

Netflix's 'Ancient Apocalypse' is more fiction than fact, say experts

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Is the Great Pyramid of Cholula in Mexico a legacy of an advanced civilization that was wiped out 12,000 years ago? Highly unlikely, say two U of A experts who take issue with how the Netflix series “Ancient Apocalypse” portrays archeology and academia. Credit: Diego Delso via Wikimedia Commons, CC-BY-SA 4.0

Since the controversial documentary series "Ancient Apocalypse" dropped on Netflix last November, academics and journalists around the

world have been incensed at its false claims and misinformation.

Earlier this month, the Society for American Archaeology wrote a letter to Netflix urging the platform to reclassify the show as "science fiction" rather than "documentary," arguing it "publicly disparages archaeologists and devalues the archaeological profession."

University of Alberta archaeologist André Costopoulos and misinformation fighter Timothy Caulfield have taken to [social media](#) and the blogosphere—Costopoulos to evaluate its claims about the past, and Caulfield to contend that the series is a dangerous attempt to discredit science and the academy, all the more so because of its enormous global appeal.

In its first week the show garnered 25 million viewing hours and climbed to Netflix's top 10 in 31 countries.

Costopoulos and Caulfield urge viewers to critically weigh the evidence and come to their own conclusions about a series that professes to "overthrow what we know about history."

Lost civilization—or logical fallacy?

The premise of the series is as old as Plato's allegory of Atlantis, an [ancient civilization](#) built by half-god/half-humans and eventually submerged in the Atlantic Ocean by the gods as punishment for its creators' greed and hubris.

In "Ancient Apocalypse," British journalist Graham Hancock proposes a similar advanced civilization "lost to history"—wiped out by a cataclysmic event 12,000 years ago. He travels the world attempting to prove its existence.

In the series' opening teaser, he takes aim at the "extremely defensive, arrogant and patronizing attitude of mainstream academia." He alleges that conventional archaeologists and "so-called experts" fear his evidence because it "calls into question everything they have told us about the prehistory of humanity."

The problem, say Costopoulos and Caulfield, is that much of Hancock's "evidence" is grossly misleading if not pure fabrication, even if seductively compelling.

"We've seen this again and again: An exciting narrative, a documentary, beautiful production, a provocative narrator can overwhelm [scientific evidence](#)," says Caulfield.

"Ancient Apocalypse" is just one example of a wider cultural trend denying expertise and the value of science, he says. It falls within the same pseudo-documentary genre as the anti-vaccine film "Died Suddenly"; Tucker Carlson's docu-series on declining [testosterone levels](#), "End of Men"; and "2,000 Mules," which falsely documents widespread corruption in the 2020 American election.

"It almost makes denying expertise a noble task," says Caulfield. "You're a hero if you stand opposed to conventional wisdom. Hancock considers it a badge of honor that he's not an archaeologist and not a scientist. He's a humble journalist fighting the good fight."

Caulfield calls "Ancient Apocalypse" a great example of the "Galileo Gambit"—the logical fallacy that you must be right because everyone else thinks you're wrong.

"Actually, most of the time it means you're wrong," says Caulfield.

He takes particular issue with Hancock's "absurd" assumption that

academia is a monolithic institution pushing some master narrative that everyone on the inside agrees with.

"I don't know what academia he's talking about. We argue about everything!" says the founder of #ScienceUpFirst, a social media campaign aimed at countering misinformation on the internet.

"These kinds of documentaries reify the view that we're all evil, and there's no such thing as academic freedom."

The 'what if?' is the easy part

Costopoulos agrees that, far from suppressing challenging evidence, archaeologists actually crave the new insight it might produce. That's how scientific knowledge advances, he says, but any new claim has to be backed up by evidence.

"Surprising finds are always more interesting and more productive than unsurprising finds in archeology. If I always found what I expected, there would be no reason for me to do research."

Asking provocative questions is a great start, he adds, as are bold what-if propositions. But that's the easy part of science.

"What matters is what we do with the claim. archaeologists evaluate its internal consistency through argument and logic, testing it time and again against evidence."

Placed under that kind of rigorous scrutiny, the claims in "Ancient Apocalypse" just don't hold up, he says. He encourages viewers to resist sensational appeals and think in a more nuanced way about the difficulty of knowing the deep past, which is almost by definition shrouded in darkness.

"Most of what we think we know about the past is wrong, or at least not completely true. Some of what we think we know is truer than some of the rest, and some is as close as we're going to get."

But unlike Caulfield and the Society of American Archaeologists, Costopoulos isn't convinced reclassifying "Ancient Apocalypse" as fiction is the best approach to countering pseudoarcheology.

People are far more likely to search for supporting evidence and background information online while watching documentaries, he says, and that at least engages their critical faculties.

And when curious viewers do go searching, Costopoulos sees it as his job to point them in the right direction.

"I want to give people the information and the tools they need to evaluate the claims they encounter," he says, adding that the claims in 'Ancient Apocalypse' are either untestable or "not very likely to be true."

Understanding the appeal of the intuitive

Since the release of the series, Costopoulos' blog post on pseudoarcheology has attracted more than 50,000 viewers, a clear sign people are starved for evidence and perspective.

Caulfield says he understands why people are fascinated by Hancock's thesis and calls for more empathy in understanding those swayed by misinformation.

As a young man, Caulfield was "obsessed" with the [science-fiction](#) blockbuster "Chariots of the Gods," the 1968 book by Erich von Däniken suggesting that ancient astronauts arrived on Earth long before humans to build an advanced civilization.

"I totally get it. It's exciting, it feels mysterious and feels like just a bit of fun. It has an intuitive appeal to it."

For that very reason, however, viewers should remain skeptical when watching or reading any provocative material.

The best advice Caulfield can offer? Read your own emotions constantly.

"Is it playing to anger, to ideology? Is it playing to your hopes or fears? That doesn't mean that you shouldn't let those things draw you in. But recognize what the creators are doing."

Documentaries are persuasive by nature, he says. We are hard-wired to believe them, seduced by their very form. Studies have shown that even health science students, presumably well versed in critical thinking, will be persuaded by a documentary with inaccurate assertions because of assumptions about its genre, production values and story arc.

As Costopoulos reminds us in his blog, there is plenty of captivating evidence-based history to explore without getting lost in the fake stuff.

"Even if we limit ourselves to the evidence actually available to us, instead of verging into the pseudoarcheological, there is unexpected wonder in the past," he writes.

"There is surprise, and there are reflections of us, as we are now, in all our complexity and our advancement. No need to make it up—it's all there."

Provided by University of Alberta

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