Flash! Fox News Reports that Aliens May Have Built the Pyramids of Egypt!

Pseudoscience as news? The Fox Network's handling of its primetime special "Opening the Lost Tombs: Live from Egypt" raises ethical questions.

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Touldn't believe my eyes. It was a Sunday night, on the ten o'clock news. Right between a report on Y2K and another on a fine against a local construction company, Fox 5 News in New York saw fit to give us a "special report" on who built the pyramids. The graphic behind the announcer, on a backdrop of the Gizeh pyramids, asks the question: "Alien Architects?" The announcer plugs the upcoming Fox television network special "Opening the Lost Tombs: Live From Egypt," then segues into the story with the campy introduction, "There are many mysteries in Egypt, like the pyramids. Who built them and how did they do it?" With that she introduces Fox News correspondent David Garcia, who begins his voice-over to video of the

pyramids: "The ancient future, a civilization of contradiction." Immediately we hear another voice in an Arabic accent, "a pyramid was a tomb," followed immediately by another similar voice, "the pyramid has never been a tomb."

This is how it begins, and it only gets worse. Besides the ramifications of this news report for the whole field of jour-

nalism-the way it was conducted, and the shoddy journalism it representsthere is the then-upcoming special that this "news report" was plugging, which aired the following Tuesday & (March 2, 1999). Although that show might be excused as "entertainment," when the same thing is done on a regular news hour, amidst real news, such an excuse is inadequate. And as I eventually discovered, it would even be ethically questionable for Fox to call its live "entertainment." special One scholar who participated in it told me he agreed to take part in the show for no fee, on the basis that it was a "news" program. "They certainly used the word 'news'," he told me, "using that as the reason why 'no one' who was interviewed was getting paid." If that is true, and if Fox does

claim the show was entertainment, then it is pulling a fast one.

Questionable Sources

On the ten o'clock news, after we are told that the pyramids have never been a tomb, correspondent Garcia continues, "Still, modern day scholars debate not only what they are, but why they are—who, or what, built them?" He treats both claims as if they are exemplary of real scholarly debate. Does Garcia really think that? He could not be reached for comment. Then we see a man identified onscreen as "Fadel Gad, Egyptologist." What news does he have for us? Why, just this: "Were the Egyptians thinking of UFOs at that time? Yes! A very sophisticated, highly intelligent species that had intercepted this planet Earth and had caused the evolution and the exploration of the human consciousness." A real Egyptologist is saying this? This is what Fox News is reporting. Though I later found that Mr. Gad has extensive field experience and a master's degree in Egyptology, he has authored no known pub-

lications, and is not a member of the International Association of Egyptologists.¹ But there is one more thing: Fadel Gad just happens to be a co-executive producer of "Opening the Lost Tombs." This is not mentioned in this news report. Here is a real blurring of the line between news and entertainment, with producers being portrayed as unbiased experts on news stories

to drum up interest in their future entertainment programs.

The thrust of the report was definitely not skeptical. Garcia tells us that "traditional Egyptologists" consider "even the mention of UFOs or other-world intelligence [as] heresy," as if this were about opinion and dogma, with rival opinions as good as any other, instead of being about facts and evidence. The only skeptic presented was Zahi Hawass, "Undersecretary of State," a truly renowned Egyptologist, widely published in the field, with a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania (all far more than Fadel Gad can claim). But Dr. Hawass was not listed as an Egyptologist-instead, he was identified as an establishment bureaucrat (though it wasn't mentioned, he would also be involved in

the upcoming special). Hawass explains, "People like to dream, If you meet someone who is not an archaeologist, they love to dream." Recounting the claims of aliens, he concludes, "That's a dream! My job is to let you dream, but you have to know a little bit about reality." That is all Hawass gets to say against the ideas of Mr. Gad. No other experts or information are presented on this matter. This furthers the impression that the debate is about opinions, not facts, about heretics fighting the establishment and being arrogantly dismissed as dreamers.

Eventually, Garcia tells us, "also preserved are records, etched in stone, supporting evidence not of this Earth." This is a tacit approval of the alien hypothesis by a mainstream journalist on a major network's regular ten o'clock news hour. This is not a tabloid; this is supposedly a mainstream source. Yet



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there is no hint of skepticism.

What is this "supporting evidence" not of this Earth? Gad again: "The records indicate that we came from another place, we came from the stars." Do they? A picture is then shown of some Egyptian hieroglyphs resembling rings, and we hear Gad declaring "they look like flying saucers!" Then comes a picture of a carving of an Egyptian in a ceremonial headdress, followed by Gad's voice again: "They are showing figures with antennas on their head. Very mysterious." No other interpretation is offered, no one is given the chance to rebut Gad's reading of these glyphs.

Garcia finishes with a sappy catch-phrase ending, typical of this brand of TV journalism, "A higher intelligence, or merely dedicated hard work? Which theory is correct? Neither is proven. It is the mystery of Egypt," an overt declaration that the aliens theory is just as good as any other, that it hasn't been "proven" that the pyramids are man-made. If the Fox network can be this gullible, or this incompetent, or this shifty, on a subject where information and experts abound, how can anyone trust anything else they report?

By now I was dreading the Fox special. I had already found the Fox Web site (www.foxnetwork.com/egypt/) promoting all kinds of pseudoscience, uncritically, from mummy curses to aliens to psychics. No real journalism appears on the Web site at all, virtually no skepticism, and no references or authorities. Statements are made as if they were facts. The Titanic was sunk by a mummy's curse; the pyramids may have been built to signal space travellers; the fifty-year-old predictions of "the celebrated American psychic" Edgar Cayce suggest the pyramids were built ten thousand years ago; that the Sphinx shows damagé from the Great Flood; and a secret hall of records from Atlantis would be found under it in the late 1990s-conveniently, the very time that Fox planned to explore, live on television, new shafts opened up "beneath" the Sphinx (not exactly-more like behind it).

"Forget about everything you've ever seen or heard about" the Sphinx and the pyramids, Maury Povich says as the show begins. Then there's a cheesy voice-over, asking the questions that set the tone for the rest of the show. "Are there clues to man's destiny? Was it Atlantis that taught Egypt how to build? Are we the descendants of astronauts from another world?" The entire two-hour show is littered with New Age authors pushing their theories, interspersed with more interesting archaeological tours led by Zahi Hawass. Hawass is a wonderful scientist, and clearly loves his job. He embodies the excitement of archaeology, and is eager to share it with others. Around this backbone of "reality," which included the new, "live-on-TV" discovery of an intact mummy, the exploration of an unused tomb, and the first-ever public viewing of the tomb of Osiris, the content is entirely lopsided in favor of the "heretics." The "reality" aspect of the show is also suspect; much of it seemed staged. It was apparent that Hawass had explored many of these sites before, identifying art and translating inscriptions, in preparation for

the show (and then, perhaps, "setting them up" by covering them with sand). Moreover, many archaeologists, whose comments can be read in the ANE Digest archives, note that Hawass was providing a very bad example of how to conduct a dig. Some even said they would use the video to instruct students on what not to do.2

A Parade of Paranormal Purveyors

We are given a tour of all the outlandish theories at the start of the program, with longer, corresponding monologues popping in and out as the show progresses, apparently to fill dead time between setting up archaeological sites for the TV cameras. In each case an author pitches his theory, with the title of his book appearing on screen. We are thus led through the entire gamut of "heretical" Egyptology today. The narrative quaintly portrays these guys as the "doubters" and "skeptics" who are challenging supposedly tired, old views. About these theorists, who posit lost civilizations and alien visitors, Povich tells us, "their ideas, or at least some of them, are not quite as wacky as you might suspect." Indeed, "they are vigorously challenging mainstream archaeologists like Zahi Hawass." When at last we get some comment from Hawass, sanity is championed, though not permitted a fair fight. He is only given time to say the obvious: "There is no evidence at all, existing in any place in Egypt, about this lost civilization."

So who are these purveyors of the strange? First, the views of Edgar Cayce, the deceased psychic mentioned in the Web site, are espoused by John Van Auken of the Edgar Cayce Foundation. He tells us we will be enlightened by the discovery of the secret hall of records containing the truth about our past. Then there is Richard Hoagland, author of The Monuments of Mars. We are descended, he says, from Martian refugees who settled at Gizeh. Robert Bauval is there, author of The Orion Mystery. The three pyramids of Gizeh were built thousands of years earlier than we think, according to him, since they must have been aligned with the Orion constellation, which was only possible in 10,500 B.C. We get to hear from John Anthony West, author of Serpent in the Sky. The Sphinx, he insists, must have been built in 12,000 B.C. in order for so much erosion to have occurred (and, of course, the fact that the head was refashioned is to him further proof of its fantastic antiquity). Graham Hancock, author of Heaven's Mirror, makes an appearance. He believes, among other things, that "an earlier civilization" that emphasized the soul rather than technology was destroyed in a great flood, and the survivors settled in Egypt. He says we are "technologically brilliant" but "spiritually barren" and so we should look to this ancient civilization for guidance.

Who gets to speak on behalf of the real scholars? Severalbut none of them are asked or allowed to comment on any of the other theories being touted on the show. Among the genuine experts, who give brief talks on ordinary facts and theories

not related to the New Age claims, are Bob Brier, an Egyptologist from Long Island University; Dieter Arnold from the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Gaballa Ali Gaballa, Secretary General of the Egyptian Antiquities Council (actually the Supreme Council for Antiquities), and, though it is not mentioned (as in the case of Hawass in the previous Sunday's news report), a leading Egyptologist with a Ph.D. from Liverpool University; Aidan Dodson, an Egyptologist (now at the University of Bristol) commenting on the King Tut dig; and Nicholas Reeves, author of *The Complete Tutankhamun*, who talks about how good forensic evidence suggests the boy king was murdered (Dr. Dodson weighs in on this one, too).

Mixing and Matching Expert Theories

The only credible expert with unorthodox ideas was Robert Schoch, author of *Voices of the Rocks*. Though not mentioned in the show, he holds a Ph.D. in geology and geophysics from Yale and has been a faculty member at Boston University since 1984. But the way his testimony is treated is part of a worrisome trend. By interweaving comments by both Schoch and

West, Schoch's geological observations are depicted as supporting West. But Schoch only dates the core body of the Sphinx to around 5000 B.C. (as opposed to 2500 B.C. as is normally believed, or 12,000 B.C. as West argues), based on his estimation of the rates of rain erosion.³

Schoch told me he did not see the show, so could not comment on how his views were portrayed. But as far as I can tell, he

certainly does not advocate West's theory, and it seems a bit shifty to present them as if they are a tag team supporting a common view. But Schoch's claims very specifically do not encompass the head or hind quarters of the Sphinx, and he also notes that his dating falls within the period of known megalith civilizations (the walls of Jericho, for example, were built in 8,000 B.C.). But this is not the theory presented on the show. Instead, the scene turns on two occasions to Schoch to argue about water erosion data, during the monologue of John Anthony West, who argues "if the water-weathering theory is correct" then there was "a very ancient and highly sophisticated" (stone carving is "highly" sophisticated?) "civilization existing at a time when no civilization is supposed to have existed." When? In 12,000 B.C. Povich then says this may be the "last monument" of a vanished civilization. When he rhetorically asks if there is further evidence, he turns immediately, not to any archaeologist or historian, but to Edgar Cayce—the psychic.

But that is not the most disturbing part of this story. Schoch is shown arguing that "there were moist periods, rainy periods, in Egypt that clearly predate the modern Sahara desert." Then at once we see West, who follows, "this kind of a rainy period prevailed in Egypt around from the time when

the last ice age broke up," and thus the Sphinx had to have been built around then. There is no qualification or distinction made here between the two views. Schoch is very plainly being presented as if he is West's co-theorist. Lest we be mistaken, Povich introduced the whole segment by saying "as we have seen, many suspect ancient Egypt was influenced by a vanished genius culture. For one group, the rock of the Sphinx speaks the truth." But wait, isn't Schoch's book called Voices of the Rocks? This seems an almost deliberate attribution of West's odd theory to Schoch, as if his book argues for a lost civilization (it does not—it isn't even about the Sphinx, although it briefly mentions it). We are led here to believe that Schoch and West are the "one group" Maury is talking about. This is a dangerous license to be taken with serious scholarship.

There were other "experts" as well. Christopher Frayling, listed as a "popular culture historian" and author of *The Face of Tutankhamun*, tells us that "the most convincing explanation of the curse" of King Tut is that "some energy" of some kind was pent up in the tomb and released, affecting all who were associated with it. Fortunately, Dodson's account at least lets us

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judge for ourselves, since he reports how Lord Carnarvon died from an infected mosquito bite that was cut while shaving—a more plausible account, at least of his death. We are not told about any of the other "dozen" (Maury Povich) or "thirty-five" (Fox Web site) people who died under "mysterious circumstances," so Fox does not help us decide what to believe here. The way Dodson's narrative is abused, however, pushes ethical boundaries yet again. Interspersed with his otherwise historical account we hear others interject fantastic comments: Povich tells us that "at the precise moment of [Lord Carnarvon's] death" there was a blackout in Cairo, and Frayling adds that Carnarvon's pet howled and died in England. Are we being led to believe that Dodson endorses this account?

When asked, Dodson said he could not confirm any of the claims inserted into his monologue. However, he doubted that there were a "dozen" mysterious deaths, and added that Cairo's power system is so notoriously bad that a blackout would not be a supernatural coincidence. Is it ethical to splice factual statements when the speakers do not share each other's views? This is the very same thing done to Schoch. I asked Dodson if he would have liked to respond on TV to any of the claims made on the show (not just those littering his own segment). He said he would, but "with such off-the-wall ideas, it's almost

impossible to even try to rebut them. There's just no point of connection between reality and fantasy!"

This abuse is matched by yet another example. Povich introduces the "monuments on Mars" theory again later in the broadcast, adding that "recent exploration suggests it may be so." Immediately we hear a replay of a real news report, over the sight of a rocket launch. The news anchor's voice declares, "All the talk tonight is about Mars and whether American scientists have the proof that life once existed on that planet." Immediately, we move to Hoagland, and Viking orbiter images of the "face" on Mars. But wait . . . are we being told that there was a real news story about this, that "American scientists" were really asking whether this was proof of life on Mars? The recording sure sounded to me like a report on the evidence of microbial fossils in a Martian meteorite, but I have no way of knowing, because that part was cut out. If this is what they did, isn't this dishonest? This seems a serious ethical question.

Eventually we get to the expected tie-in with the previous Sunday's news report. Besides being told repeatedly that the Egyptian constructions were "seemingly supernatural" in their technical perfection,5 the hieroglyphs that "prove" our extraterrestrial origins are shown again. This time, Hoagland is our interpreter, despite the fact that even Fox won't stoop so low as to claim he has any expertise in this matter. We are shown a wall inscription, which Hoagland says has pictures of "high-tech things" like "helicopters and land speeders and spaceships and the Millennium Falcon." To prove his point, the Fox production team overlays video of an Apache helicopter to show the similarity. According to Ms. Griffis-Greenberg, an Egyptologist at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, who saw this broadcast, this interpretation is absurd, but not new to her-it has cropped up on the Usenet so many times she is tired of answering it. But she was glad to explain yet again, and referred me to more credible sources.

I spoke to several other Egyptologists who were amazed that this was being done on television, although one said to me that he expects this sort of thing now, "It is just what TV does." But what do the experts say about this "helicopter" glyph? This will serve as an example for all the rest: the "helicopter" is in fact the Abydos palimpsest. A palimpsest is what is created when new writing is inscribed over old. In the case of papyri, old ink is scraped off, but in the case of inscriptions, plaster is added over the old inscription and a new inscription is made. The image described as a helicopter is well known to be the names of Rameses inscribed over the names of his father (something Rameses was known to do quite frequently). A little bit of damage from time and weathering has furthered the illusion of a "helicopter." What we should ask is why no Egyptologists were questioned about this, something well known in the literature? As one of them said to me, "We don't live under rocks!" It would not have been hard to get an expert to clarify the meaning of the "helicopter"—they had several experts on camera already. Hawass is heard saying the claim of aliens coming from space and building the pyramids "is nuts," but he is never asked to comment on any specific details of the arguments being made. This is a very one-sided investigation. The people are not being fairly informed.

The show did conclude on an encouraging note, however. West's theory was tied to Cayce's claim of a lost hall of records beneath the Sphinx, and when the tomb of Osiris is being explored with Hawass, he is asked his opinion of the Cayce theory. His response? "It's a myth . . . but to be fair," he adds with a humorous tone, "I did not excavate this tunnel yet," pointing down a shaft perhaps leading in the direction of the Sphinx, "then really I don't know." Hopefully the audience will catch his sarcasm.

Hawass was also given (almost) the last word: "People like to dream. And I like to let them dream. But my show gives them a little of reality. I believe that all that we found today, this is the reality." And indeed he is right—for despite all the "wacky" theories, the only real facts that were exposed on the show were of that very reality: the pyramids were tombs built for mummified corpses buried only thousands, not tens of thousands, of years ago. The pyramids were built without secret history or technology; no Atlantis; no aliens; no amazing hall of records. Just an exciting, fascinating, thoroughly human, and definitely Egyptian, historical reality.

1. Fadel Gad is president of Joy Travel International (11600 Washington Pl., Suite 209, Los Angeles, CA 90066). He was travelling and could not be reached for comment. His resume cites official posts, from Inspector of Antiquities to Director of Excavations at Saqqara, excavations from 1973 to 1980, and a master's degree in Ancient Egyptian Art and Archaeology from Cairo University, 1981. He runs tours for organizations as diverse as The Institute of Noetic Sciences and the University of California, and works a lecture circuit on "Egyptian mythology." I contacted many people who met him, and all praised him as an ethical businessman and all-around nice guy. For online, mostly New Age, references to Fadel and his unusual teachings see www.visionmagazine.com/august98/artofliv.htm,www.intuition.org/jour ney.htm, and www.instadv.ucsb.edu/InstAdv/AlumniAssociation/Travel.

There was much discussion about this Fox special: see www-oi.uchicago.edu/OI/ANE/ANE-DIGEST/CURRENT.

3. See R. M. Schoch, "Redating the Great Sphinx of Giza," KMT: A Modern Journal of Ancient Egypt, 3:2 (Summer 1992), pp. 52-59, 66-70; T. L. Dobecki and R. M. Schoch, "Seismic Investigations in the Vicinity of the Great Sphinx of Giza, Egypt," *Geoarchaeology*, 7:6 (1992), pp. 527–544; R. M. Schoch, "L'Age du Sphinx de Gizeh: Vers Une Revision Dechirante?" Kadath, Chroniques des Civilisations Disparues, 81 (Winter 1993-1994), pp. 13-53).

4. See David Silverman, "The curse of the curse of the pharaohs,"

Expedition, 29:2 (1987), pp. 56-63.

5. The pyramids are still made of the most primitive of permanent construction materials (stone) and no super-technological cutting tools have been found. See also Robert Bianchi, "Pyramidiots," Archaeology, 44 (Nov-Dec 1991), p. 84, and Daniel Boorstin, "Afterlives of the great pyramids," The

Wilson Quarterly, 16 (Summer 1992), pp. 130-8.

6. See http://www.finart.be/UfocomHq/usabydos.htm. See also Juergen von Beckerath, Handbuch der Aegyptischen Koenigsnamen, Muenchner Aegyptologische Studien 20, pp. 235–237; Omm Sety and Hanny El Zeini Abydos: Holy City of Ancient Egypt, 1981, p. 187; and Shafik Farid, ed., The Temple At Abydos, 1983, Simpkins Splendor of Egypt series, 1983, p. 8. I would like to thank Ms. Griffis-Greenberg for her help.