



ANCIENT ATOM BOMBS

FACT, FRAUD, AND THE MYTH OF PREHISTORIC NUCLEAR WARFARE

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The Cult of Alien Gods: H. P. Lovecraft and Extraterrestrial Pop Culture (Prometheus, 2005)

Knowing Fear: Science, Knowledge, and the Development of the Horror Genre (McFarland, 2008)

“A Hideous Bit of Morbidity”: An Anthology of Horror Criticism from the Enlightenment to World War I (McFarland, 2009)

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Contents

I. The Myth of Ancient Atomic Warfare	1
II. The First Ancient Atomic Bomb Theories	4
III. The Tesla Death Ray	13
IV. Big Theories, No Evidence	16
V. What It All Means	20
<i>Works Cited</i>	24

I. The Myth of Ancient Atomic Warfare

IN FEBRUARY 2008, GLOBAL DIGNITARIES gathered to inaugurate the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, a repository for plant life designed to withstand nuclear war so survivors could restart civilization with healthy seeds. Magnus Bredeli-Tveiten, who oversaw construction of the vault, told the Associated Press that he expected it to last as long as the 4,500-year-old pyramids of Egypt. However, for a certain percentage of the public, ancient civilizations like Egypt are just one key to a nuclear war that already happened--thousands of years ago.

Believers maintain that in the distant past either extraterrestrials or a lost civilization like Atlantis detonated nuclear weapons, producing terrible devastation. This disaster was recorded, they say, in the Bible, Hindu scriptures, and world mythologies. Sodom and Gomorrah felt the sting of nuclear weapons when “the LORD rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah--from the LORD out of the heavens.” (Genesis 19:24-25, New International Version).

An ancient Indian epic was said (erroneously, as we shall see) to describe a “single projectile charged with all the power of the universe. An incandescent column of smoke and flame as bright as ten thousand suns rose in all its splendor.” To believers, these sound like eyewitness accounts of nuclear bombs being dropped from above. To skeptics, these sound like imaginative interpretations of the equivalent of prehistoric science fiction.

No mainstream scientist or historian endorses the idea of prehistoric atomic bombs, and nearly all experts believe the evidence cited to support the idea is misinterpreted at best and fraudulent at worst. For example, believers hold that deposits of 28-million-year-old glass found buried in the deserts of Libya are the result of ancient atomic bombs that melted the desert sand. In fact, according to geologist Evelyn Mervine, the glass (while still not completely understood) is likely the result of either a meteorite impact or volcanic action.

Textual Literalism

One of the key tenets of the modern ancient astronaut or lost civilization craze is the belief that ancient scriptures are the literal testament of what has gone before. For this reason young-earth creationists still claim that the earth is only 6,000 years old, and others take literally the harrowing adventure the Hebrew patriarch Enoch was said to have had in heaven. But this textual literalism tends to be highly restricted, confined to specific texts, typically those that are least familiar or accessible to the average reader and thus most difficult to check.

From the very beginning of the ancient astronaut movement, Hindu mythology, exotic to Western eyes, has been a mainstay of ancient astronaut theories. Ancient Vedic epics, running into the hundreds of thousands or even millions of words each were perfect for out of context quoting since ancient astronaut writers could be fairly certain no one would be able to find and check their accuracy. These theorists wish us to believe that ancient Indian Vedic literature is every bit as true as a modern-day news report. “Researchers” like self-proclaimed “real life Indiana Jones” David Hatcher Childress fervently argue that the flying machines and powerful weapons described in the Indian Vedas were actual airplanes and even nuclear weapons.

It is this latter claim of ancient atomic warfare that has sparked the interest of many internet conspiracy mongers, and these ancient atom bombs are a mainstay of the History Channel-style “ancient

mystery” documentaries. As of this writing, claims of prehistoric nuclear warfare continue to be repeated in newly-published books of “alternative” history, and are broadcast frequently on the History Channel’s *Ancient Aliens: The Series*, seen by more than two million people in the United States and many more worldwide.

It is therefore important to examine this strange theory critically to see where it came from and why anyone would believe aliens used nuclear bombs on prehistoric humans.

II. The First Ancient Atomic Bomb Theories

OBVIOUSLY, THE EARLIEST REFERENCES to the theory that ancient sites were destroyed by atomic or nuclear weapons do not predate the creation of those weapons in 1945. After the United States developed the first working atomic bombs, J. Robert Oppenheimer, the father of the atomic bomb, used a line from ancient Indian epic the *Bhagavad Gita* to reflect on the enormous power of the Bomb: “Now, I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.” He spoke these words not at the time of the detonation in July 1945, but twenty years later, on a television documentary, *The Decision to Drop the Bomb*. From this, an apocryphal story arose that Oppenheimer had told students in 1952 that the Manhattan Project produced the first atomic weapon “in modern times.” There is no evidence that Oppenheimer ever said this, and his reference to the *Bhagavad Gita* was meant as a poetic reflection, not a serious scientific reflection on ancient weaponry.

Among fringe thinkers, an allegedly scientific paper by two researchers named David W. Davenport and Ettore Vincenti is said to have recorded the scholars’ belief that an archaeological site they investigated in India, the famous city of Mohenjo Daro, was destroyed in ancient times due to a nuclear blast. However, the authors’ 1979 book, *2000 a.C. Distruzione atomica* (Atomic Destruction in 2000 BC), was not a scientific paper but another work of pseudoscience,

unrecognized by academia. There is to date no evidence of nuclear explosions prior to 1945.

Instead, the earliest reference to prehistoric nuclear warfare appears to be the Soviet mathematician and ethnologist Matest M. Agrest, who argued in 1959 that Sodom and Gomorrah had been destroyed by nuclear bombs from alien spaceships. This claim was brought to the attention of the other side of the Iron Curtain through *The Morning of the Magicians* (1960), a French work by Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier which outlined one of the earliest complete (nonfiction) versions of the modern ancient astronaut theory (see my eBook *The Origin of the Space Gods*) and, on page 122 of the 1963 English edition, offered outlandish claims about ancient nuclear warfare. We will examine their specific claims about ancient India momentarily, but first we turn to the other alleged prehistoric bomb blast--the one from the Bible.

Biblical Bombs

Those who support the theory of ancient atom bombs tend to be believers in a lost civilization like Atlantis or in extraterrestrial intervention in ancient history, the so-called “ancient astronaut” theory popularized by Swiss hotelier Erich von Däniken in the 1960s and ’70s with his book *Chariots of the Gods?* (1968), its sequels, and movie adaptation as *In Search of Ancient Astronauts* (1973), narrated by Rod Serling of *Twilight Zone* fame. It was von Däniken who introduced mainstream audiences to the idea (borrowed from the French writer Robert Charroux, as well as Pauwels and Bergier) that the “aliens” had blown up Sodom and Gomorrah with atom bombs. Pauwels and Bergier quote what they say is a description from the Dead Sea Scrolls about the nuclear effects of the Sodom bomb (216-217), but I have been unable to find this passage in published versions of the scrolls. It appears to be a lightly paraphrased and re-ordered version of the Genesis account, translated from its original tongue to French to English

with modern terms like “explosions” added in. No references are given. As we shall see, this is not the only case where Pauwels and Bergier offered an unusual translation to support their belief in ancient atomic warfare.

Von Däniken argued in *Chariots of the Gods?* (1968) that atom bombs destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, the biblical cities of sin: “since the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japan, we know the kind of damage such bombs cause. . . Let us imagine for a moment that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed according to plan, i.e. deliberately, by a nuclear explosion” (36). From his offhand remark, asked as a question rather than stated as fact, a whole sub-genre of ancient warfare grew, usually without reference to the earlier and (slightly) more serious versions proposed by Pauwels and Bergier or Agrest. However, this remark was, well, remarkably ill-considered. Here is what Genesis says about the destruction of the two cities:

By the time Lot reached Zoar, the sun had risen over the land. Then the LORD rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah—from the LORD out of the heavens. Thus he overthrew those cities and the entire plain, destroying all those living in the cities—and also the vegetation in the land. But Lot’s wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt. Early the next morning Abraham got up and returned to the place where he had stood before the LORD. He looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, toward all the land of the plain, and he saw dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace. So when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham, and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe that overthrew the cities where Lot had lived. (Genesis 19:23-29, New International Version)

This description is notable for its brevity, but even this brief mention has little in common with an actual atomic or nuclear blast. When atomic bombs go off, the majority of their destructive power

derives from the blast wave—a wall of wind that knocks down all around it. No mention of this blast wave—the most prominent effect of a nuclear blast—shows up in Genesis. Theoretically, with Lot so close to the site of the destruction, he should have felt the blast. While nuclear weapons can set off fires, this is entirely dependent on the amount of flammable material and the distance from the blast site; whereas in the biblical description the dominant motifs are first, a rain of burning sulfur and second, heavy smoke and fire lasting into the next day. The clear implication, taking the story as literally as von Däniken would like, is that the two cities were destroyed by a shower of flaming rocks from the sky. This led some researchers to propose recently that cities were destroyed by an asteroid, though this is, like so many theories, unproven since neither Sodom nor Gomorrah has ever been found (though some Bronze Age candidates like Bab edh-Dhra have been proposed), or even proved to have once existed outside the Bible.

The Indian Connection

As I have noted, von Däniken's most important source was not scientific literature, or even first-hand observation; instead, von Däniken derived much of his information and wild speculation from a *The Morning of the Magicians*. On page 122 of the 1963 English translation, Pauwels and Bergier misquote out-of-context passages from Vedic Indian literature to claim that India experienced atomic warfare ten thousand years ago. We will explore their specific misquotation momentarily. For now, it is important to note that von Däniken read and repeated these claims for an international audience and continued the tradition of misinterpretation. The author gives a lengthy quotation in *Chariots of the Gods?* from the *Mahabharata*, the ancient Indian epic, which he likens to the devastating effects of a nuclear blast, suggesting that the ancient poem is a record of nuclear war in the distant past. The quotation describes what sounds like the effects of a nuclear blast:

It was as if the elements had been unleashed. The sun spun round. Scorched by the incandescent heat of the weapon, the world reeled in fever. Elephants were set on fire by the heat and ran to and fro in a frenzy to seek protection from the terrible violence. The water boiled, the animals died, the enemy was mown down and the raging of the blaze made the trees collapse in rows as in a forest fire. The elephants made a fearful trumpeting and sank dead to the ground over a vast area. Horses and war chariots were burnt up and the scene looked like the aftermath of a conflagration. Thousands of chariots were destroyed, then deep silence descended on the sea. The winds began to blow and the earth grew bright. It was a terrible sight to see. The corpses of the fallen were mutilated by the terrible heat so that they no longer looked like human beings. Never before have we seen such a ghastly weapon and never before have we heard of such a weapon. (59-60)

However, this quotation is translated into English from an 1889 German translation of the Sanskrit original, with no indication of where in the 1.8 million words of the epic the quotation came, or in what context this amazing weapon worked. In Book 7, I found what I believe to be the same passage in a standard translation:

The very elements seemed to be perturbed. The Sun seemed to turn round. The universe, scorched with heat, seemed to be in a fever. The elephants and other creatures of the land, scorched by the energy of that weapon, ran in fright, breathing heavily and desirous of protection against that terrible force. The very waters being heated, the creatures residing in that element, O Bharata, became exceedingly uneasy and seemed to burn. From all the points of the compass, cardinal and subsidiary, from the firmament and the very Earth, showers of sharp and fierce arrows fell and issued, with the impetuosity of Garuda or the wind. Struck and burnt by those shafts of Aṅgathāman that were all endued with the impetuosity of the thunder, the

hostile warriors fell down like trees burnt down by a raging fire. Huge elephants, burnt by that weapon, fell down on the Earth all around, uttering fierce cries loud as those of the clouds. Other huge elephants, scorched by that fire, ran hither and thither, and roared aloud in fear, as if in the midst of a forest conflagration. The steeds, O king, and the cars also, burnt by the energy of that weapon, looked, O sire, like the tops of trees burnt in a forest fire. [...] Burnt by the energy of Aṅgawathāman's weapon, the forms of the slain could not be distinguished. (Ganguili Vol. 7, 678-679)

The context for this passage makes clear that the speaker is describing an imaginary weapon composed of fiery arrows that rain flame down onto the ground. Unlike an actual nuclear weapon, which produces a mushroom cloud, vaporizes the area beneath it, and then dissipates, this weapon is specifically said to be like a “smokeless fire.” It causes the sky to fill with clouds that rain blood, but instead of vaporizing those it hits, instead, it causes the air to boil, setting alight all around it. In an actual nuclear explosion, the blast force is the force that kills once one passes the hypocenter. And anyone who survived to describe the blast would by definition have been in the region where the blast wave overtook any flame. Outside the small area where the actual explosion occurs, the thermal radiation from a nuclear blast is intense, but brief, lasting perhaps one or two seconds. It can cause severe skin burns (but not light a person aflame). Thermal blasts can ignite highly flammable materials, though these do not include elephants or trees; nor would it boil the rivers and seas.

All of this is irrelevant, however, since the description makes clear that the weapon is no bomb but instead a type of imaginary sky-cannon, shooting flames like arrows or thunderbolts to the ground below. The context notes that the weapon is wielded by an individual, who fires it. It is not dropped like a bomb.

But this type of creative interpretation pales against the wholesale rewriting of Indian myth to suit the needs of the ancient

astronaut theory that we find in *The Morning of the Magicians* and the unscrupulous writers who altered and mangled even its dubious scholarship. In *Morning*, two passages from the *Mahabharata* are cited as proof of ancient atomic warfare. In later works, like those of David Hatcher Childress, these two passages are interpolated into a single block of (out of context, mixed together) text. Here is the passage as it is frequently given online and in the works of Childress, somewhat different than in *Morning*:

Gurkha, flying a swift and powerful vimana,
 hurled a single projectile
 charged with all the power of the Universe.
 An incandescent column of smoke and flame,
 as bright as ten thousand suns,
 rose in all its splendor.

It was an unknown weapon,
 and iron thunderbolt,
 a gigantic messenger of death,
 which reduced to ashes the entire race of the Vrishnis and
 Andhakas.

The corpses were so burned
 as to be unrecognizable.
 Their hair and nails fell out.
 Pottery broke without any apparent cause,
 and the birds turned white.

...After a few hours, all foodstuffs were infected...
 ...to escape from this fire,
 the soldiers threw themselves in streams
 to wash themselves and all their equipment.

(Childress *Lost* 72-73)

This passage does not appear in the 1.8 million words of the *Mahabharata*. Instead, it appears to be carefully and purposefully

rewritten from genuine passages, combining texts at will to create a misleading paragraph that seems to indicate anomalous knowledge of nuclear bombs. Childress did not do the rewriting; it seems that Pauwels and Bergier were the first to record the variant version, though few seem to seek out the actual Vedic original, relying instead on Pauwels and Bergier or Childress rather than primary sources. When we look at the source texts, we can see how this material has been altered dramatically:

Gratified with him, the holy one then showed Utanka that eternal Vaishnava form which Dhananjaya of great intelligence had seen. Utanka beheld the high-souled Vasudeva of universal form, endued with mighty-arms. The effulgence of that form was like that of a blazing fire or a thousand suns. It stood before him filling all space. It had faces on every side. Beholding that high and wonderful Vaishnava form of Vishnu, in fact, seeing the Supreme Lord (in that guise), the Brahmana Utanka became filled with wonder.

Acwamedha Parva, Section LV (Ganguili Vol. 16)

This passage, which mentions the ten thousand suns, refers to an appearance of Vishnu. It is representative of many, many passages in which the standard poetic line “ten thousand suns” is used to describe a deity. It does not refer to the specific flash of a nuclear blast unless one imagines the gods to be exploding.

When the next day came, Camva actually brought forth an iron bolt through which all the individuals in the race of the Vrishnis and the Andhakas became consumed into ashes. Indeed, for the destruction of the Vrishnis and the Andhakas, Camva brought forth, through that curse, a fierce iron bolt that looked like a gigantic messenger of death. The fact was duly reported to the king. In great distress of mind, the king (Ugrasena) caused that iron bolt to be reduced into fine powder.

Mausala Parva, Section 1. (Ganguili Vol. 16)

Here it is clear that the iron bolt, known also as the rod of chastisement, is not envisioned as a bomb but as a type of scepter. But more importantly, this passage does not describe events that happened, but rather a prophecy of events to come. The king *destroyed the bolt before it could be used*. The actual destruction of the Vrishnis came three decades later when they became drunk and killed one another with pots and pans.

Day by day strong winds blew, and many were the evil omens that arose, awful and foreboding the destruction of the Vrishnis and the Andhakas. The streets swarmed with rats and mice. Earthen pots showed cracks or broken from no apparent cause. At night, the rats and mice ate away the hair and nails of slumbering men. [...] That chastiser of foes commanded the Vrishnis to make a pilgrimage to some sacred water. The messengers forthwith proclaimed at the command of Kecava that the Vrishnis should make a journey to the sea-coast for bathing in the sacred waters of the ocean.

Mausala Parva, Section 2 (Ganguli Vol. 16)

Obviously, the rats are a far cry from radiation poisoning, and ritual purification in water (much like Christian baptizing) is very different from seeking water to assuage radiation sickness.

The false version of this passage appears time and again in alternative works—more than three dozen times in print and thousands more online. In a half dozen books, Childress alone repeats the same alleged passage from the *Mahabharata*, gleefully explaining that the excerpt describes in precise detail the exact pattern of radiation poisoning seen after a nuclear event—something ancient people could not possibly have known yet recorded in their literature. Childress is not the only author to rely on this false quotation, merely the most prolific, but he has an important reason for needing it to be true.

III. The Tesla Death Ray

DAVID HATCHER CHILDRESS is perhaps the most famous proponent of the atomic warfare theory. Childress calls himself a “lost science scholar,” and claimed in his book *Extraterrestrial Archaeology* that the moon and nearby planets contain pyramids, domes and spaceports visible by telescope and satellite. (Full disclosure: Childress publicly criticized my discussion of his theories in my 2005 book *The Cult of Alien Gods* as inaccurate because it linked him with those who believe in alien visitations in the remote past. He claimed at that time that ancient anomalies were the work of a lost super-civilization, but he returned to the alien intervention theory in 2009 when he joined the History Channel’s *Ancient Aliens* television series.) He has a profound respect for the scientist Nikola Tesla, who Childress believes invented antigravity, time-travel, death-ray, and thought machines. Childress is also prone to seeing conspiracies, arguing in his book *The Fantastic Inventions of Nikola Tesla* that the U.S. government conspired to suppress the discoveries made by Tesla to protect big business. Incidentally, Childress claims only to be the posthumous co-author of *Fantastic Inventions* with Tesla as the main author.

To promote his turn-of-the-millennium book *Technology of the Gods*, Childress released a chapter on ancient nuclear weapons to *Nexus Magazine*, the “alternative” magazine founded in 1987 to report unconventional and occult stories, or what owner Duncan Roads calls “suppressed information”: “It was a magazine that addressed itself to the alternative fringe of society and thus it carried many ‘alternative’

points of view on the subjects of health, human rights, the environment, human potential and suppressed information. I revived this magazine by deleting all articles on the new age, the occult, environment and similar subjects, and by concentrating on what I call 'suppressed information.'”

Childress begins his article by discussing a geological anomaly: namely that the same glass-like fusion of sand which occurs on the land beneath a nuclear blast can also be found in ancient strata dating back up to 8,000 years. Hatcher provides the scientific explanation, and then he rejects it: “The general theory is that the glass was created by the searing, sand-melting impact of a cosmic projectile. However, there are serious problems with this theory....” (“Evidence”)

Childress rejects the theory because he says there is no evidence of an impact crater. The 1988 work of A.A. Qureshi and H. A. Khan concluded that a crater would no longer be visible because the glass did not form 8,000 years ago, as Childress would have it, but much longer ago: “Based on these studies a meteoritic impact, which caused the fusion of Nubian sand or sandstone and resulted in the formation of Libyan desert glass 28.36 m.y. [million years] ago, has been recognized” (49-56). A 1988 study by A.V. Murali et al. found traces of the actual meteor in the Libyan glass (817-818). Childress also ignores another possibility. Childress himself admits that there have been impacts which did not produce craters, like the Tunguska Event of 1908, of which mainstream science holds that an asteroid hit Siberia and vaporized without leaving any trace except flattened trees and an explosion so loud it could be heard in Moscow and so bright that midnight was bright as noon in London.

A whole mythology has grown up around the Tunguska Event. Many explanations exist, ranging from the scientifically-accepted asteroid theory to the crash of a UFO and the resulting detonation of its nuclear reactor. How anyone knows whether UFOs are nuclear-powered is not explained. One fringe theory that fits well with Childress' conspiratorial view of Tesla is the Tesla ray. True-believer Oliver

Nichelson says, “The idea of a Tesla directed energy weapon causing the Tunguska explosion was incorporated in a fictional biography (1994), by another writer, and was the subject of a *Sightings* television program segment.”

Nichelson continues: “Given Tesla’s general pacifistic nature it is hard to understand why he would carry out a test harmful to both animals and the people who herded the animals even when he was in the grip of financial desperation. The answer is that he probably intended no harm, but was aiming for a publicity coup and, literally, missed his target.” Nichelson then gives his version of how Tesla directed an energy-ray across the globe to blow up a relatively uninhabited section of Siberia.

So what does the Tunguska Even have to do with ancient atomic warfare?

Well, the answer lies in the literary career of David Hatcher Childress, author of books on both antediluvian nuclear weapons and the so-called Tesla Death-Ray. Childress needs the Tunguska event to be something other than an asteroid to bolster his theories. In the course of his work, Childress became convinced that Tesla had only “rediscovered” technology that had existed in ages past, much as Ignatius Donnelly asserted in his *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World* (1882). Therefore, Childress asks: “[I]s it possible that the vitrified desert is the result of atomic war in the ancient past? Could a Tesla-type beam weapon have melted the desert, perhaps in a test?” (“Evidence”).

IV. Big Theories, No Evidence

CHILDRESS BUILT ON THE MANGLED quotations from *The Morning of the Magicians* and the supposedly scientific report from Davenport and Vittore to develop his own “evidence” from the same sources: “If one were to believe the *Mahabharata*, great battles were fought with in the past with airships, particle beams, chemical warfare and presumably atomic weapons. . . [B]attles in the latter days of Atlantis were fought with highly sophisticated, high-tech weapons” (“Evidence”).

Needless to say, for Childress, Atlantis is not only real but an active competitor for ancient India, which he calls the Rama Empire: “The Rama Empire, described in the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, was supposedly contemporaneous with the great cultures of Atlantis and Osiris [Egypt] in the West. Atlantis, well-known from Plato’s writings and ancient Egyptian records, apparently existed in the mid-Atlantic and was a highly technical and patriarchal civilization” (“Evidence”).

Needless to say, there is neither proof of Atlantis existing outside of Plato’s mind, nor any evidence that the Atlanteans had high-tech weaponry. I know of no ethnographies describing the familial relations of Atlanteans. Osiris, we are told, is pre-dynastic Egypt. Childress’ source? “Esoteric doctrine” unrevealed to the reader. As for the Rama Empire, Childress says it began with “Nagas (Naacals) who had come into India from Burma and ultimately from the “Motherland to the East”—or so Col. James Churchward was told” (“Evidence”). Churchward wrote about the lost continent of Mu in the early 20th century. His books sold well, but were quickly shown to be a hoax when

he could produce no evidence of the tablets where he read of the continent or the monks who gave them to him.

Of course, this is good enough evidence for Childress. He identifies Mu with Lemuria and uses material from the Lemurian Fellowship lesson manual to tell how the Ramas and the Atlanteans fought a great war which resulted in nuclear holocaust. Never mind that Lemuria was a failed 19th century scientific theory designed to explain the appearance of lemurs in both India and Madagascar in the years before plate tectonics showed that the animals walked from one to the other when both were linked.

None of this made it into Childress' story, and he tells how the Atlanteans were angry that the Ramas had beat them in battle: "Assuming the above story is true, Atlantis was not pleased at the humiliating defeat and therefore used its most powerful and destructive weapon—quite possibly an atomic-type weapon!" ("Evidence"). As has been shown, the above story is not true and there was neither Atlantis nor Lemuria to fight with any weapons at all, let alone nuclear ones.

Childress cites L. Sprague DeCamp's assessment of ancient oil-based weapons like Greek Fire to bolster the claim of sophisticated stone-age weapons. DeCamp, it should be noted, was one of the disciples of the American horror author H.P. Lovecraft, whose mythos of Great Cthulhu helped spawn the ancient astronaut theory when Pauwels and Bergier used him as inspiration for *Morning of the Magicians* (see my eBook, *The Origins of the Space Gods* and my *Cult of Alien Gods*). Childress then brings in another ancient astronaut supporter, Robin Collins, to testify that on the authority of another Indian epic, the *Vymaanika-Shastra*, ancient peoples had plasma guns powered by electrified mercury.

If that were not enough, Childress brings in moldy 19th-century tales of vitrified ruins in Death Valley, California to say that ancient atom bombs melted the bricks in those buildings. However, he also says that he could not prove they existed, let alone were the result of

a nuclear blast. Nevertheless, they form an important piece of evidence for the author.

Remember what von Däniken said about Sodom and Gomorrah, that they were destroyed by a vengeful alien race? Childress also makes this claim: “Probably the most famous of all ancient ‘nuke ’em’ stories is the well-known biblical tale of Sodom and Gomorrah” (“Evidence”). Childress apparently does not think it is that well-known, for he then quotes it in full. He then sets up a straw-man, smashing the paper-tiger argument that the cities were destroyed by plate tectonics. Obviously, this is false, and Childress knows it. He then claims there is but one hypothesis to explain the disappearance of the two cities: “Therefore we come back to the popular theory that these cities were not destroyed in a geological cataclysm but in a man-made (or extraterrestrial-made) apocalypse that was technological in nature” (“Evidence”). Obviously, Childress neglects to recognize that there are other explanations, the simplest of which is that the cities and their destruction are the product of a fertile imagination.

The theory of Occam’s Razor says we cannot accept this possibility without extraordinary evidence. Childress believes he has it. Quoting L. M. Lewis, the reader learns that Lot’s wife (the pillar of salt) proves an atomic blast because the pillar still stood in the first century A.D. when Flavius Josephus saw it. Sodom, of course, was destroyed in 1898 BCE, according to Lewis. Therefore, had the salt pillar been anything but the remains of a nuclear blast, it should have vanished. Of course, he fails to note that the Dead Sea area produces new salt pillars on a regular basis. These are still called “Lot’s wife” by the locals, but few are of any great age.

So where does this leave the theory of ancient nuclear activity?

There is no basis in fact for the empty assertions of alternative authors like von Däniken, Pauwels and Bergier, and Childress, but they are repeated by so many who read these authors that they take on a verisimilitude that endangers a rational view of the past. How can

genuine mysteries be explored and the vast tapestry of ancient history displayed in its full color and glory when rampant and baseless claims throw dark stains on the delicate images of the past?

The final question we must ask is this: Why does this silly theory matter?

V. What It All Means

THE FIRST REASON THE CLAIMS about ancient atom bombs matter is that far too many people take them seriously. Recently, the History Channel has given Erich von Däniken and David Hatcher Childress a weekly soapbox to opine unchallenged on the ancient astronaut theory, telling an audience of two million viewers that aliens blew up ancient cities with nuclear weapons and genetically engineered early humans. These claims are utterly without compelling evidence, and do violence to our public discourse by misleading the public and using the power of television to circumvent the need for real evidence and sound theories.

What is more interesting, though, is not the alleged evidence for ancient atom bombs but rather *why* people come to embrace a belief in the existence of nuclear devastation in the remote past. Surely the History Channel would not program *Ancient Aliens: The Series* if two million or more viewers weren't ready and willing to embrace the idea of aliens with atomic weapons.

Unfortunately, there are no reliable statistics to tell us just how many people today believe that the ancient world experienced nuclear war. We do know that surveys conducted by anthropology professor Kenneth L. Feder found that in the 1990s anywhere from a quarter to a third of college students believed Atlantis existed, and a third or more believed "aliens from other worlds visited the earth in the prehistoric past." By 2003, belief in ancient astronauts had fallen to less than 10%, but more than a third still believed in Atlantis, today often seen as a hotbed of advanced (and atomic) technology.

Though the Atlantis legend has its origins in an unfinished work by Plato written more than 2,500 years ago, the modern version of the Atlantis legend begins with Ignatius Donnelly, an American politician who wrote *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World* in 1882 to prove that the lost continent was very real and was the origin of all European, Asian, and Native American civilizations. Donnelly was the first to equate Atlantis with the destructive power of advanced weaponry. In the book he discusses an event from the Bible when “a fire from the Lord consumed two hundred and fifty men” who led a rebellion against Moses (Numbers 16:31-41). Tellingly, though, Donnelly interpreted this event through the lens of the technology of his time: “This looks very much as if Moses had blown up the rebels with gunpowder” (449). He also thought gunpowder was responsible for explosions in India and Atlantis.

Though Donnelly believed Atlantis was roughly as sophisticated as the pre-industrial Europe of the eighteenth century, those who built on his work steadily expanded the wonders of the lost continent to include everything from lasers to antigravity devices to nuclear power, keeping the mythical Atlantis one step ahead of modern technology. By the time of von Däniken, Donnelly’s quaint ideas about gunpowder had gone out the window. Instead, von Däniken argued that biblical explosions, like the one at Sodom, were effected “deliberately, by a nuclear explosion” (36). Granted, even nuclear scientists like J. Robert Oppenheimer, the father of the atom bomb, noted the (thematic, not literal) similarities between passages in the *Bhagavad Gita* and the destructive power of atomic weapons, but why was it that in the 1970s ancient texts started to seem like historical records of nuclear war?

Ironically enough, von Däniken provides the answer to this question, in a passage I quoted earlier in this book: “[S]ince the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japan,” he wrote, “we know the kind of damage such bombs cause and that living creatures exposed to direct radiation die or become seriously ill” (36).

Because the nuclear age had produced horrors on a scale previously unimaginable, and because nuclear war was a very real possibility during the Cold War (the Cuban Missile Crisis had occurred just six years before von Däniken published his first book), it made sense that some would begin to look for mythological and historical precedents for otherwise unprecedented events. This relationship between modern technology and the ancient atom bomb theory has kept it current even as so many other “alternative” beliefs of the ’70s—like psychic spoon bending, EST, and pyramid power—have lost their currency.

In fact, the same day that the Svalbard Global Seed Vault opened, an article appeared on the *American Chronicle* website declaring that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Atlantis and the lesser-known lost continent of Mu were all the result of ancient atom bombs. Like von Däniken, writer Paul Dale Roberts immediately understood the connection between his reconstruction of the past and his concerns about the present: “The world is in dire straights (sic) ...With the threat of terrorism, crime, global warming, wars and the rumors of wars, new diseases arising, we are facing the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.”

Roberts’s description of ancient atomic warfare leaned heavily on the work of the field’s most popular author, David Hatcher Childress, who in the late 1990s connected the dots to events then in the news, the development of nuclear weapons in the 1990s in both Pakistan and India, countries that had previously fought several (non-nuclear) wars: “The echoes of ancient atomic warfare in south Asia continue to this day with India and Pakistan currently threatening each other,” Childress wrote. “Ironically, Kashmir, possibly the site of an earlier atomic war, is the focus of this conflict. Will the past repeat itself in India and Pakistan?” (“Evidence”).

Childress has appeared in countless television documentaries to testify to the advanced state of ancient technology, and cable channels

like the History Channel and the Syfy Channel have been complicit in popularizing the story of ancient nuclear weapons, the myth of Atlantis, and the “reality” of ancient astronauts. The echo chamber of the internet reinforces these beliefs among the core of believers. And ancient mysteries sell better than science.

“I have to wonder,” geologist Mervine wrote in 2005, “what inspires such crazy notions and how people such as Von Daniken and Childress manage to sell so many books. Certainly, far more copies of a single one of their books have been sold than, say, all the editions of my igneous petrology textbook.” For Mervine, the answer comes from the explanatory power of fringe theories, which offer a one-size-fits-all explanation for the otherwise complex and difficult tangles of ancient history. It’s easier to say the aliens or Atlantians did it than to study the intricacies of history.

While this may be true for the Atlantis theory or the ancient astronaut theory, for the specific case of ancient atom bombs, it seems that contemporary anxieties are being projected backward into the past. Until the first nuclear blast in 1945, no human civilization had possessed the power to completely destroy civilization, but imagining such a civilization in the deep past serves two powerful purposes.

First, it provides a morality tale for the modern world. A great civilization (human or alien) once had the power to destroy the world. They misused the power and destroyed themselves. We must therefore avoid their fate. Second, it provides a comforting ray of hope. Although early human civilization had been destroyed, we are still here today. Humanity can and will survive nuclear war, and the species will go on.

The story of ancient atomic bombs, therefore, is a morality tale with a promise for redemption. *It tells us that we will be ok even when the technology we create threatens to destroy us.* For this reason, the modern myth of ancient atom bombs continues to ricochet around the internet, cable television, and “alternative history” publishers and likely will for years to come.

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