



The Skeptics SA guide to Erich von Däniken

The idea that in ancient times the Earth had been visited by beings from other worlds has gained in popularity with the general public. The chief promoter of this idea? Erich von Däniken, author of *Chariots of the Gods*, *Return of the Gods*, *Arrival of the Gods* and *Return to the Stars* amongst others.

Biographical background

Erich Anton Paul von Däniken was born on 14 April 1935 in Zofingen, Switzerland. After Grammar School he commenced work in the hotel trade. According to biographers Peter Rochell and Wilhelm Roggersdorf, he was frequently in trouble with the law for theft and misappropriation. Money disappeared on several occasions, and on one occasion, in Berne, he was jailed for 16 months for fraud. While working at the Hotel Rigi-Kaltbad, the hotel burned down, killing 11 people. He was suspected of insurance fraud, but nothing could be proved.

It is possible that the original ideas of his most well-known book, *Chariots of the Gods*, were not his own. In 1966, in America, he met a Professor Ley, who claimed to have evidence of aliens visiting Earth. He allowed von Däniken to use his material, but von Däniken never acknowledged this. Returning home and faced

with a debt of 142,000 francs, he showed the manuscript of his book, *Erinnerungen an die Zunkunft*, (*The Chariots of the Gods*) to a newspaper man. Soon after, in 1968, the book was published and was an immediate success.

In this book von Däniken claims that “our forefathers received visits from the universe,... that these ‘strangers’ annihilated part of mankind existing at the time and produced a new, perhaps the first (race of) *homo sapiens*.” Furthermore he says that these aliens had constructed certain engineering projects which were beyond the ability of humans.

He claimed that his knowledge sprang from an early interest in archeology, but that he had been forced to break off his studies when he inherited a hotel from his father. There is no evidence of these claims, and he certainly never inherited any hotel from his father, who was a clothes manufacturer.

There has been a tendency in most cultures to attribute early human achievements to the gods, claiming that the gods taught humans the arts of hunting, agriculture, writing, etc. More likely, in the past, certain individuals made major leaps in knowledge and such people were believed to be ‘god-inspired’ and often deified. We know that Imenhotep, the

architect for the pharaoh Zoser, who evolved the idea of building royal tombs from stone instead of the former method of mud-bricks, was deified. So the knowledge came from men who were made into gods. Notably, we have developed all of our modern technology without alien help.

There is a major problem with von Däniken’s theory. If he is right, then one must ask who taught the aliens? Did they also need technological help from some other alien race, and if so, was that other alien race also helped by another alien race? No matter how far back you go eventually you still cannot escape the fact that, somewhere, in the past, one alien race had to have had the ability to advance without outside help. If they could do it, why not humans?

His evidence

Few members of the public ever check an author’s claims; they assume ‘If it is in a book it must be true.’ So it is with von Däniken’s books. However, when one looks at his claims, they are quickly revealed as complete and utter rubbish, inaccurate, false, deliberately misleading, and totally unsupported by fact. Unfortunately, we only have enough space to look at a few of his claims, but be assured, all

his other claims are just as unreliable. Let us look at some of them:

- (1) The Step Pyramid of King Zoser in ancient Egypt was built from granite blocks (Wrong: the pyramids were built of limestone)
- (2) The Great Pyramid weighs 31,200,000 tons (2,600,000 blocks, at around 12 tons per stone (Wrong: the blocks in fact weighed on average 2.5 tons.)
- (3) Because Egypt had so few trees they could not have had wooden rollers (Wrong: The Egyptians imported timber)
- (4) The Egyptians had no ropes (Wrong: Samples of their ropes are on display in the Cairo Museum)
- (5) There were no huts for workers (Wrong: Sir Flinders Petrie found an entire workers' village, and others have since been located)
- (6) The pyramids would have taken 664 years to build (Wrong: most were built within the lifetime of individual pharaohs. They used thousands of volunteers, who were happy to work on the pyramids, believing that by this work they earned credits for the after-life)
- (7) The Cheops Pyramid is 490 feet high (Wrong: In fact it is 481.4 feet (146.7m) high.)
- (8) The 'classic' proportions of the pyramids are related to the distance to the sun, and to other abstruse mathematical concepts (Wrong: These were 19th century ideas long discredited. In addition, as mentioned in item 7, he used incorrect height figures, so they would not have worked out anyway.)

- (9) He cannot understand why the pharaohs built their pyramids in the rocky desert terrain. The sites were chosen to be near local quarries. The stone did not come from distant Aswan as he claims, but from quarries near each pyramid. We know this is so, because analysis of the stone blocks in the pyramids have been found to contain identical fossil samples to the rock in the nearby abandoned quarries
- (10) The area of the base of the Khufu pyramid divided by twice its height gives the mathematical value of pi (Just plain wrong)
- (11) He cannot understand why the rocky ground on which the pyramid is built was carefully and accurately leveled. It would seem obvious why the ground was leveled. A level site is easier to build on. As for the accuracy of the levels even the Egyptians could dig long trenches and fill them with water to obtain accurate levels
- (12) The island of Elephantine, in the Nile, is shaped like an elephant. The Egyptians could only have discovered this if they had viewed it from the air (Wrong: In fact its name refers to the fact that it was a large island; the term elephantine was used in the same sense that one might call a large person 'elephantine' because of their size, not because they look like an elephant)

The remaining material in this, and his other books is no better. For example, he claims that the stones for Stonehenge were brought from 'south-west Wales'. In fact they were quarried just a few kilometres from the site.

He says that the Nazca Lines were runways for alien spaceships, yet the soil is so soft that if alien spacecraft had landed at Nazca, they would have left indentations which, like the lines themselves, would still be visible.

Apart from misrepresenting 'facts' von Däniken uses a great deal of hyperbole. For instance, "Is it a coincidence that a meridian running through the pyramids divides the continents and oceans into two exactly equal halves?" What does that mean? Precisely nothing! If you ran a meridian through the exact spot on Earth where you are at this precise moment, that too would divide all of the continents and oceans exactly in half.

Regarding Easter Island, von Däniken accepts as 'evidence' an old myth about men who could fly and claims that these 'gods' carved and moved the great stone heads. The locals could not have done the work he claims as their population was too small, their tools were too primitive to cut the rock, and there were not enough trees for rollers.

In fact, the island once had a much larger population and was covered by trees. Over many years they chopped down most of the trees to use as rollers. The removal of the trees upset the island's ecology. That, plus constant tribal wars, destroyed their rich culture and the population fell. The islanders, using the primitive tools found abandoned in the quarry, showed researcher Thor Heyerdahl, (of the *Kon Tiki*), how the heads were cut out of the rock. On another occasion they raised one of the abandoned statues into place to demonstrate to Heyerdahl how it was done.

Interestingly von Däniken claims that an artifact found in an old ship-wreck “gives the year of its construction as 82 BC.” How could this be? The BC/AD concept was not devised until 525 AD.

Apart from the fact that he got his own name right, it is difficult to find any other factual material in his books.

Consider too, that, if he is right, then the vast knowledge from thousands of scholars in the fields of archeology, geology, and history, must be discarded. For, unlike scientists who spend a lifetime studying and researching ancient sites and artifacts, von Däniken is able to drop in on a site, perhaps spending as long as a few days, and immediately becomes an expert, able to see ‘evidence’ of alien influences.

So, do we accept the claims of a man prone to exaggeration, or the careful research of thousands of learned scholars? That decision is yours to make.

We strongly recommend the reading of *The Past is Human* by Peter White, Angus & Robertson, 1974.

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