Arabia. At each of these sites, it was suggested that the skill and craftsmanship displayed in the construction of the structures, many of which had deep significance in non-Christian religions, had to have been influenced by extra-terrestrials because there was simply no way that ancient man had the capacity to construct these works of art. When discussing Lalibela in Ethiopia for example, where the churches

are carved down into the stone, rather than built above, the ancient aliens experts imply that there is no way that the Ethiopian population at the time could possibly have cut down into the rock with such precision. It would require lasers and electrical tools, and since it was allegedly where the Ark of the Covenant ended up at one point before being moved to another Ethiopian site, there's obviously a lot of additional interest from ancient astronauts proponents who believe that that particular object holds the key to our interactions with extra-terrestrials.

This example points to two problems with Ancient Aliens – purely from a practical research standpoint, the show tends to take all information as equal, with no differentiation between primary and secondary sources, and little to no regard for historical timelines or contexts. The churches at Lalibela, according to local tradition, were constructed during the Zagwe Dynasty, which ran throughout the Middle Ages, under the guidance of King Lalibela, who reigned in roughly the late 12th Century. You know what else was happening in the 12th Century? The first and second King Henry's and the first King Richard, the Crusades were happening and, architecturally speaking, a lot of churches. What Ancient Aliens is doing here is effectively presenting the churches at Lalibela as some bizarre anomaly that must have been assisted by aliens, while other churches in more familiar European styles built at the same time can escape this scrutiny by omission. Like, just to give you some pop cultural context – any Robin Hood adaptation you've ever seen is set during the Crusades, the King's castles he robs were built during that time period and lots of

the structures they use for the long-shots are of actual castles whose construction commenced during that time period. European colonialism and the hoarding of wealth allowed those countries to keep adding to their structures, which is why you see huge castles and churches with a variety of architectural styles.

I'm not using this example to try and debunk the logic, but to point out the second problem with Ancient Aliens, which is that a lot of the time, these theories are just used to reinforce the myth of white supremacy. There's a really great TED talk by archaeologist Sarah Kurnick. In it she says "What you rarely hear is pseudoarchaeologists claiming that Romans had help building the Colosseum... For pseudoarchaeologists, Europeans could have accomplished their feats on their own but non-Europeans must have had outside guidance." These lies by omission have really long-lasting impacts on local areas. I'll use Australia as an example – there are large figural paintings in the Kimberly of the Wandjina, which in simple terms, created the country and gave Indigenous people the guidance to live in the place. They're considered sacred to the Worrora, Ngarinyin and Wununbul peoples who still live in the surrounding areas and care for the site. Eric von Daniken picked up early images of the paintings drawn by white colonisers, and determined that they were aliens. The theory never gained much traction locally – when I brought up that I was writing this episode my parents both went "Oh like that weird guy who though Aboriginal people came from the moon... or... spoke to aliens or whatever? Like that guy?" And I had to explain that he'd channelled that into

a 16-season TV show. But they remain deeply hurtful to the locals - Worrora woman Leah Umbagai says:

"A lot of the people that come into the art centre, they ask so many questions, and yes I suppose there have been UFO sightings in America and all of that, but it just really saddens me that they say things about it. It's like people are making fun, or think we're making things up, and it's hurtful for us. When I'm out there, I'm just so at home... just looking at the paintings and knowing that our old people used to walk this area and sit here, and knowing this is what they left for us ... it's very special."

I think at least part of the reason that these pseudoarchaeological views have been able to be perpetuated is because actual archaeology has only really recently started to engage with local indigenous populations about what they actually would like to see from exploration of their sites, or whether they would like that type of engagement at all. So, while I think there is movement in contemporary archaeology toward a more ethical practice, archaeology itself has a history of white supremacy. I mean, just take a look at the British Museum for all the real reference you need. If you ever want your eyes really stapled wide open, I encourage you to take a look at any of the publicly available meeting minutes on the repatriation of human remains from the Museum. Here's a quote from the meeting minutes regarding the return of two Torres Strait Islander skulls to their homeland. "After taking independent expert advice on the Torres Strait Islanders' claim, and considering the claim with great care over a number

of meetings, the Trustees concluded that in this instance the evidence was not sufficient for them to agree to the claim, since on the balance of probabilities it was not clear to them that the process of the mortuary disposal of the skulls had been interrupted." Ah yes... because skulls naturally want to be in museums and not on their traditional lands. That's the normal mortuary process. Bastards.

Anyway, if I'm honest, I think Ancient Aliens has an audience because we like to watch people we consider to be a little bit unhinged earnestly tell us about cryptozoology. But these types of entertainment do have real-world impacts on the people depicted. What I would encourage, if you are watching, is that you take 15 minutes after each episode and look up the actual histories of the sites they mention. I promise you it's so much more fascinating than anything Eric von Daniken can come up with, and so much more human.

Right. That's my aliens episode, I guess. Well, technically my second aliens episode. Stay tuned for me to talk about Mothman at some point in the future. He's real and he's haunting Richard Gere. If you have a favourite local cryptid, talk to me about it next time you see me at the pub. Peace!



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Episode written by Alex Johnson and produced by Wes Fahey.

Theme tune by Wes Fahey. (Soundcloud: [lee snipes](#))

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