Key Concepts in Public Archaeology

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Introduction

You might have seen books on the ‘archaeology’ shelves in bookstores with brightly printed covers with pyramids, standing stones and crystal skulls. More likely you will have seen television shows where enthusiastic explorers find traces of ghosts, aliens or mythical monsters at archaeological sites around the world. Welcome to the world of alternative archaeology where up is down, old is new, and nothing is what it seems – except for the surprisingly large pay cheques. In this chapter I want to explore the world of alternative archaeologies (sometimes called fringe, bad or pseudo-archaeology), looking at their different themes and characteristics, at how archaeologists have responded to them, and at their impact in the real world. This chapter can be read as an accompaniment to Schadla-Hall’s (2004) detailed analysis of the topic.

What is alternative archaeology – or perhaps given their number and diversity I should ask what are alternative archaeologies? The term refers to the practices, products and views of the ancient world that exist beyond the margins of the professional, scholarly and intellectual mainstreams – outsider knowledge of the past, some of it the result of painstaking if misguided scholarship, some of it ‘truths’ revealed to initiates by prophets and conmen and the voices in their heads. Alternative archaeologies pose hypotheses and narratives of the human past that deviate from the mainstream consensuses in a variety of ways. They present a challenge to archaeologists who must decide if – and how – we
should respond to them, but they also exist in the real world (like mainstream archaeology) and must be understood (again, like mainstream archaeology) in their specific political, economic, cultural, social and intellectual contexts.

Academic and professional archaeologists have long taken an interest in alternative archaeologies, and there are a number of good studies of the subject. The majority of these are by US-based scholars and focus on US archaeology, such as the works of Williams (1991), Feder (1984, 2002) and Harrold and Eve (1995). Archaeologists’ responses to alternative archaeologies can be seen as part of a movement – again largely US-based – against pseudoscience in general, such as the widely read works of Michael Shermer (1997) and Carl Sagan (1997). The lively debates around the teaching of biblical creationism in the US – often referred to as a ‘culture war’ – have endured for more than a century, and this more than any other factor is arguably responsible for the relative strength and diversity of US scholars’ responses to pseudoscience in general, as well as pseudo-archaeology.

There are number of factors that make alternative archaeologies alternative. One common feature is their epistemology: in other words, the way they deal with knowledge, often by a rejection of scholarly rigour and the scientific method. For example, rather than critically evaluating all available evidence, some alternative archaeologists work by gathering only the evidence that fits their theories – even if some bits contradict others. Another is their outsider status: some archaeologists are deemed ‘alternative’ because they disregard widely accepted conventions and practices, while other more conspiracy-minded alternative archaeologists cultivate their ‘outsider’ persona as a badge of rebelliousness, independence and authenticity. In practice the boundaries between alternative and mainstream archaeology are not so clear, and they change over time. For example, the druidic origins of Stonehenge are viewed as pseudo-archaeology today, but in the past this has been the dominant, mainstream view (Schadla-Hall 2004). Many alternative archaeologists like to claim that their ideas – though mocked in the present – will one day be regarded as a long-neglected truth.

**Themes in alternative archaeologies**

Alternative archaeologies are a very diverse group, ranging from religious fundamentalist ideologies to romantic nationalism to alien conspiracy theories to New Age beliefs. However, there are a number of themes that
turn up again and again in different alternative archaeologies around the world, and these are worth looking at in a little more depth (for a more detailed analysis of these themes see Schadla-Hall 2004).

Origins

Many alternative archaeologies are focused on the search for origins: whether it’s the origins of a national, linguistic or ethnic community, or the birthplace of a specific practice like metalworking, agriculture or pyramid building. Alternative archaeologists want the origins of their favoured groups or things to be glorious (or at least respectable) and they want them to be simple and unambiguous. Unfortunately for them, archaeology is really not very useful for writing ‘just so’ stories. If you really look into it, the origin of a particular group of people probably involves groups joining and dividing over and over again over time; the story will have gaps, and the point of origin – if you can find it – is likely to be mundane, unimpressive and probably not where you hoped or expected it to be. As for technologies and other practices, most of them seem to have had multiple points of origin – no one person is the father or mother of, say, the bow and arrow – but for alternative archaeologists this is too complicated. A good example of this is pyramids: some alternative archaeologists claim that pyramids could only have been invented once (probably in Egypt), and that every other pyramid-like structure in the world, from Mexico to Silbury Hill, is part of the same continuous lineage (e.g. Picknett and Prince 2003). This type of belief in single, identifiable origins is referred to as ‘hyperdiffusionism’, a variation on the more respectable ‘diffusionism’ or the spread of ideas through cultural transmission.

Ancient knowledge

Another common theme in alternative archaeologies is the idea that people or civilisations in the past possessed spiritual, technological or ecological knowledge that far surpasses modern thought in complexity or purity. This sort of romantic nostalgia for a lost, more perfect world is part of many New Age alternative archaeologies as well as ideas of Atlantis, Mu and other lost continents. Writers and leaders in alternative archaeology like to talk about lost, ancient knowledge, holding out the promise that if you buy their book, watch their show or join their sinister little cult you can enjoy exclusive access to the wisdom of the ancients.
The existence of occult (literally ‘hidden’) knowledge in the archaeological record of past civilisations and cultures is an alluring idea, and one that has influenced literature and popular culture as well as the more literal beliefs of alternative archaeologists. Again, pyramids are a good example (they seem to have a supernatural ability to attract odd theories). Pyramids have been interpreted as ancient refrigerators, radio beacons, and timelines that predict the future destiny of entire peoples (Jackson and Stamp 2002; Moshenska 2008). The revival of ancient knowledge is a popular theme in alternative archaeologies because it claims to offer the consumer wisdom, enlightenment and superiority – in particular, superiority to successful academic scholars – without requiring much if any work.

Religious truth

One of the largest and best-funded strands of alternative archaeology is devoted to proving the truth of one religion or another. Archaeological evidence is often invoked to demonstrate the literal truth of the Bible, and wealthy fundamentalist Christians have lavished funding on expeditions to find the resting place of Noah’s ark and other biblical sites. The influence of religiously inspired work on middle-eastern archaeology has been a powerful one, and not altogether negative: the disputes between biblical literalists and less dogmatic Christians in the nineteenth and early twentieth century led to a large amount of work taking place on important middle-eastern sites, only a relatively small amount of it by truly crazed fundamentalists.

Mainstream religions are not alone in seeking reinforcement in archaeology. The ‘Vedic archaeologist’ Michael Cremo is a Hare Krishna creationist: his widely read book Forbidden Archeology (sic) claims that anatomically modern humans have existed on earth for hundreds of millions of years, in accordance with Hare Krishna beliefs (Cremo and Thompson 1993). Furthermore, he claims that archaeologists have conspired to hide this fact behind the invented idea of human evolution. Cremo and his co-author marshal a large amount of evidence in support of his claims: like many alternative archaeologists they favour early archaeological material that pre-dates accurate relative or absolute dating, and which has often been conclusively refuted or subsequently reinterpreted. They also cherry-pick materials and quotes without sufficient regard for context. Overall their approach is characterised by confirmation bias: the search for supporting evidence only, rather than the
rigorous evaluation of a hypothesis against both supporting and opposing evidence.

Another area of religiously inspired alternative archaeology lies within the New Age movement, and in particular around the idea that ancient societies worshipped a Mother Goddess whose likenesses and traces can be found spread across Europe and beyond. The idea of the Mother Goddess was powerfully reinforced by the work of archaeologist Marija Gimbutas (1974, 1989), whose work has been widely accused of going beyond the boundaries of scholarship into pseudoscientific speculation and imagination. Gimbutas’s vision of a peaceful prehistoric matriarchal religion found a great deal of support and sympathy within parts of the feminist movement in the 1980s and 90s, particularly in the US. This in turn led to a growing number of contemporary feminists identifying themselves as followers or worshippers of the ancient Mother Goddess, a movement that continues into the present and claims to be a revival of ancient beliefs and practices. However, Gimbutas’ interpretations of much of her material were questioned by archaeologists such as Peter Ucko (1968), while Lynn Meskell has criticised her work from a feminist archaeological perspective, arguing that ‘fantasy’ views of the past are an impediment to feminism in archaeology and in society (1995: 83).

Aliens

The idea that extra-terrestrial beings have visited earth in the past and guided human development and/or evolution is a staple of science fiction, from 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) to Prometheus (2012). These views were most effectively popularised by the works of Erich von Däniken, discussed in more detail below, and by the more recent television series Ancient Aliens. The belief in extra-terrestrial influences on the human past is arguably an extreme version of hyperdiffusionism discussed earlier: the idea that all advances in human culture have a single origin (in this case an external one) from which they were spread and disseminated. Like most hyperdiffusionist beliefs, these beliefs are based in part on a derogatory view of past human societies that emphasises or exaggerates their primitive nature and lack of technological or intellectual abilities, often within an implicitly racist framework. Other arguments for early human contact with extra-terrestrials focus on artistic and iconographic analysis of figurines and other representations, in particular of large-scale artworks such as the Nazca Lines.
Case study 9.1: Erich von Däniken’s Chariots of the Gods?

Probably the single most successful work of alternative archaeology was published in 1968 by Swiss hotel manager and convicted fraudster Erich von Däniken: *Chariots of the Gods?* presented what the author claimed to be a raft of evidence showing extra-terrestrial influence on human societies throughout prehistory. *Chariots of the Gods?* sold tens of millions of copies around the world, was adapted into documentaries, and formed the basis of a theme park in Switzerland opened by von Däniken in 2003.

The premise of the book is that there is abundant evidence in art, artefacts, mythology and religion for numerous visits to earth by extra-terrestrials in spaceships. In defence of this theory von Däniken shows images of rock carvings such as the sarcophagus of the Maya Pacal the Great, arguing that it shows the complex internal structure of a rocket ship; he also claimed that the Nazca Lines in Peru are landing strips for spaceships. Turning to the Bible, von Däniken suggested that Ezekiel’s vision of fire was in fact a spaceship, and that Lot’s encounter with angels was in fact a close encounter with aliens.

The success of von Däniken’s book spawned a host of imitators and followers, but also a number of attempts to debunk his work. One of the most amusing of these is *Some Trust in Chariots*, published a few years after *Chariots of the Gods?* (Thiering and Castle 1972). This short edited collection takes a tongue-in-cheek approach to von Däniken’s claims, with a cover describing it as ‘The bombshell book that goes far beyond *Chariots of the Gods?* to reveal the startling, irrefutable truth about ancient marvels!’. The contributors include an archaeologist, an engineer, a theologian, a philosopher and an ancient historian. The title, taken from the psalms, highlights the slightly religious tinge to the work although the editors point out the contributors include ‘Christians of several kinds, a member of the Jewish community, and at least one agnostic. But they are closely united in believing that truth is hard-won and precious, and that *Chariots of the Gods?* requires a counter-attack’ (Thiering and Castle 1972: 1).

It is worth noting that von Däniken’s tone in his writing is (at least superficially) questioning rather than declaiming. This is a common rhetorical device in alternative archaeology to protect the writer or speaker from being required to justify their argument: they can claim semi-truthfully that they never made the claims suggested; they merely posed difficult questions and suggested possible solutions.
which are most clearly visible from a high altitude. The ‘aliens’ view of the origins of humanity is closely linked to other pseudoscientific beliefs about extra-terrestrial contact and related conspiracy theories.

Characteristics of alternative archaeologies

Despite the global spread and thematic variations of alternative archaeologies, there are some characteristics that are common to many or most of them. These are worth examining and knowing about, as they can be used as the basis of an archaeological ‘bullshit detector’.

Fallacies

If you examine the arguments presented by alternative archaeologists, you find a number of recurring themes in the methods of presenting information and drawing conclusions. Very often these means of arguing seem flimsy or misleading, but it is not always easy to pin down precisely why. It helps to have an understanding of logical fallacies – formal and informal – to get a clearer view of how these arguments aim to mislead. The full range of fallacies is beyond the scope of this chapter, but some of the most common in alternative archaeology include either–or fallacies, confirmation bias, and proof by assertion.

Either–or fallacies present a false dichotomy, and are commonly used by creationist alternative archaeologists: they claim that a mainstream argument is invalidated by a minor or invented problem (for
example, the imprecision of radiocarbon dating), and assert that therefore their preferred faith-based viewpoint is correct, excluding the myriad other possible interpretations. This is particularly common in creationist arguments, which tend to be constructed in primary opposition to mainstream scientific research, not to – for example – the many other very different religious creation stories.

Confirmation bias, mentioned earlier, is the gathering of information in support of a theory, rather than critically evaluating it by seeking and including evidence that contradicts or disproves it. This is often done unconsciously and is by no means restricted to alternative archaeologies: some prominent archaeologists are known to have ignored or discarded evidence which did not conform to their preferred interpretations of sites.

Proof by assertion is the crude method of repeating a claim over and over until it is embedded in the minds of credulous viewers, listeners or readers. This method, derived from rhetoric, is surprisingly successful and is often used in the form of ‘Just Asking Questions’ (also known as JAQing off), popularised by Erich von Däniken and more recently on the television series *Ancient Aliens*. Here the proponent of an alternative archaeological theory can claim that they are not in fact promoting a particular view, but merely asking awkward questions that highlight flaws in the mainstream view. In fact, the questions are likely to be posed as claims, worded misleadingly, or piled up one after another so as to overwhelm. Crude and bullying rhetoric of this kind is surprisingly effective, particularly if the audience is already broadly sympathetic to the questioner’s views.

These are just a few of the many logical fallacies employed by alternative archaeologists, and it can be fun to try to spot them ‘in the wild’ in television programmes, books and discussions.

**Linguistic and stylistic similarities**

One of the most important longstanding research methods in archaeology is the establishment of typologies and type-series of artefacts and other material things showing how tools, technologies, buildings, decorative designs and other features developed over time and moved through space, either by the movement of people or the spread of ideas. Similarly, related fields such as historical linguistics chart the spread of languages, dialects, language families and even specific words through time and space, revealing movements and connections between people,
whether based on migration, trade, conquest or other factors. Similarities between languages and designs are a valid form of data in archaeology, but with well-understood limits: individual similarities are not treated as proofs of connection, rather they contribute small pieces to an overall weight and diversity of evidence. In alternative archaeologies, in contrast, even very minor or isolated similarities can be treated as conclusive proof of connection: in these breathless, uncritical searches for meaning there is no room for coincidence.

One example with a long and disreputable history is the idea popularised by the American anthropologist Thomas Wilson (1894) that the swastika design is a distinctive symbol, perhaps the first to be deliberately designed, and that its spread around the world coincided with the movement of spindle whorls and bronze working. The idea of the swastika as the distinctive symbol of an advanced race was taken up by the hyperdiffusionist anthropologist Grafton Elliot Smith (1929), amongst others, becoming associated with the notion of a Nordic or Aryan race.

Case study 9.2: The curious theories of John Hooper Harvey

John Hooper Harvey (1911–97) is best known as a reputable and respected British architectural historian, who published extensively in scholarly journals and lectured in conservation at University College London. In his other life, as revealed in his early writings and in research by historian Graham Macklin (2008), Harvey was a Nazi-sympathiser, a rabid anti-Semite and a virulent fascist, regarded as extreme even within the British fascist groups of the 1930s and 40s. Harvey’s interest for the purpose of this case study lies in his ability both to work within the academic system producing reputable research, and also to publish fantastical and wildly racist writings that seem (to modern eyes) utterly deranged.

As a student in London Harvey became a member of the Imperial Fascist League, and a friend of its leader Arnold Leese. He gave lectures to members of the League on topics relating to the history of the Nordic race, and wrote articles for their magazine *The Fascist*. During the 1930s Harvey became an ardent admirer of the alternative archaeologist Laurence Austine Waddell, a retired doctor in the Indian army and former professor of Tibetan. Throughout the 1920s and 30s Waddell authored a series of ever-more bizarre history books claiming inter alia that the Britons, Scots and Anglo-Saxons were
Phoenician; that the Phoenicians were Egyptian; that the Egyptians were Sumerian; and that the Sumerians were (of course) Aryans from India. Waddell had directed archaeological excavations in India in the 1890s, and his books employed the full range of alternative archaeological techniques including the alleged decipherment of ancient texts, the misinterpretation of monuments, the conflation of stylistic and linguistic elements, and the use of rhetoric and bombast in place of evidence. A recent and extremely odd biography shows that Waddell’s ability to command adherence to his views has extended far beyond the grave. Harvey’s uses of Waddell’s works are best seen in his book *The Heritage of Britain*, published in 1940, in which he notes that

> One of the greatest real advantages of the modern age has been its ability to recover past history by scientific archaeology. But so specialized has archaeology become that the results achieved are for the most part sealed books to the ordinary man … Violent conflicts of opinion among the scientists themselves are frequent, and entirely erroneous ideas have been upheld in order to buttress some political or religious theory.

(Harvey 1940: 5)

In place of these erroneous ideas, Harvey promises a history that ‘can yet save the British nation from the downfall which awaits those who lose race-consciousness, and who mix their blood with that of lesser breeds’ (Harvey 1940: 5).

Building on Waddell’s ideas, Harvey asserted that the biblical Adam was a real man, a king of the ‘Gothic Sumerians’, and identical with King Arthur, Thor and St Andrew. He draws uncritically on the medieval writings of Geoffrey of Monmouth to argue that the Trojan king Brutus travelled to Britain and gave it its name, and that the Scots were really ‘S’Goths’ (Harvey 1940: 60). His short bibliography includes the works of the proto-Nazi race theorist Hans Günther, and Alfred Watkins, inventor of ley lines. Harvey’s combination of outdated sources, weak arguments and racist ramblings are not in themselves unusual, but it is remarkable that he went on to become the respected author of several scholarly works on architectural history and conservation. It is very important to note that the line between the mainstream and the lunatic fringe is in no way identical with the lines between amateur and professional or academic and layman.
Writer George Herbert Cooper (1921) found a swastika within the layout of Stonehenge, while fringe archaeologist Laurence Austine Waddell (1924) traced the swastika from India to Scotland, both taking this as proof of the Aryan origins of the British.

Amongst the most ambitious attempts to prove linguistic connections comes in the work of well-known alternative archaeologist Barry Fell, whose book *America B.C.* (1976) claimed that many ancient civilisations of the Old World made contact with the Americas in prehistory. Much of Fell’s evidence comes from tenuous linguistic connections, claiming to have found words in Native American languages that are identical or very similar to words in other ancient languages. Fell’s analysis was examined in depth by researchers from the Smithsonian Institute, who concluded rather damningly that

> No prehistoric loanwords of Old World origin have been found in any North American Indian language. The contention is made in *America B.C.* that there are words of Egyptian, Semitic, Celtic, and Norse origin in certain Indian languages of the Algonquian family, but the alleged evidence is seriously flawed. The discussion does not distinguish clearly among the separate Algonquian languages; ignores basic facts of Algonquian grammar, linguistic history, and etymology; makes many errors on specific facts; miscopies and misinterprets words (or impossible fragments of words) and their translations; and shows no awareness of the basic scientific linguistic procedures that have been used by specialists for over a hundred years to study the history of languages.
> (Goddard and Fitzhugh 1978: 86).

This catalogue of intellectual sins is typical of alternative archaeological approaches to historical linguistics.

**Misinterpreting geological phenomena**

One of the most interesting features that links alternative archaeologies with the world of conspiracy theories is the capacity – some might say compulsion – to find evidence of human agency behind what might otherwise be regarded as natural processes. Nowhere is this more common than in the interpretation of geological phenomena as evidence of often colossal megalithic architecture. Many of these sites are underwater, and link in with theories of sunken continents such as Mu and Atlantis.
The alternative archaeologist behind many of these claims is the journalist Graham Hancock, whose work covers a wide range of fringe beliefs including pyramidology and astro-archaeology (e.g. Hancock 1995). Hancock’s explorations of underwater pseudo-architecture includes the island of Yonaguni in Japan (2005), where formations of sedimentary rock probably shaped by tectonic activity have been interpreted as a pyramid, a vast stadium, castles, roads and other structures. Few artefacts have been recovered from the site and most are strangely shaped rocks, not the advanced technologies one might expect to find in a vast city. In 1997 Hancock was involved in the early exploration of this site, which has been claimed to date from as early as 6000 years ago although geologist Robert Schoch, an alternative archaeologist also involved in the study, has argued for a natural origin for the site. Schoch is best known for his theory that the Sphinx is much older than commonly supposed, based on a tendentious analysis of its erosion patterns. The Yonaguni site has been linked with the mythical lost civilisation of Mu. Perhaps the best-known example of a geological phenomenon interpreted as manmade is the Bosnian Pyramid, discussed in more detail in Case study 9.3.

Case study 9.3: The Bosnian pyramid

The Bosnian pyramid is a good example of nationalist-driven alternative archaeology: a vaguely pyramidal (from some angles) hill near the town of Visoko in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is claimed to be a 12,000-year-old human-made structure. The pyramid theory was instigated and promoted by Semir Osmanagić, a Bosnian businessman and author of several alternative history books. Osmanagić’s works include claims that the Maya people are descended from aliens in Atlantis, and that Hitler survived the Second World War and escaped to the Antarctic. In 2005 Osmanagić visited Visoko and discovered the pointed hills, which he decided were pyramids. He conducted surveys and excavations, and published a book describing the monumental landscape, which he claimed included several pyramids and other important sites. Scientists who have examined the site have found that it is a fairly common form of geological formation found across Europe, Asia and North America.

While claims such as Osmanagić’s are not unusual in alternative archaeology, the response from politicians and the public is far from
How have archaeologists approached alternative archaeologies?

One of the most interesting things about alternative archaeologies is what they tell us about the ‘mainstream’ or establishment world of archaeology. This is particularly the case when we observe the many different ways in which professional and academic archaeologists have approached or responded to the work of alternative archaeologists,
revealing much about their own ideologies, beliefs and approaches to the ancient world.

Cornelius Holtorf has highlighted what he regards as the absolutism of many critics of alternative archaeologies, suggesting that they hold to an unrealistic view of archaeology as a bounded, professional enterprise. He points out that many of these critical responses are unduly censorious and high-handed, noting that ‘Archaeologists do not serve as a special state police force dedicated to eradicating interpretations that are considered false or inappropriate by a self-selected jury’ (Holtorf 2005: 549). Holtorf’s criticism is focused on the more strident critics of alternative archaeologies:

Readers are addressed by dismissive rhetoric and seemingly arbitrary value judgements reflecting personal preferences. What exactly is a ‘distortion’ of archaeological interpretation or ‘bogus archaeology’, as opposed to one based on the ‘proper’ study of archaeological remains? Which criteria are to be applied to judge TV archaeology? On what authority is anybody entitled to divide up their fellow citizens into categories such as ‘charlatans’ and ‘misdirected hobbyists’? Surely such judgements, as they are socially negotiable and subject to change over time, tell us more about the person making them than about the people addressed or should I say insulted.

(Holtorf 2005: 545)

It is worth noting that some of the subjects of Holtorf’s ire have been known to combine attacks on alternative archaeologies with criticisms of aspects of post-processual public archaeology such as multivocality in archaeological interpretation. Some of the key texts on alternative archaeologies, such as Feder’s highly influential Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries (2002) explicitly align themselves with a model of archaeological reasoning tied to an increasingly anachronistic notion of scientific objectivity, as Holtorf notes.

One common approach to alternative archaeologies is to attempt to debunk their claims, providing evidence to contradict their arguments and pointing out gaps, misinterpretations or deliberate distortions. Given the rate at which alternative archaeologies are created and spread, particularly in the age of the Internet, this is a near-impossible task and requires a large investment of time and intellectual effort. Websites such as Bad Archaeology and The Hall of Maat provide resources and information to contradict specific
alternative archaeological narratives, often with painstaking detail and at considerable length. Sometimes debunking is combined with humour: *Some Trust in Chariots*, a collection of papers attacking von Däniken’s *Chariots of the Gods?*, includes a paper entitled ‘Was Santa a Spaceman?’ by an anonymous author described as ‘a used car salesman for many years [who] has recently devoted himself to full-time studies in esoteric anthropology and occult archaeology’ (Thiering and Castle 1972: 123).

Perhaps the most constructive approach to alternative archaeologies is to treat them as a phenomenon worth studying: something that we can examine, evaluate, critique and deconstruct. Whether you believe that alternative archaeologies are harmful intellectual pathologies or valid ways of approaching the past, it is surely worth approaching them with a clearer understanding of their nature, their appeal and their possible harms.

**Discussion**

Why should public archaeologists take an interest in alternative archaeologies? Alternative, fringe or pseudo-archaeologies have enormous popular appeal, and reach a far wider audience than mainstream archaeology. Thus if we want to understand the public interest in archaeology then we need to appreciate the degree to which it has been shaped by these alternative narratives, and shape our messages and our media accordingly.

At the same time, it is important to understand alternative archaeologies in their wider social and political contexts as well as the purely intellectual. Compared to mainstream archaeology (never innocent, of course) the narratives generated within alternative archaeological frameworks are far more likely to be embedded within frameworks of nationalism, imperialism, and religious and ethnic supremacism. All too often the claim ‘Aliens built X’ is built upon the assumption that ‘Non-white indigenous people Y could not possibly have built X’, while many ‘lost civilisation’ narratives posit white-skinned settlers who pre-date and/or were wiped out by the apparently indigenous populations in countries such as New Zealand and the United States. These narratives provide the blueprints or more commonly post hoc justifications for colonialism and genocide. Even apparently ‘harmless’ alternative archaeologies such as the Pagan campaigners for the reburial of archaeological human remains in the UK can encode strongly
nationalist and white-supremacist assumptions within their mytholo-
gies. Archaeologists as scholars and intellectuals can, if they wish, 
choose to challenge potentially harmful interpretations or presenta-
tions of the ancient world. But alternative perspectives on the past, the 
earth and the universe have been compared to unsinkable rubber ducks: 
you can submerge them with arguments but they will almost always bob 
up again.

The phenomenon of alternative archaeologies is global, with a 
long and interesting history. In this short chapter I have only been 
able to cover a few of the most notable examples and significant 
themes, but there is a great deal of potential for research in this field 
including sociological, anthropological, historical and philosophical 
perspectives, all of which will strengthen our understanding of the 
world of archaeology in general, and public archaeology in particu-
lar. Alternative archaeologies matter – and they are very much part 
of archaeology.