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POINTS OF YOU

My experience in pseudoarchaeology

José Manuel PEQUE MARTÍNEZ

People, our public, usually have a poor knowledge of archaeology. In fact, the public only have knowledge of the activities archaeologists do when they discover a very important site, and after seeing it or hearing about it in the media. Otherwise, the public is not aware of what archaeology is and what it works on. Therefore, it is not surprising that some people get caught in the 'nets' of certain kinds of false beliefs about History and our past. My experience in pseudoarchaeology made me think there are internal and external factors that can make anyone fall prey to these beliefs.

External factors are based on the general ignorance about the topics that pseudoarchaeologists deal with in their work. Obviously, it is easier to capture an audience for your 'particular' ideas about archaeology or ancient history if a large majority of people do not know in detail the scientific explanation of these issues. Many people confuse archaeology with exploration or adventure, and others really think that archaeologists do not know all that is discovered in archaeological sites. This is a real image problem that must be solved somehow soon.

Internal factors are the personality constraints of anyone that chooses to believe in pseudoarchaeological theories. In my particular case, the motivators were a lawless passion for ancient history, without a formal academic training (I am not an historian or archaeologist), and a personal situation for which I needed an outlet, after a family tragedy that had shaken the foundations of my beliefs about the world and religious faith.

This explanation, which may be irrelevant to the subject, was, however, the starting point of my search for an explanation of why things were so unfair. I decided that the answer lies in the origins of religion. Were people tampered with, or just misunderstood ancient events? Why seek for religious or mystical explanations of what could actually be an alien intervention in the history of ancient civilizations?

My search began with buying books about mysteries in History by well-known Spanish –my country- authors, such as JJ Benitez. This author has written numerous books, like Caballo de Troya (Trojan Horse), that addressed the issue of alleged extraterrestrial intervention in ancient times, in a mild way, and based more on inspirations or “intuitions” rather than concrete evidence -what is a common mistake made by the vast majority of authors who address this issue.

For example, I have carefully read his book Astronautas en la Prehistoria/Escribamos de nuevo la Historia (Astronauts in prehistory/ Let’s write History again), which is based on a chapter of a TV series made for the public Spanish television entitled Planeta Encantado (Charmed planet). It was about the cave paintings of Tassili in the Algerian Sahara, and alleged implications of visitors from others planets. Of course, this documentary does not show any conclusive proof beyond the personal ideas of the presenter (Benítez). I understand that there are people who believe in it, especially if we take into account the general ignorance about archaeology mentioned earlier, and the attractive and easy-to-understand ideas presented.

I could cite a list of pseudoarchaeologic authors that I consulted back when I was rejecting everything that had to do with a scientific or official explanation. Among them, the books of Zecharia Sitchin about his ‘vision’ of history and his interpretation of Sumerian mythology and cosmogony as something that really happened, or Von Danniken’s texts, in which he did not only show he was not an historian or archaeologist, but also that he had no idea what he was writing about.

Today I know that those books and TV programs were not really contributing anything to me, but rather the opposite; they were helping me form totally false ideas. Back then I trusted them. Moreover, the problem increased when I automatically stopped reading anything that did not have to do with these issues, and ended up completely convinced that there really was some kind of extraterrestrial intervention in the beginning of ancient civilizations.

Luckily for me, I never got to believe in conspiracy theories or in those sects camouflaged under the “not official archaeology” title to get followers. They have their ‘operational centres’ on the Internet, and for this reason the Internet is an unreliable communication network, when not a ‘hellhole’ where any preacher of the paranormal can say whatever he wants and build a group of loyal followers that trust him.

That affected my work, and I wrote several articles in which I exposed these ideas as likeñy or even true. I lost prestige as a freelance writer and had to struggle every day with the advice of colleagues and friends who asked me to rectify and document my texts well.

My 'conversion' finally happened on a December night of 2010, when I went to a presentation of a book edited by Jaime Almansa, a Spanish archaeologist devoted body and soul to the public diffusion of archaeology. A few weeks before, he had given me an introductory course of archaeology and I wanted to continue that relationship with him in order to learn more about this scientific discipline and push myself forward at work.

Chatting that night with him and Oscar Blázquez, a friend of his, I did not hesitate to ask them directly what was true in the alleged extraterrestrial intervention theories, and they laconically answered: "Nothing". Then, I immediately asked for more information on this issue and they informed me of the real archaeological knowledge about it. This affected me, as if they had opened my brain with a key and I admitted, at last, the sanity and common sense that, without realizing it, I had lost.

Since then, I try to offer in my texts the most contrasted information possible, and thanks to that event I am currently the editor of my own website, and I am writing this text now. My example may serve to give a clue about what archaeologists have to do in order to stop alternative archaeology from becoming a greater problem.

The key seems to lie in a better communication between archaeologists – not writers, journalists or amateurs-, and the public without intermediaries. Reporting recent research and discoveries should improve public knowledge. I have personally gone to meetings like this, and I must say that the experience was rewarding for both the archaeologist and the public, who came out happy with this new and exemplary experience.

Therefore, in my opinion, if archaeologists want the problem of alternative archaeologies to be minimized over time, they must abandon their strict academic circle of 'initiated', in which they generally move, and try to take public initiatives for all those who wish to participate, using a discourse that also allows the public to understand clearly what archaeology is and how it works.

I know that this is not an easy task, building a mountain of knowledge from grains of sand. I also know that building public initiatives depends on the support from governments and companies, but I strongly believe that just the intention of making them happen is a very important step to achieve these objectives.

Definitely, such initiatives can keep the public interested in archaeology and history in the future. This interest is essential for the future of archaeology and, therefore, something that we all should work in as soon as possible.

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