

BOX 10.1 PSEUDOARCHAEOLOGY

Pseudoarchaeology involves explanations of places, people, and things from the past using unusual, far-fetched, often bizarre, and extremely unlikely scenarios. Although proponents of outlandish theories often purport to be following scientific methods and contextualize their explanations within archaeology, they are clearly not following the principles or methods of science in general and archaeology in particular, and usually demonstrate a poor understanding of the prehistoric and historic past.

Pseudoarchaeology is big business. One well-known pseudoarchaeologist, Erich von Daniken, has sold tens of millions of books, opened a theme park, and produced multiple documentaries, all purporting that many of the major features of the prehistoric past have been either created or facilitated by visits to Earth by extraterrestrial aliens. Pseudoarchaeology persists in mainstream media, in print, online, in movies, on video, and on a multitude of television programs, including documentaries and reality programming.

Pseudoarchaeologists often make fantastic claims, including, but certainly not limited to, that the lines on the Nazca desert in Peru are in fact landing strips for alien spacecraft; that the Egyptian pyramids were built with knowledge obtained from extraterrestrials; that the statues of Rapa Nui were created to relieve boredom by stranded extraterrestrials awaiting rescue; and that Mayan art depicts ancient astronauts.

One of the most common ploys of pseudoarchaeologists, especially those claiming to be following the scientific method, is to frame possible explanations as a series of several hypotheses. They then proceed to rule out all the hypotheses but the last one, which invariably is the most fantastic, bizarre, and outlandish of all, often invoking extraterrestrials and occasionally conspiracies by mainstream archaeologists to keep things quiet. This is far from acceptable science. A basic rule of science is that one should never accept a hypothesis by merely ruling out the others. And this is what pseudoarchaeologists do, almost every time.