



[THE TIME WARP: SKEPTICISM REVISITED— FROM THE FUTURE CRAIG A. FOSTER

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Ancient Aliens, Now Extra Cringey

Welcome aboard, friends! In *The Time Warp*, we aren't limited to present-day examinations. We use *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*'s rich history to examine skepticism ... from the future.

On this voyage, we travel to Winter 1978 and the sixth installment of *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* (Vol 3, no 2). Some historical glitter to prepare us for our journey: Freak out! Chic's *Le Freak* was a huge hit, reaching #1 one on three separate occasions (December 9, 1978; December 23, 1978; and January 20, 1979). Neptune overtook then-planet Pluto for being farthest from the sun (January 21, 1979). Cult movie classic *The Warriors* was released (February 9, 1979).

And *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* came out to play. Unlike preceding issues, there was no initial commentary clarifying the purpose of CSICOP or the magazine. This issue rocketed straight into late-1970s skepticism.

Some Skeptical Thoughts from the Time

Paul Kurtz was unconvinced by the evidence used to support parapsychology, but he invited parapsychologists to bring future findings to skeptics. An annotation to the article indicated that J.B. Rhine, a prominent parapsychologist, had been invited specifically.

James Oberg dismissed the theory that the Tunguska explosion of 1908 was caused by an interstellar spaceship. Oberg expressed concern that the spaceship claim was distracting people from the real danger presented by comets.

Legendary science fiction author Arthur C. Clarke suggested, whimsically, that Martians used advanced technology to hide all traces of their existence from the Mariner and Viking space



probes. Clarke suggested that Erich von Däniken and Charles Berlitz were “racing each other to present these sensational conclusions to the world” (79).

Deep Dive

I wish Clarke were alive to consider ancient alien “vonsense” today.

To recap, von Däniken took an existing ancient aliens premise into hyperdrive with the 1968 publication of his book *Chariots of the Gods?* In the book, von Däniken suggested that extraterrestrial visitors were responsible for the rapid technological advancement of ancient civilizations. Von Däniken also suggested that alien visitors might have contributed to human genetic advancement by fertilizing specially selected women.

Von Däniken's packaging of the ancient alien claim was tremendously popular despite its enormous historical and biological problems. His work generated a feature-length documentary released

in the United States in 1973, and he subsequently published additional work that further promoted ancient alien speculation.

The topic of ancient alien visitation was popular and impractical, making it a natural fit for skepticism. The Winter 1978 issue addressed ancient aliens thrice, in addition to Clarke's humorous letter.

Kendrick Frazier described how George Alexander, then president of the National Association of Science Writers, criticized United Press International's coverage of an ancient aliens conference.

William Sims Bainbridge used belief in ancient aliens to test sociological theories about deviant behavior. The obtained results suggested that ancient alien belief was “part of a generalized occult and pseudoscientific subculture” (41).

David N. Keightly explained why an ancient Chinese bone carving was no ancient alien secret. An ancient aliens supporter had suggested that the carving showed a man and woman visited by a shapeshifting alien that departed in a rocket-propelled vehicle. Keightly demonstrated how this interpretation deviated insensibly from the true linguistic and historical context.

Previous issues of the magazine offered similar responses to the notion that ETs were ancient educators and human impregnators. Collectively, the skeptical response to the ancient alien promotion makes two fundamental points: First, historians have developed an understanding of ancient history based on centuries of extensive, careful research. Ancient alien enthusiasts show no appreciation for this evidence. Instead, they mislead the public by pre-



Ancient Aliens promo image. Credit: History Channel

senting fraudulent, mistaken, or creative interpretations of hand-picked historical events while omitting evidence to the contrary. Keightly's article about the ancient Chinese bone carving provides an excellent example of such ancient alien absurdity. Second, ancient alien belief seems to stem from, and encourage, implicit or explicit racism. It robs ancient people—typically non-Europeans—of their ingenuity. It confuses differences in technological innovation with differences in intelligence.

These problems notwithstanding, ancient alien belief remains alive and well today. Ironically, technological advancements (presumably human-achieved advancements) have changed the nature of ancient alien arguments and scientifically skeptical responses.

The contemporary ancient aliens promotion is shared primarily through the *Ancient Aliens* television series broadcast frequently on one of the modern pseudoeducational channels, and Ancient alien supporters can share their enthusiasm for their pseudohistorical claims via the internet.

The response to ancient alien belief has also changed. Traditional ancient alien repudiation can be found in

Kenneth L. Feder's fabulous book *Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries: Science and Pseudoscience in Archaeology*, but this work is now complemented by online videos and podcasts devoted to bringing ancient aliens claims back to Earth. To wit, Fredrik, the friendly host of the *Digging Up Ancient Aliens* podcast (see diggingupancientaliens.com), provides keen insights into the differences between genuine archaeology and the ongoing pseudoarcheology offered by the *Ancient Aliens* television show.

Post-Warp Summary

Scientific skeptics in 1978 would likely be shocked and dismayed by the popularity and nature of the ancient alien promotion in 2024. Nevertheless, the fundamental problems with ancient aliens haven't changed, and there isn't a compelling need to review them. This commentary shows places where interested readers can find more information.

Instead, a trip to 1978 can help us examine how society has changed around the concept of ancient alien visitation.

Contemporary society is less accepting of depicting groups in stereotypical ways than it was in 1978. This is evident in movie scenes that were broadly acceptable decades ago but are emotion-

ally uncomfortable today. Likewise, the claim that certain ancient cultures—such as those inhabiting Easter Island, Egypt, or the Americas—needed some off-planet help is, to use a modern colloquialism, seriously awkward.

Chariots of the Gods? (the movie) even delivers the cringey moment when “primitive” World War II South Pacific Islanders respond to contact with Americans by staring at the sky, hoping that the “technologically superior” people will return. This depiction, clearly inspired by a genuine cargo cult phenomenon, is callously twisted out of its legitimate historical context.

I suspect that the *Ancient Aliens* producers recognized its patronizing overtones and added new ingredients to address the public's distaste for implicitly racist themes. One *Ancient Aliens* episode examines whether extraterrestrials were responsible for Albert Einstein's achievements. This speculation, while neither practical nor ancient, does at least suggest that a European received some help too. (On that note, I'm looking forward to the *Ancient Aliens* episode that investigates whether some ET gave the green gown to Isaac Newton's mom.)

To skepticism's credit, skeptics identified the race-based implications of the ancient aliens promotion long before a more recent social justice movement brought extra attention to implicit and explicit racial bias (see, for example, “Von Daniken's Chariots: A Primer in the Art of Cooked Science” by John T. Omohundro, Fall/Winter 1976).

Thus, the history of the ancient aliens phenomenon should remind skeptics that our shared focus on evidence and reason does work even if it takes some time. We just need to stick to the process. After all, I don't think we're going to receive any help from gods or aliens.

Archaeology *and* skepticism. Can you dig it? ■

Note

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