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Valid Theories or an Overactive Imagination?
Assessing Erich von Däniken’s *Chariots of the Gods*

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Cult archaeology and its theorists have become more and more popular in recent years, endangering the public with unproven and unsupported hypotheses. Their theories are appealing to the layperson because they explain complicated events in some of the simplest ways possible, with little scientific evidence given to complicate the readers thought processes. Many of these cult archaeologists profit immensely from their published works, which outline their theories and their “valid” reasons for positing them. One such work is *Chariots of the Gods* written in 1968 by pseudo-scholar Erich von Däniken. Though written 45 years ago, this work and the ideas raised by it are still relevant to cult archaeology theorists today; this is evidenced by events such as the 2009 TV premiere of “Ancient Aliens” on the History channel and its subsequent popularity. In his book, von Däniken puts forth the idea that not only was the ancient world in contact with extraterrestrial life, but these communications are the explanation for multiple unsolved ancient mysteries. For example, he posits that the “God” of the Bible was inspired by an ancient astronaut who visited the Earth and some ancient marvels such as the monoliths found on Easter Island can be taken as proof of ancient aliens—since ordinary humans would have
been unable to move them alone. Are these sound conjectures, or merely the ramblings of a man looking to make money off of an easily manipulated public?

According to William H. Stiebing, Jr., cult archaeology has three distinct characteristics: rejection of the results of modern archaeology, the use of simple explanations to explain complex events or questions, and the assertion of persecution by the academic community.¹ *Chariots of the Gods* displays all of these characteristics, making it an ideal study in cult archaeology. In almost all of his chapters, von Däniken posits theories and uses examples that he acknowledges go against accepted archaeological data. For example, he prefaces his entire work by saying, “It took courage to write this book, and it will take courage to read it. Because its theories and proofs do not fit into the mosaic of traditional archaeology…”² This should immediately put the reader on alert that his theories may not grounded in academia or scholarly thought. By rejecting the accepted findings of traditional archaeology, von Däniken automatically ostracizes certain members of the academic community; in turn losing their support for his work and making his theories seem all the more invalid.

The second aspect of cult archaeology is the most prevalent throughout *Chariots of the Gods*. Von Däniken continually uses simple explanations in order to explain complex phenomena and unsolved mysteries of the past-without much scientific evidence to back these explanations. In trying to explain the possibility of life in other areas of space, he says, “…life is by no means bound to the prerequisites for life on our planet…” and “Even on our own earth there are forms of life that need no oxygen. They are called anaerobic bacteria.”³ This is a valid point; however, von Däniken is trying to assert that human life not only exists on other planets,

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³ Ibid., 4–5.
but that they are responsible for many of Earth’s civilizations. By only mentioning bacteria as a life form that could be sustained on other planets, he skims the surface of scientific proof while offering no evidence of his actual proposed theory.

Von Däniken also exhibits a persecution complex throughout *Chariots of the Gods*, which is the third characteristic of cult archaeology. For example, regarding recognized scholars, he says, “I was accused of ‘plagiarism’ and ‘unscientific ideas,’ also ‘antireligious bias’ and ‘ignorance of scientifically established facts’.”4 The continual statements about being persecuted by scholars might seem to the layperson to make his theories more credible and make him a sympathetic character. However, all it really does is serve to continually point out the fact that his work is not academically acceptable and should be questioned.

Another reason for not taking this book at face value is due to the author’s background. Erich von Däniken is a high school dropout with no degrees in either education or history that is relevant to his claims.5 He has also been convicted of both fraud and embezzlement.6 While the biography of an author is not always a reason to immediately dismiss his or her claims, it should be considered in this case. The validity of von Däniken’s claims can automatically be called into question due to the fact that he has no professional experience in the field in which he claims to be an expert. One must also consider, due to the fact that he has been convicted of two crimes involving deception, that he is using these theories merely as ways to dupe the public and make money off of his published works. It is also interesting to note that there is a disclaimer at the beginning of the book stating, “This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely

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4 Ibid., 9.
coincidental.”⁷ This should further call von Däniken’s hypotheses and motives into question—why would a true scholarly work need a disclaimer admitting that it has been made up by the author? In contrast to the author’s statements, the book’s back cover classifies it as “nonfiction/new age.”⁸ This work completely satisfies Stiebing’s characteristics of cult archaeology and its popularization represents a danger to the public.

*Chariots of the Gods*, while fascinating, is admittedly a work of fiction that should not be taken at face value. The author, Erich von Däniken, is a convicted criminal who has no academic or professional experience in his professed area of expertise. The book itself contains all of the characteristics of cult archaeology, which can be dangerous to the minds of the public if it is blindly accepted. The importance of the author’s criminal background can be determined by the individual reader; however one thing is certain: every reader should read and accept this novel for what it is—a fictional story. While Erich von Däniken attempts to make his theories plausible, his rhetoric shows that *Chariots of the Gods* is merely a pseudo-scholar’s use of cult archaeology to make money off of an easily manipulated public.

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*About the author*

Katherine graduated from Armstrong with a History B.A. in December 2012. She wants to be a professor emphasizing in world history, specifically Africa and Asia, and human rights and genocide. She like chocolate, turtles and long walks on the beach.

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⁷ Von Däniken, back of title page.  
⁸ Ibid., back cover.