

How Da Vinci Code tapped pseudo-fact hunger

By Damian Thompson
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Has anyone revealed that after Jesus married the notorious Freemason Mary Magdalene in a ceremony on top of the Great Pyramid of Giza, she spirited him off to the south of France in one of the FBI's black helicopters?

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If not, it can only be a matter of time. We are living in a golden age of fake history and archaeology – historical counterknowledge, as I call it – some of which is easily identifiable as rubbish and some of which is pseudo-

scholarship carefully dressed up to look authentic. And you do not have to root around the internet to discover it: every major bookshop in Britain stocks bogus history.



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Until a few years ago, nearly all this material could be found on shelves marked "Mysteries". Now you can find pseudohistory in the history section. All Britain's major bookshops stock a volume called 1421: The Year China Discovered the World by Gavin Menzies. The author, a retired naval commander, thinks Chinese fleets discovered America, Australia, New Zealand, Greenland and Antarctica in the 15th century.

"The drivelt of a two-year-old," was the verdict of the leading British historian Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, professor of global environmental history at Queen Mary, University of London. Other historians have echoed this view: not one professional scholar supports Menzies's thesis. Yet, last year, Britain's two major chains of bookstores were selling 1421 as "recommended history".

The public has been buying works of speculative archaeology and history in increasing numbers for many years. Oddly, however, it was a work of fiction, Dan Brown's thriller The Da Vinci Code – which has sold 40 million copies since 2003 – that alerted authors, publishers and filmmakers to the commercial potential of historical counterknowledge.

At the heart of The Da Vinci Code was lay a controversial historical narrative that Brown insists was not fiction but history. Indeed, he begins the story with a page marked "Fact", which says: "The Priory of Sion – a European Secret Society founded in 1099 – is a real organisation. In 1975 Paris's Bibliothèque Nationale discovered parchments known as Les Dossiers Secrets, identifying numerous members of the Priory of Sion, including Sir Isaac Newton, Sandro Botticelli, Victor Hugo and Leonardo da Vinci."

In the course of the novel, we learn that Jesus married Mary Magdalene, who bore him a child; their descendents became the Merovingian kings of France. This secret is protected by the Priory of Sion. According to Brown, Leonardo da Vinci hinted at the truth in his Last Supper, in which the androgynous St John is actually the Magdalene. The Roman Catholic Church also knows this secret, and is desperate to suppress the truth. Again, this is a conspiracy theory to which Dan Brown actually subscribes.

The theory is not new. In 1982, Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln published The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail, which introduced English-speaking readers to the connection between the Magdalene, the Merovingians and the Priory of Sion. They themselves partly based their work on a book called Le Tresor Maudit de Rennes-le-Chateau (1967) by Gérard de Sède, a self-confessed hoaxter and forger of historic documents. Holy Blood, Holy Grail, as it was called in America, became an instant bestseller.

In reality, The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail was pure pseudohistory. Laura Miller, writing for Salon in 2004, described its technique: "A preposterous idea will first be floated as a guess, then later presented as a tentative hypothesis, then still later treated as a fact ... The miasma of bogus authenticity becomes impenetrable; you might as well use a rifle to fight off a thick fog."

Ken Mondschtein, reviewing a reprint of the book, made fun of the notion that the bloodline of Jesus and Mary Magdalene could have been preserved: "Infant mortality in pre-modern times was ridiculously high, and you'd only need one childhood accident or disease in 2,000 years to wipe out the bloodline ... keep the children of Christ marrying each other, on the other hand, and eventually they'd be so inbred that the sons of God would have flippers for feet."

In the 1990s, Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln learned that they had been the victims of an elaborate hoax. The Priory of Sion, it turned out, was founded as recently as the late 1940s by Pierre Plantard, a fake French aristocrat; the "medieval" Priory documents were knocked up by Plantard's con-artist friends.

Yet, when The Da Vinci Code shot to the top of the bestseller lists, The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail was reprinted and placed next to Brown's thriller in bookshops. No mention was made of the hoax. It has now sold six million copies. A visitor from Mars (of whom there have been many, according to pseudohistorians) would be confused. How did this peculiar genre develop?

Academics use the word "hyperdiffusionist". A hyperdiffusionist theory proposes that the greatest cultural achievements of one ancient civilisation can be traced to another, higher civilisation whose ideas were transmitted as a result of voyages that never happened. Anyone who tells you that the Egyptians/Minoans/Lost Tribes of Israel built the Mayan pyramids/Easter Island statues/Stonehenge is a hyperdiffusionist. Also, the phrase "before Columbus", when applied to transatlantic voyages, should set off a warning light, as should the adjective "lost" when applied to something as intrinsically hard to misplace as a civilisation.

"Fantastic archaeology", as Stephen Williams calls it, has been the province of the amateur and the mischievous ever since the 19th century, when enthusiastic researchers turned the Americas into the Grand Central Station of the ancient world, visited by Greeks, Romans, Celts, Phoenicians, Israelites, Nubians and "Hindoos". According to the Book of Mormon, the sacred text of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Israelites arrived in the Americas in 600 BC, and split into Nephites and Lamanites; they were later visited by Jesus Christ.

All of this is easy to mock; but, increasingly, pseudohistorians and cult archaeologists have been able to laugh back at their critics. The authors of badly written pseudohistory routinely sell more than a million copies of their books; television channels commission lavishly funded programmes from hyperdiffusionists. For the first time, archaeologists and historians have begun to feel that what was previously a joke genre is undermining their work.

The architect of the new cult archaeology is Graham Hancock, a former East African correspondent of the Economist. He is, at heart, an extreme hyperdiffusionist; but his rhetoric is ingenious, and reminiscent of Creation Scientists who use real gaps in the fossil record as a subtle way of introducing the idea that the Earth is 6,000 years old. According to Hancock, the Andean temples of Tiahuanco and Mexico's Pyramids of the Sun and Moon "reveal not only the clear fingerprints of an unknown people who flourished during the last ice age, but also disquieting signs of high intelligence and scientific knowledge." Nonsense? Channel 4 didn't think so: it gave Hancock a television series in which to expound these ideas.

The other day, I came across a book by Hancock and his fellow fantasist, Robert Bauval, in the history section of one of London's most respected bookshops. Talisman: Sacred Cities, Secret Faith pieces together the story of a "secret religion" founded in ancient Egypt that culminated in the Zionist-Masonic project to found the state of Israel. Hancock and Bauval suggest that the two pillars of Solomon's Temple and the Star of David represented in Masonic art bear a strong resemblance to the Twin Towers and the Pentagon – in other words, that the atrocities of September 11, 2001, are pieces in their jigsaw puzzle. (Quite how they do not explain.)

When I came across this passage, with its resonances of anti-Semitic conspiracy literature, I checked the spine of the book to remind myself of the publisher: it was the main imprint of Penguin Books.

Alarminglly, one variety of pseudohistory has worked its way into school textbooks and university curricula. It's called Afrocentric history, and anyone who criticises it runs a high risk of being accused of racism.

In 2007, Routledge – one of the leading academic publishers in Britain and America – published The History of Africa by Molefi Kete Asante, professor of African American studies at Temple University, Philadelphia.

For Asante, Africa is not just the birthplace of homo sapiens but also, more controversially, of civilisation. Asante always uses the Egyptian word "Kemet" for ancient Egypt, explaining that it meant "land of the blacks" or "the black country". In fact, it meant only the latter, and in a restricted sense: kemet (black) refers to the fertile soil, as opposed to deshret (red), the desert. Asante is implying that the Egyptians defined themselves in terms of their skin colour, which is not true.

He goes on to state baldly that Kemet invented writing and architecture, both very dubious claims. On the subject of the architect Imhotep, who lived around 2700 BC, he writes: "He was the first philosopher in human history ... As the first human being to be deified, that is made a deity by his society, he stands at the very top of African and world philosophy so great were his deeds." No source is given. Actually, we know virtually nothing about the real Imhotep; he left no writings or authentic sayings, there are no eyewitness accounts of him, and his deification did not take place until 2,000 years after his death.

Asante holds extreme views about the right of white professors to teach black American history. Most of them "do not have the proper orientation to adequately teach any African American studies," he writes. "They tend to be off on either orientation, facts, pedagogical skill, or humility". Try switching round "black" and "white" and substituting "European" for "African American" and it becomes clear what a breathtaking position this is.

Afrocentrism has its black opponents, who object to the way young black people are being drawn into a quasi-religious movement. Clarence Walker, professor of history at the University of California at Davis, writes that: "Like religion, Afrocentrism operates in the realm of faith and belief. One either accepts its preposterous claims or is anathematised. Doubtters are either racist, if they are white, or inauthentically black and co-opted by a world of Eurocentric madness."

It is this element of moral blackmail that distinguishes Afrocentrism from other forms of historical counterknowledge. Routledge prides itself on its rigour: I find it hard to believe that it would allow a scholar to make sweeping and unsupported statements unless it was afraid of being accused of racism.

Whatever the explanation, a leading academic publisher has added to the mountain of books that make claims whose falsehood could have been established if an editor had spent just a few minutes checking the sources. A History of Africa, The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail, The Jesus Papers, Talisman, 1421 and countless other titles all do the same thing, to a greater or lesser extent. They employ the rhetoric of authentic history, but not its method, to present myths as fact.