

Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries: Science and Pseudoscience in Archaeology

By Kenneth Feder. 2nd edition. Pp. xiv + 231, figs. 81, b&w. Mayfield Publishing, Mountain View, California 2006. \$45. ISBN 1-55934-523-3.

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The propagation of “alternative” archaeologies is a simultaneously fascinating and disturbing phenomenon, disseminated and reinforced by innumerable television shows, books, and movies. It is a subject that is almost always ignored within academia, and consequently students of archaeology are often ill-prepared to deal with the wild claims of these people. In that regard Kenneth Feder, a prehistorian at Connecticut State University, has come to the rescue with his book *Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries: Science and Pseudoscience in Archaeology*, an overview of popular archaeological myths and contentious cases, and a deconstruction of the evidence and logic behind them.

At 201 pages, Feder’s book is a quick and breezy read, the text clear and concise. The book is divided into four general parts. In the opening chapter, he outlines the origins of his interest in alternative archaeologies, noting that their lure lies in the fact that they purport to use scientific principles while simultaneously existing outside of science, and outlines six major reasons behind pseudoarchaeology: money, fame, nationalistic furor, religion, romanticism, and mental instability.

The second part discusses epistemology, or the examination of how we know what we know, focusing on the scientific method and Occam’s Razor, which he later uses to deconstruct several of his case studies. Feder is an unabashed processualist, and for him archaeology is a science, subject to scientific principles of rules and laws. His arguments hinge on the contention that through logic and scientific deduction there is a knowable, reconstructable past, which may turn off some more post-modernist readers.

The third part, and the bulk, of the book is devoted to various and famous archaeological mysteries and hoaxes from all over the world and from all temporal scales including Piltdown Man, pre-Columbian visits to the New World, ancient astronauts, psychic archaeology and, of course, Atlantis. Feder lays out the origin of each topic and carefully deconstructs the so-called evidence behind it. He caps each topic with a small section that includes archaeological perspectives on the particular area of the world in which each topic occurs. However, these short discussions are little more than footnote summaries of academic archaeological debates and they assume the reader is already somewhat familiar with the archaeological evidence.

Feder concludes the book with a short discussion of current archaeological mysteries, discussing how archaeologists have yet to discover the meaning behind European cave paintings, exactly how Stonehenge was built and what it was used for, and the reasons behind the fall of the Mayan civilization. This section is somewhat outdated, although a seventh edition of the book was released in November that will hopefully rectify this issue.

In a baffling oversight, however, although it is mentioned briefly at the beginning of the book Feder fails to discuss pseudoarchaeology from within the discipline, most notably resulting from political pressure and nationalism. This is a conspicuous omission, and while pseudoarchaeology is mostly associated with aliens and Atlantis, pseudoarchaeology driven by nationalism and performed under the guise of academic archaeology is a very real practice and, indeed, is inarguably more dangerous to the discipline than charlatanism. By focusing on the pseudoarchaeologies from outside the discipline and ignoring the role of academic archaeology as a potential source of fraud, Feder overlooks this very real issue, and the tragic examples offered by Nazi Germany and elsewhere clearly necessitate a discussion of pseudoarchaeology beyond that proffered by psychics and fame hunters.

Importantly, Feder discusses how and why these frauds are perpetrated and what makes their conclusions wrong. For example, Erich von Daniken’s special brand of baloney may seem seductive to even trained archaeologists, but Feder makes sure to point out that von Daniken often fabricates his evidence or completely ignores evidence which does not work in his favor. Archaeologists are quick to dismiss frauds and hoaxes under the guise of no evidence, but they often don’t know how or why there is no evidence behind these claims. The ignoring or twisting of evidence by alternative archaeologies is a recurring theme throughout the book, and one which academic archaeologists would do well to pay attention to. Feder also briefly touches in why the propagation of these claims often fall onto Egypt and Mesoamerican, pointing out that racism is often a motivating factor, in that non-white people couldn’t possibly have the means or intelligence to construct such monumental

structures. However, this point is regrettably underexplored in the book.

Perhaps most importantly of all, however, Feder's book shows that pseudo and alternative archaeologies are not limited in scope to the deep past of the Egyptian pyramids, Stonehenge, and the Maya. The historical period, as well, has been subject to this nonsense with fake Minnesota rune stones point to Viking explorations of America, Mystery Hill in New Hampshire, considered by some to be "America's Stonehenge" and a Celtic temple, in reality a root cellar and a unique example of 18th-19th century vernacular New England architecture. Clearly, no period of history is exempt from alternative explanations. One might be tempted to call this edition is outdated, it is a sad fact that some of the mysteries Feder discusses continue to be a bugaboo for archaeology. For example, the Newport Tower in Rhode Island, which some "investigators" argue are the remains of a Viking or Templar church but considered by most archaeologists to be the remains of a 17th century windmill, received renewed attention in a recent issue of *Archaeology* magazine and its own television special.

While Feder's book is not perfect, it nonetheless highlights a portion of archaeology that is too often overlooked and too quickly dismissed out of hand. By not challenging these frauds and hoaxes, archaeologists do a great disservice to the people they study and to today's public. Indeed, as Feder notes in his conclusion (1990, 201): "I believe, and have tried to show in this book, that we deserve better-and can do better. We deserve a veritable past, a real past constructed from the sturdy fabric of geology, paleontology, archaeology, and history, woven on the loom of science. We deserve better and can do better than weave a past from the whole cloth of fantasy and fiction...the veritable past is every bit as interesting as those pasts constructed by the fantasy weavers of frauds, myths, and mysteries". I agree, and I think all archaeologists, regardless of their temporal or geographic interest, will find the book of relevance to their work and to our discipline.