

Marco Ciardi

Il mistero degli antichi astronauti. Rome: Carocci, 2017, 220 pages, ISBN: 978-88-43-08546-0.

As a real science fiction novel, this essay begins with a classical “what if?” scenario: what if Earth was invaded by a civilization with an advanced knowledge and technology in ancient times? The “theory of the ancient astronauts” was exactly this: the possibility that extraterrestrial entities reached our planet in the past and left evidence of their stay, such as archaeological finds of their coherent historical context or even genetic manipulations of the prehistoric hominids, therefore constituting a direct influence on human evolution. The literature on this topic has been flourishing since the XIX century, but the issue is not only a historical one. What about the scientific basis of this “theory”? The answer to this question is actually an enigma: Marco Ciardi tries to solve the puzzle in his book, piecing together the origins of this theme. Ciardi uses scientific and pseudo-scientific books as means to investigate the precincts in which the problem has been addressed, showing how “the theory of the ancient astronauts” has influenced popular texts such as science fiction novels, short stories and comics.

The book is structured in three parts: “The context of the mystery”, “The definition of the mystery” and “The diffusion of the mystery”: a chronological as well as logical division that explains when the problem was born, how it consolidated and became a popular subject.

In the first part of the book, the author shows how men believed that universe was populated by different creatures since ancient times, while only in the last two centuries this belief became a pre-eminent topic in literature. Since the second half of the XIX century, and thanks to authors like Jules Verne, Herbert George Wells, Edgar Allan Poe and others, the moon and Mars became new places for the setting of fictional stories, for finding other intelligent species, and communicating with them. This new attitude, together with the imagination provided by the recent scientific discoveries and space observations, began to blend with the idea of an ancient advanced civilization living on Earth before the emergence of *homo sapiens*. The result of this attitude was not only matter for fictional adventures but in some cases turned into a real field of study. For enthusiastic scholars of esoteric disciplines, this ancient wisdom was something real; proofs were shown in ancient esoteric texts and in particular in the religious interpretations of the origin of men. The most famous contemporary movement which embraced all these elements was theosophy, a new spiritual doctrine proposed by the Theosophical Society, founded in New York in 1875 by Madame Blavatsky. This doctrine was grounded in the idea of a cyclic history of

the world, with the last cycle starting with the Great Flood. It also featured the belief in the higher mental and scientific development of ancient civilizations. The diffusion of these ideas made the myths of Atlantis and Mu interesting again, and fostered curiosity for disciplines which focused on ancient cultures, like Egyptology.

In the second part of the book, the author focuses on the path that led to the definition of the idea of “ancient astronauts” invading planet Earth thousands years ago. The main theme concerns the figure of alien artefacts, creatures or population coming from outer space. Here, Ciardi engages with many fictional productions showing how pseudo-scientific theories mixed with literature. Some paragraphs are dedicated to famous novels and short stories. For example, Jack London’s *The Red One*, which seems to be a primitive version of *The Sentinel* by Arthur C. Clarke (also mentioned in the book) – namely the basis for the novel, and then the movie, 2001: *A Space Odyssey* – or various visionary works by Howard P. Lovecraft, a skeptical writer who developed ideas from esoteric studies. However, Ciardi also points out that not only fiction dealt with the theme of “ancient astronauts”. Charles Fort’s *The Book of the Damned* gave a different twist to theosophical speculations, giving birth to extraterrestrial mythology and, with it, to the “role of the unknown masters which Madame Blavatsky talked about” and which “is now assigned to aliens who visited and conquered the Earth in the past”. The author examines at length the pursuit that leads from the Fortean Society to popular magazines like *Astounding Science Fiction*, trying to underline the influence of non fiction in science-fiction writing. Another important contribution to the imagination of the “ancient astronauts” was without any doubt the rocketry avant-garde of the XIX and XX centuries, whose discoveries were reflected on the short stories and comics of the first two decades of the XX century.

In the third part, Ciardi deals with more recent times, more specifically with those pseudo-scientific books about U.F.O.s and ancient societies that, through the use of a significant number of sources, wanted to achieve the status of truth. It is the case of the writings by Immanuel Velikovsky, Desmond Leslie, Morris Ketchum Jessup and many others. In the Italian context, an important case is represented by Luigi Rapuzzi. Rapuzzi published some novels in the famous series “I romanzi di Urania” under the pseudonym of L.R. Johannis. In his novels, an ancient population from outer space lands on Earth, meets the native race of the anthropoids and, mixing with it, creates the human species as we know it. Ciardi admits that the literature about “ancient astronauts” is almost impossible to track down after the 1950s, and argues that this literary genre did not add anything new to earlier themes from that time onwards. Ciardi also adds some pages to explain how, since the dawn of modernity,

well-known scientists were fascinated by alien life in the universe, how they conceived its characters, and what chance humans had to communicate with them.

To conclude, Ciardi comes back to the original question: is there a scientific basis for the theory of the “ancient astronauts”? As a skeptical scholar and an intellectual he obviously cannot answer in a positive way. Nonetheless, this theory results from a huge mass of sources where each brick has its exact place in the building. However, “science requires detailed analysis [...] in a restricted field of studies”, Ciardi claims, and so it is very difficult for it to reach broad audiences. Today just as as one hundred years ago, pseudoscience is fascinating, and it has more chances to reach the common man.

Overall, the book is a good source for the understanding of the historical trajectory of this specific topic. The author is able to keep the reader’s interest alive; *Il mistero degli antichi astronauti* is a valuable source not only for science-fiction lovers but also for anyone who wants to better understand the origin of pseudo-scientific theories about ancient societies living on Earth before the birth of mankind, and to distinguish them from the established scientific ones.

Stefano Spataro

University of Bari

st.spataro@gmail.com