CHAPTER NINE

PYRAMIDOLOGY, HERETICS, MYSTICS AND CRANKS

IT IS A TRUTH UNIVERSALLY ACKNOWLEDGED THAT, while the subject of ancient Egypt has undoubtedly attracted some of the finest, most disinterested and most rigorous intellects of the past few centuries, it has also been a magnet for all manner of obsessives, charlatans, occultists and cranks. Professional Egyptologists have an unkind name for such types: "pyramidiots." One can well understand their irritation at seeing how all the countless painstaking hours that have built their discipline up into a genuine fund of accurate knowledge and scrupulous procedures may simply be cast to the wind by some raving visionary who claims that he was told in a dream that the pyramids were built by Venusians.

And yet, looking back at the long, motley history of the Egyptian rediscovery, the boundaries of sense and folly are a little more disputed than this clear division might suggest. At least a few of the greatest of the scholars involved in creating Egyptology (including its acknowledged modern paterfamilias, Petrie, in his pious adolescence) had some brush with occult theories, and in the period up to the seventeenth century, or even later, it is not easy to draw a line between orthodox and unorthodox belief, between science and magic. Witness the case of Sir Isaac Newton: probably the greatest of all scientists, but by the standards of the twenty-first century nonetheless a clear victim of "pyramidiocy."

For many centuries, one central Egyptological belief could be shared both by scholars of the highest intelligence and by those barely one step away from the lunatic asylum – the faith in a Lost Knowledge: the idea, in other words, that the Egyptians were in possession of all manner of wonderful secret insights and techniques, which were transmitted to posterity only in mutilated fragments – or not at all – by their conquerors and successors on the world stage, the Greeks and Romans. The Great Quest was, therefore, to rediscover the said Lost Knowledge; and few of those engaged in the quest, then as now, could resist the temptation posed by that vast brooding object on the Giza plateau and its two younger siblings.

This chapter, then, will rapidly survey some of the wilder shores of pyramidological studies over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Not everyone mentioned deserves to be dismissed as a fool or a charlatan (although quite a number can), but the reader should be wary throughout of taking any of their contentions too seriously without a full knowledge of the orthodox opinion on such matters – opinion which is, however the occultists may jeer, either the truth, or at any rate the best approximation of it that human ingenuity can afford. Thus braced, let us board the merry-go-round with a colorful but wholly sincere and useful character.

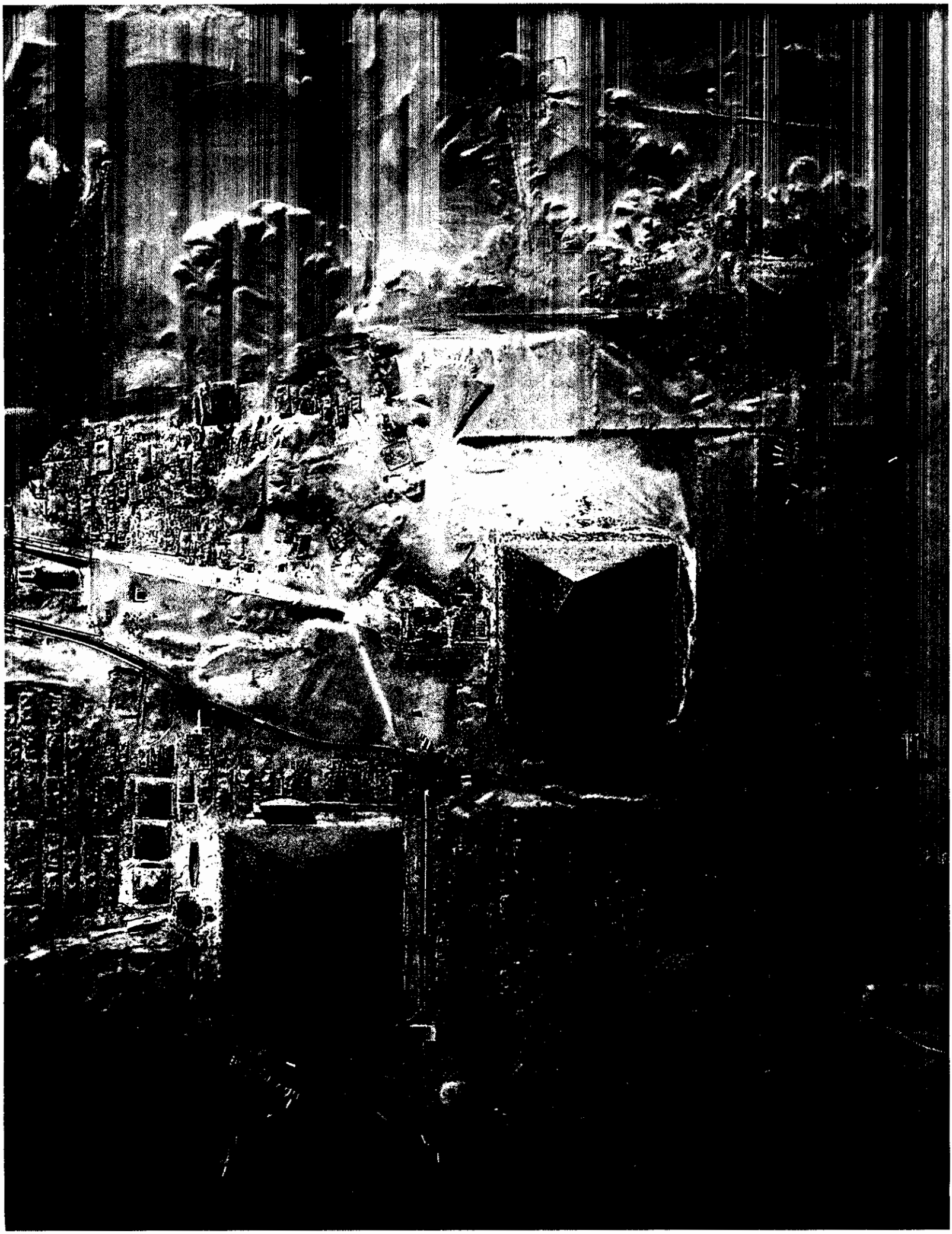
G. B. CAVIGLIA

Giovanni Battista Caviglia (1770–1845) has a foot in both worlds of scholarship, orthodox and unorthodox. Unlike most pyramidologists of later generations, he actually made some genuine contributions towards the understanding of Khufu's structure. On the other hand, like many others, he was fond of claiming that his researches had put him in touch with great, dark mysteries. An English gentleman who met Caviglia in Cairo, Alexander William Crawford (1812–80; later ennobled as Lord Lindsay), was impressed by the Italian's authentic Christian piety, but perturbed by his hints about the superhuman experiences that had come his way. As Crawford wrote home to England, "Caviglia told me that he had pushed his studies in magic, animal magnetism, etc., to an extent which had nearly killed him ... to the very verge, he said, of what it is forbidden man to know, and it was only the purity of his intentions which saved him." Possibly so; though it cannot be said that "purity" was the hallmark of Caviglia in his other dealings.

A Genoese merchant seaman who gave up the sea to pursue what he saw as the "mystery" of the Great Pyramid, Caviglia had originally arrived in Egypt as the master of a Maltese vessel, flying under a British flag. He then moved not just to his ancient goal but right into it, setting up home in Davison's Chamber, once he had cleared it of its thick and slimy coating of bat droppings. One account of his new home described it as being transformed into a "residential apartment," although few dwellings worthy of that description have a ceiling that is only 3 feet (1 meter) high. Caviglia then set about investigating his new home, financing himself by helping other Europeans to loot everything they fancied from the rest of the Giza necropolis.

Caviglia was convinced that there must be more secret chambers to discover, and did a great deal of damage to the area surrounding Davison's Chamber before he gave up. He then made the perilous descent into the "well" from the Grand Gallery, and found, like Davison before him, that its base was plugged with sand and rocks. Managing to persuade his reluctant workers to make the same descent, he started to excavate this rubbish and to haul up buckets of debris, but after a while – lungs clogged with dust and the powder of dried bat dung – they rebelled at the sheer unpleasantness of the task, and work was stopped.

He then tried a new tack, and began to clear the lower reaches of the descending passage. Brave to the point of foolhardiness, Caviglia crawled down



the cleared space for about 150 feet (46 meters), at which point the air became so thick with dust and muck and the heat so bad that he began to spit up blood. He persisted, however, and went another 50 feet (15 meters) deeper, at which point he noticed what looked like a doorway leading into a hole. Cajoling his men back to work, he hacked away at this wall until a shower of dust and small rocks fell around them and they felt a sudden blast of cooler air. As the dust cleared, they also discovered ropes and baskets – their own ropes and baskets. They had uncovered the blocked-off connection between the descending passage and the "well."

At this point, Caviglia was unexpectedly joined by a much wealthier explorer – Colonel Howard Vyse. The colonel was so impressed by what this curious Italian told him about the occult purposes for which the Pyramid had been built that he threw his considerable fortune into advancing these researches, and employed Caviglia as his superintendent of works. All went swimmingly until Vyse found out that Caviglia was mainly using the new, expanded workforce to further his other concerns, raiding the nearby burial pits for everything from scarab rings to mummies – the powdered flesh of mummies still being popular in some European medical circles as a supposedly sure-fire cure for fractures and other ailments.

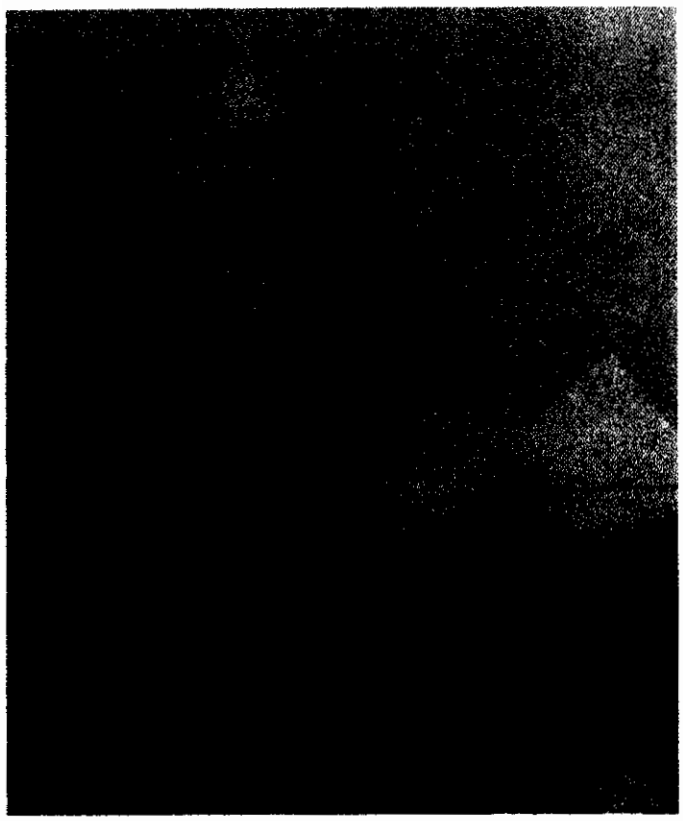
The pair parted on bad terms, and Caviglia, sulking, went off to Paris where he managed from time to time to win the patronage of another famous British antiquity-hunter, Lord Elgin. Whatever hermetic "secrets" Caviglia had gleaned in addition to his genuine archaeological finds, they were manifestly not of the order to bring worldly riches in their train. Yet he was probably as sincere as he was courageous and determined; and the men who soon followed him in search of ancient wisdom were, beyond question, all sincere to a fault.

JOHN TAYLOR

If there is one prevailing theme which unites almost every "alternative" (or "crank") theory about the Great Pyramid, no matter what its other details are, it is that the dimensions of the building, both exterior and interior, enshrine some form of Egyptian higher wisdom – geometrical, astronomical, geographical and what have you. Rumors and legends to this effect are of considerable antiquity, but the modern craze for such speculative computations began with a modest Englishman of letters who never actually traveled to Giza himself.

Opposite
Satellite view of the Giza plateau. Khufu's Pyramid is at the bottom left of the picture.

John Taylor (1781–1864), a poet, essayist and sometime editor of the *London Observer*, was in his fifties when he first caught the Pyramid bug, and devoted much of the remaining three decades of his life to collecting and collating information about the building's nature. Taylor summed up his arguments in *The Great Pyramid: Why Was It Built & Who Built It?*, published in 1859.



John Taylor with a model of the Great Pyramid.

He was clear-eyed enough to note the considerable discrepancies in figures that had been coming back to Europe since the time of Greaves, and imaginative enough to grasp that the increasing length of the base in these reports must be due to the progressive clearing away of rubble and the exposure of still deeper layers of masonry. Taking Howard Vyse's figures as the most accurate available, he set about trying to interpret them.

Following a hint from Herodotus, Taylor applied himself to the question of why the builders had chosen the angle of roughly 51 degrees for the Pyramid's faces, instead of the more standard 60 degrees as in an equilateral triangle. A leap of imagination prompted him to divide the perimeter of the Pyramid's base line by a figure equal to twice its height. The result: 3.144 – tantalizingly close to, though not precisely the same as, *pi*: 3.14159... and so on. Concluding that this was unlikely to be coincidence, and hunting around for other implications, Taylor eventually hit on the notion that the base perimeter was meant to represent the circumference of the earth at the equator, while the height represented the distance from the earth's centre to the pole. If so, this would corroborate Jomard's contention that the Egyptians had been able accurately to calculate a geographical degree; and to multiply it by 360 to arrive at the circumference of the earth; and to use *pi* to calculate its radius. In Taylor's words, the Egyptians "knew the earth was a sphere; and by observing the motion of the heavenly bodies over the earth's surface, had ascertained its circumference, and were desirous of leaving behind them a record of the circumference as correct and imperishable as it was possible for them to construct."

Taylor's next self-appointed task was to improve on Greaves and Isaac Newton by determining the unit of measurement employed by the Egyptians,

working on the assumption that one part of the *pi* ratio would almost certainly have been expressed as a whole number rather than as an inelegant fraction. Trial and error led him to the proportion of 366 to 116.5. This rang a bell: 366 is a decent approximation to the number of days in the solar year. He played around with this figure, and found that if he used simple British inches as his unit, then the perimeter was – again not perfectly, but as a satisfactory approximation – 366 × 100.

It so happened that the great English astronomer Herschel had recently proposed a unit only fractionally larger than the British inch as the one best suited to reflect the actual dimensions of the earth – he rejected the French meter on the grounds that it ignored the fact that the earth is not a perfect sphere, and was miscalculated anyway. The British Ordnance Survey had fixed the axis of the earth from pole to pole as 7898.78 miles, or almost 500,500,000 inches. Simply boost the length of the inch by a hairsbreadth to make an exact 500 million inches. Fifty of these units would give a terrestrial yard; half that number a cubit.

Taylor was delighted by the coincidence of Herschel's calculations with his own pyramidical conclusions. He was equally pleased with another set of data which hinted that Newton's postulation of a "sacred" cubit of about 25 inches (63.5 cm) was correct and – Taylor thought – showed that the good old British inch was even older than people assumed: the relic, no less, of an ancient unit of measure based on the true dimensions of the earth, and thus known to the Egyptians, too. He threw himself into a tireless study of all known measurement systems from around the world, and went back to his models of the Pyramid with renewed fervor.

At about this point, however, Taylor's faith in geometry and history collided headlong with his religious faith. Convinced, like many pious men of his day, of the literal truth of the Old Testament, he was certain that the universe had been created about four thousand years earlier and that the world had been drowned in a great Flood around 2400 BC. At this point in the mid-nineteenth century, Khufu's Pyramid was assumed to date from about 2100 BC. So how, Taylor agonized, could mankind have redeveloped so rapidly in a mere three hundred years? Not having had the benefit of reading the best-sellers of Erich Von Däniken about meddlesome space beings (see page 176), he grasped at the only compromise available to him: the Pyramid had been divinely inspired.

It was probable, he asserted, that to some human beings in the earliest ages of society, a degree of intellectual power was given by the Creator, which raised

them far above the level of those succeeding inhabitants of the earth. He went further. Since the venerable British inch was so close to the "Pyramid inch" as to suggest that it was one and the same unit, slightly worn down by generations of transmission, was it not apparent that the British must be related to the Lost Tribes of Israel? Alas, to his bitter disappointment Taylor realized that his marvelous discoveries were being treated at best with caution, at worst with sheer indifference, by most of his contemporaries; the Royal Society, whose members were Britain's most eminent men of science, politely declined his offer to address them on the subject of the Pyramid. He was in danger of dying a sad man, until his cause was suddenly taken up at the eleventh hour by a man too eminent to be ignored.

Charles Piazzi Smyth was Astronomer Royal for Scotland and believed in the "sacred cubit."

CHARLES PIAZZI SMYTH

The last weeks of Taylor's life were sweetened by an intense correspondence with the Scottish scientist, then in his early forties, whom we encountered briefly in Chapter 8 as an early influence on Flinders Petrie. Charles Piazzi Smyth (1819–1900) had studied Taylor's calculations, and thought that there was something in them. Remembered by orthodox science for his work in spectroscopy, and as Astronomer Royal of Scotland, Piazzi Smyth was also convinced that the British had inherited the "Pyramid inch" or "sacred inch," calculated as being $1/25$ of a "sacred cubit" – the primary unit used by Noah for his Ark, Moses for his Tabernacle and the Egyptians for the Pyramid.

On Taylor's death, Piazzi Smyth resolved to go to Egypt and confirm or explode the older man's conjectures for good. He set out with his wife in December 1864, and despite meeting with all manner of setbacks, from shortage of funds at home to chaos and galloping inflation in Egypt, eventually made it to Cairo. (They hated it: the smells, the flies, the noise, the squalor.) Still, the couple were generously received by the viceroy, Ismail Pasha, although not so generously that he would consent to the Englishman's request for full backing for an excavation: hardly surprising, since Piazzi Smyth wanted to clear the entire base area, to bore assorted holes and so on.

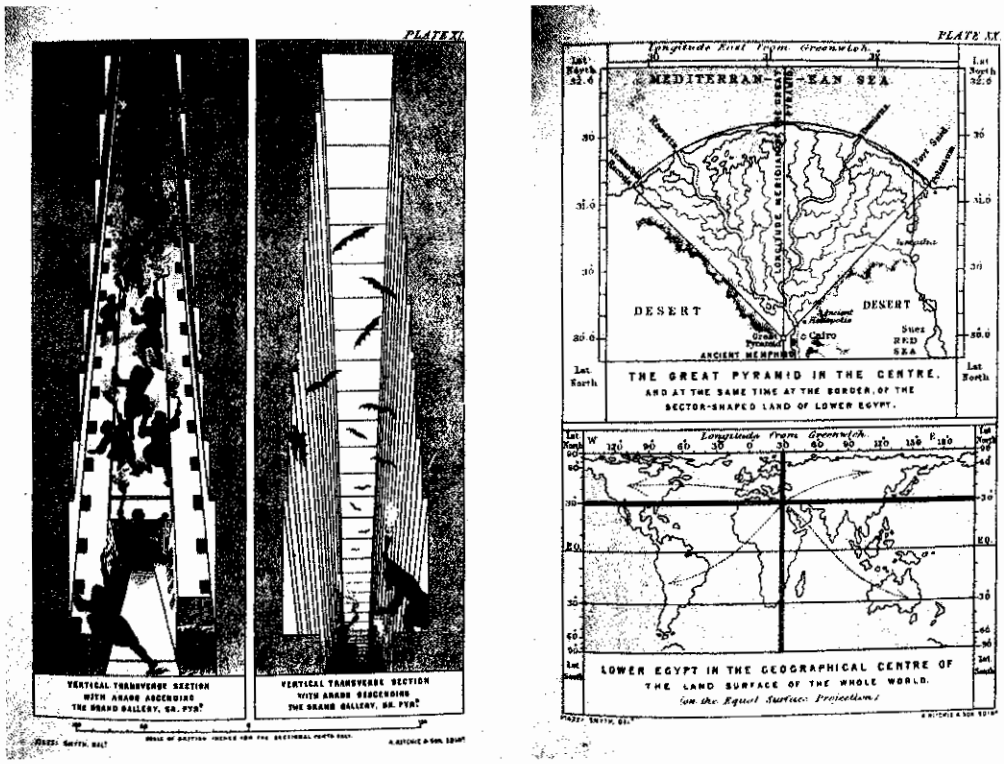
Instead, the viceroy granted him twenty workers for the site and the means of transport to it. By late January 1865, Piazzi Smyth's team had cleaned up the

interior rooms and passages of Khufu's Pyramid – often fouled by tourists, or (in the case of the passage uncovered by Caviglia) craftily reblocked by lazy tour guides who did not like the effort involved in making the descent – enough for an extended visit inside to be bearable. He set to work with a measuring bar, 105 inches (2.67 meters) long and furnished with thermometers at each end to register any change of heat large enough to expand it, and with other measuring instruments of equal delicacy. He also brought along a camera, and exposed some eighty plates using a magnesium flare system of his own devising.

Outside, he used cords, sextants, theodolites and telescopes, all of the best quality and latest design. To measure the latitude, he went to the very top of the Pyramid with his plumb-line and stayed there with his wife for several successive nights, heedless of vertigo. He used his telescope to make accurate observations of the stars. He called on the services of two fellow Scots, honest engineers who happened to be passing, to help him uncover once again the sockets at the corners of the Pyramid's base, previously cleared by the French expedition but now once again covered with sand, rocks and rubbish. To his chagrin he had to leave the two men to complete the task on their own, since four months had now elapsed and the Piazzi Smyths' return journey had been booked long in advance.

Back home in Scotland, he worked at collating all his measurements, augmenting them with the figures sent to him by his new friends – who estimated the base length at 9110 inches (231.4 meters), a figure much shorter than the one Taylor had used. His conclusions were complex, but a few of them stand out. He claimed, for example, that the ceremonial completion of the Pyramid must have occurred at midnight on the autumnal equinox of 2170 BC, when the star *Alpha Draconis* was exactly visible along the line of the descending passage and the chief star of the Pleiades, *n-Tauri*, was crossing the vertical meridian of the Pyramid, directly above the upper limit of the Grand Gallery.

More impressively, Piazzi Smyth confirmed that the mean angle of the Pyramid's faces was just over 51 degrees 51 minutes, and put this together with a mean base line (using the measurements of both Colonel Vyse and the French) of 763.81. Repeating Taylor's earlier calculation, he came up with 3.141259... an astonishingly precise approximation to *pi*, much more impressive than the figure of 3.144 which had so inspired Taylor in the first place. And so on. Piazzi Smyth felt that he had been vindicated: the Pyramid *did* incorporate a scale model of the earth, its base perimeter *did* correspond with the number of days in the solar year, and it *was* built with an advanced knowledge of geometry.



Two plates from Piazzi Smyth's *Our Inheritance in the Great Pyramid* showing (*above left*) sections of the Grand Gallery and (*above right*) the Great Pyramid in the "geographical center of the land surface of the whole world."

Naturally, Piazzi Smyth was more than pleased by his results, and so, at first, were his peers: he was awarded a gold medal for his work by the Edinburgh Royal Society. But doubts soon began to be raised, grumbles were voiced, and when he finally wrote up all his conclusions in the huge, three-volume *Life and Work at the Great Pyramid of Jeezah during the Months of January, February, March and April, A.D. 1865*, the reception was not nearly so kind. In fact, it was often openly scornful.

For most of Piazzi Smyth's readers, the problem was neither the accuracy of his measurements nor the correctness of his mathematics, but the purpose to which they were put. The controversy surrounding Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, which had been published in 1859 and contended that mankind had not descended from a Biblical Adam but had evolved through a process of natural selection, was still raging. Like Darwin's opponents, Piazzi Smyth and Taylor were Christians of the most literal-minded, fundamentalist kind. Faced with the same intellectual quandaries as Taylor about Creation and the Flood, Piazzi Smyth had found the same explanation – the Pyramid was divinely inspired. The skeptics and the wits had a field day. To make matters worse, the waters of argument become muddied when a notional supporter of Piazzi Smyth's called Robert Menzies – the kind of intellectual "friend" to make anyone yearn for a good, straightforward enemy – jumped into the fray with his contention that the Pyramid was not only divinely inspired but contained

a literal prophecy in stone, with each "Pyramid inch" of its internal passage system corresponding to a year in the history of the world, from Creation to Apocalypse.

Seemingly immune to the worst sneers of informed and ignorant critics alike, Piazzi Smyth proceeded to carry his calculations and speculations to still more extraordinary degrees. He worked out, for example, that the Pyramid rises from its base in the proportion of 10 units of height to 9 units of width. Now, taking the height of the Pyramid and multiplying it by 10 to the power of 9, he came up with the (adjusted) figure of 91,840,000 miles – an approximation to the average distance of the earth from the sun. This calculation is still a key part of the annals of pyramidology.

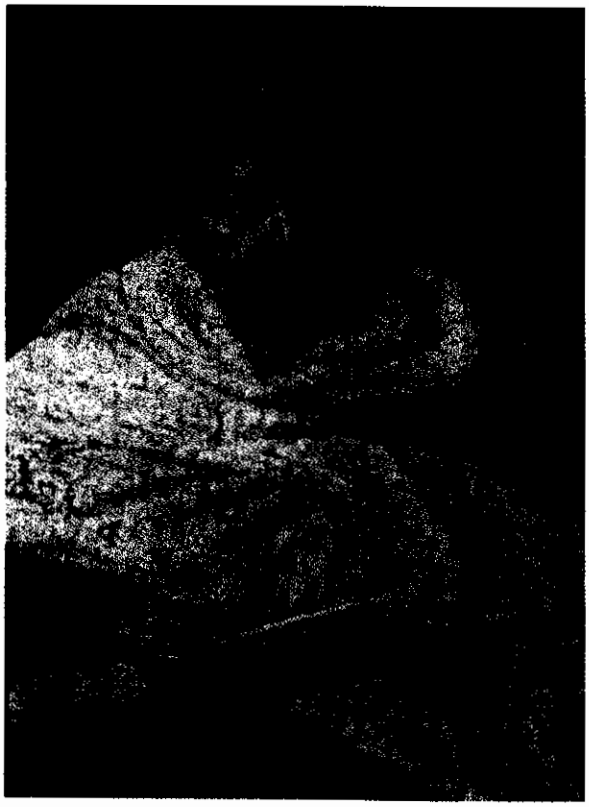
Wonderful stuff; but the problem was that even Piazzi Smyth's careful figures were no better than a fair estimate of the exterior dimensions of the Pyramid, and as long as so much as a few inches of uncertainty remained in those figures – which would be the case until someone cleared away the entire base area – the Taylor/Piazzi Smyth case would remain nothing more than a charming set of hypotheses. As we saw in Chapter 8, one of the quieter ironies of this history is that it was a good Christian and sincere admirer of Piazzi Smyth, Flinders Petrie, who eventually carried out the work which, designed to prove the "Pyramid inch" and all its related stories, actually blew it to smithereens. But the next of our pyramidologists took a journey of faith in quite the other direction.

DAVID DAVIDSON

A structural engineer from Leeds read Menzies's "prophetic" case, found it vastly irritating and, like the sound rational agnostic he was, began to gather together the data which would scupper it. Unfortunately, the more deeply David Davidson read in Pyramid literature, the more persuaded he became that it was he, not Menzies, who had been on the wrong track. With all the fervor of the fresh convert, he declared to the world – or that part of it which would listen – that the Pyramid was all that Taylor, Piazzi Smyth and Menzies had claimed it to be, and more. It was, he said, a proof in stone that the Bible was indeed the work of God.

Much of Davidson's work recapitulates earlier claims that the Pyramid's measurements were founded on knowledge of, and tacitly represent, the

dimensions of the earth and its orbit around the sun. The new aspect of his writings responded to a phenomenon which Petrie had noticed but not used as the basis for any theory – the fact that each of the Pyramid's sides is very slightly concave, an effect invisible to the naked eye from most angles, and later shown up quite clearly by aerial photography. Davidson used this detail as the basis for an ingenious set of calculations by which he hoped to prove that the Pyramid represented the three different methods of measuring the earth's annual rotation around the sun (the solar, the sidereal and the anomalistic) that had been found useful by modern astronomers.



Madame Helena Blavatsky, a founder of the Theosophy movement, photographed in London in 1889.

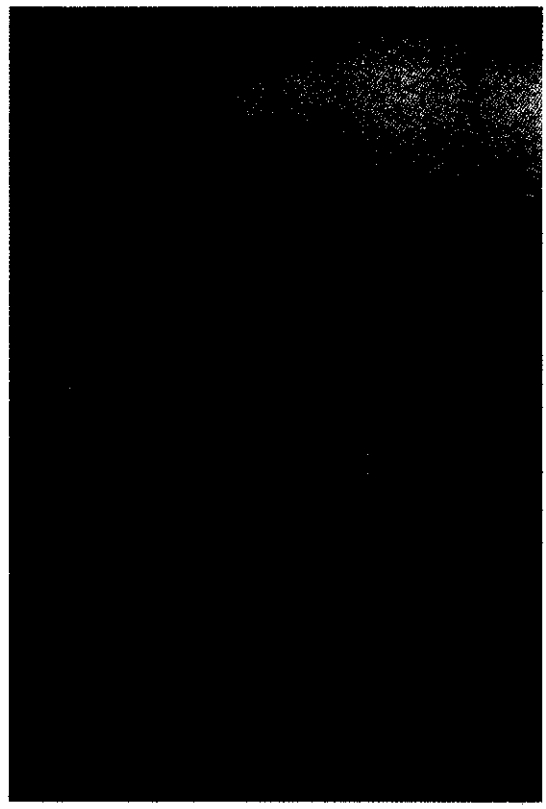
It might not seem a very radical point – nor, indeed, a particularly persuasive one – but Davidson built on this and related arguments to bolster his case that, since the Egyptians "obviously" knew both the exact length of the sidereal year and the distance of the earth from the sun, they also potentially had access to knowledge of everything from the specific gravity of the earth to the speed of light. They had access to knowledge, in other words, not merely as complex as that of nineteenth-century science – roughly the Taylor/Piazzi Smyth position – but vastly in excess of it. "It has taken man," Davidson concluded, "thousands of years to discover by experiment what he knew originally by a surer and simpler method." Moreover, "It means that the whole empirical basis of modern civilization is a makeshift collection of hypotheses compared with the Natural Law basis of that civilization of the past." For Davidson, the old, old question of why the pyramids were built had a simple answer. They were built to preserve a highly advanced form of natural science through a coming Dark Age, until such a time as human beings were once again advanced enough to decode its teachings and come again into the full knowledge that they had once enjoyed.

Whether or not the Pyramid encoded prophetic truths, it did not take any great gifts of prophecy to predict what would come next. However much the mathematicians, astronomers, archaeologists and Egyptologists might try to resist his wild surmises, Davidson had unleashed a vast, murky and unstoppable flood of "pyramidiocy" and related nonsense, which has not ebbed away even today.

To provide details of all the madcap, mathematically based theories which have grown from Davidson (and Menzies, Piazzi Smyth and Taylor) would be

a long and tiresome task. But it is worth mentioning one or two of Davidson's more flavorsome successors, such as Morton Edgar (who "read" in the Pyramid the prediction that, by the year 2914, the end of the thousand-year "Day of Judgment," humankind will have experienced the full benefit of the sacrificial work of Christ, and will regain that perfect human nature which Father Adam lost in the beginning of his disobedience 7040 years previously); or Colonel J. Garnier (who discovered a prophecy that in 1920 the rivers of the world would all turn into blood). The school of pyramidal mathematics, too, is a very long way from being dead. A prime recent example is Peter Lemesurier's *The Great Pyramid Decoded* (1977 and 1997), which is so laden with page after page of exhaustive calculations as to deter all but the sternest of seekers after truth.

It is time to examine some of the other fringes. An exhaustive survey of all the quaint and curious (non-mathematical, non-predictive) things that have been asserted or believed about the Great Pyramid would not merely be dull but would risk inducing odd states of mind into the most robust browser. For the sake of both brevity and sanity, three principal tendencies may be identified: the Occultists, the Atlanteans, and the Extraterrestrials.



P. D. Ouspensky photographed in 1935, a year after publishing an account of his experiences at the Great Pyramid on the eve of World War I.

THE OCCULTISTS

From the early eighteenth century all manner of secret societies and cults, from the Rosicrucians to the Freemasons, seized eagerly on the trappings (often poorly understood) of ancient Egyptian culture and religion, either by way of conferring a kind of instant antiquity on their invented practices, or in more extreme cases claiming direct succession from Egyptian priesthoods. For these groups, the Great Pyramid often figured as the mythical Place of Initiation – the site where the acolyte was admitted into the full light of those Ancient Secrets that had been carefully guarded and passed down over the centuries.

The cults that followed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often did just the same, the most obvious instance being that of the synthetic belief system which called itself Theosophy. One of the founders of the movement, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, usually referred to as Madame Blavatsky (1831–91), went through a major Egyptian craze – although she later shifted her

enthusiasm to Tibet – and in her works *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) and *Isis Unveiled* (1877) instructed her disciples that the Pyramid was "the everlasting record and the indestructible symbol of the Mysteries and Initiations on Earth," and also "a temple of initiation where men rose towards the Gods and the Gods descended towards men." She believed that the sarcophagus in the King's Chamber was actually a kind of baptismal font, and that the person to be initiated would be ritually laid out in it to undergo transformative experiences.

With such impressive credentials, it is no surprise that, for the well-traveled sorcerer and quester after truth of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a trip to the Great Pyramid became as essential a component of a full life as it is for a certain brand of New Age tourist today. For some, of course, the trip was carried out purely on the astral plane, bypassing the services of Thomas Cook; but the list of those who went there in person is striking enough.

Peter Demianovich Ouspensky (1878–1947), the Russian mathematician-philosopher, sometime disciple of the strange and (in some ways) impressive Armenian mystic Gurdjieff, and, later, cult leader in his own right, went to the Pyramid on the eve of World War I. In *A New Model of the Universe* (1934), he wrote of his experiences in terms which, although hushed and reverent, do not greatly stretch the boundaries of likelihood: "The incomprehensible past became the present and felt quite close to me, as if I could stretch out my arm into it, and our present disappeared and became strange, alien and distant ...."

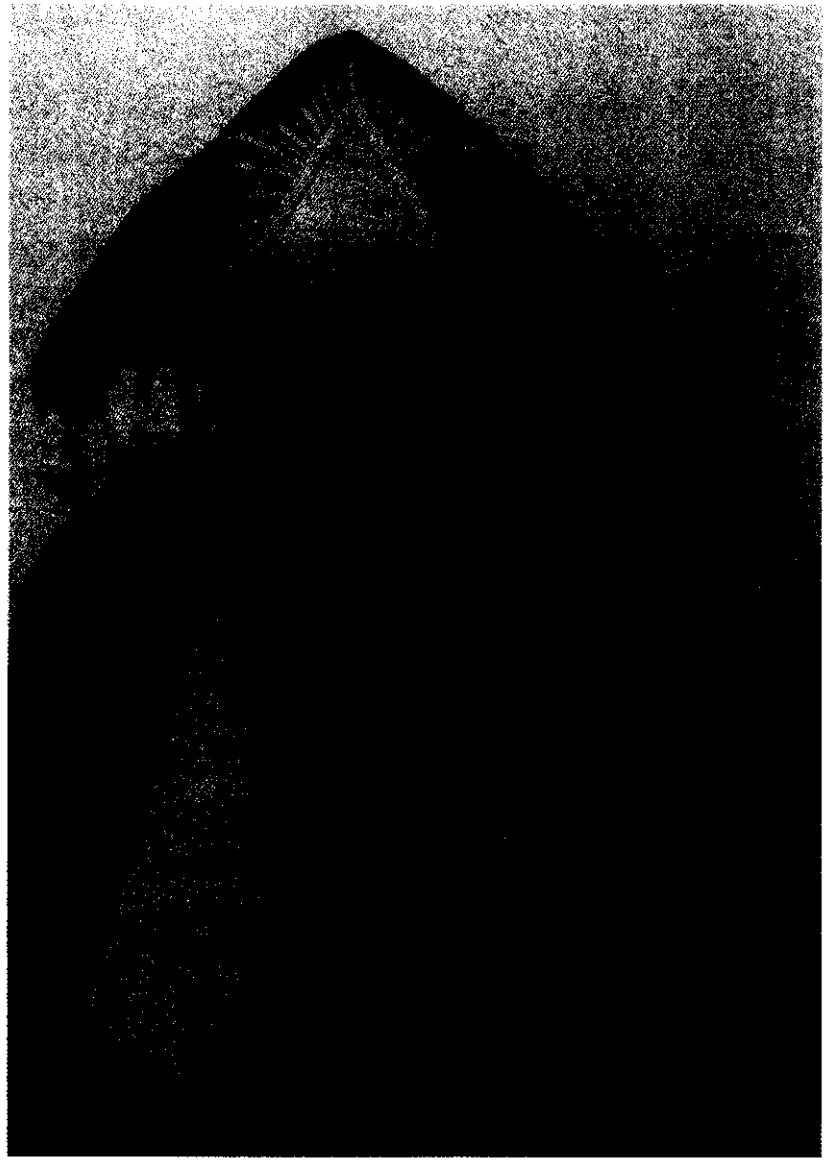
A rather more lively account of such a jaunt can be found in the *Confessions* of Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), the self-styled *to mega therion* or Great Beast 666, known to the British yellow press as "the wickedest man in the world" and certainly the most notorious of all twentieth-century practitioners of magic (or, as he spelled it, Magick). Crowley's name is still one much conjured with, sometimes literally, in Satanist circles, but his thrillingly evil reputation should not blind one to the fact that he was also an inveterate prankster and teller of tall tales.

Crowley claims that he spent one of his honeymoon nights in the King's Chamber of the Pyramid, reading out strange hermetic incantations by the light of a candle. Gradually, he says, he noticed that the walls began to glow with an unearthly light, and soon the whole chamber was bright enough for him to carry on reading without needing his candle. A few days later his bride appears to have had a mystical encounter with an Egyptian deity, but that is another (tall) story.

The most detailed and colorful contribution to the my-night-in-the-Pyramid genre can be found in a book which was, in its day, a considerable best-seller:

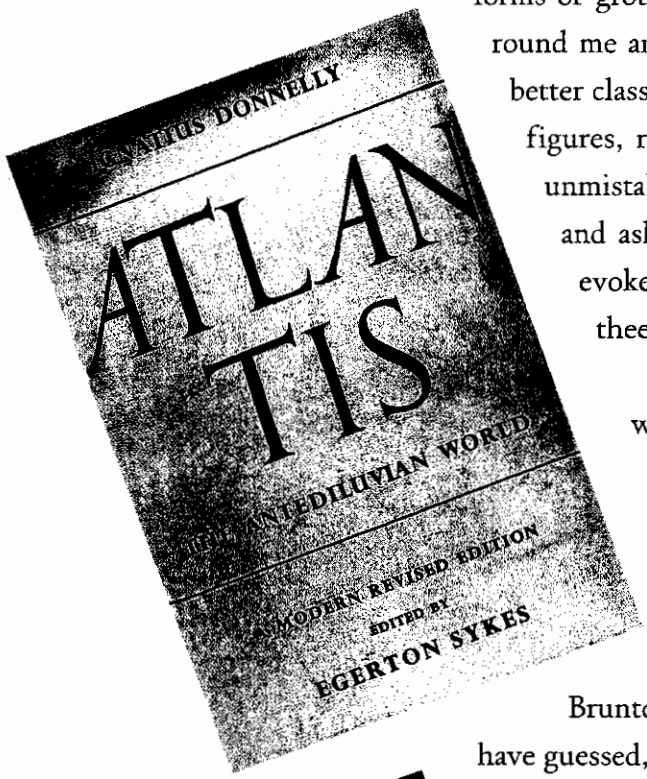
A Search in Secret Egypt (1935) by "Dr." Paul Brunton. Unlike Crowley, Brunton was not a trickster: he expected to be taken quite seriously, and often was. Later in life he cultivated many disciples, who supported him financially and took his advice on everything from sexual intercourse (abstain from it) to real estate (buy heavily in South America so as to be safe from the nuclear war of the mid-1970s). An entertaining, exasperating and moving account of Brunton's later exploits can be found in a book by Jeffrey Masson with the self-explanatory title *My Father's Guru* (1993).

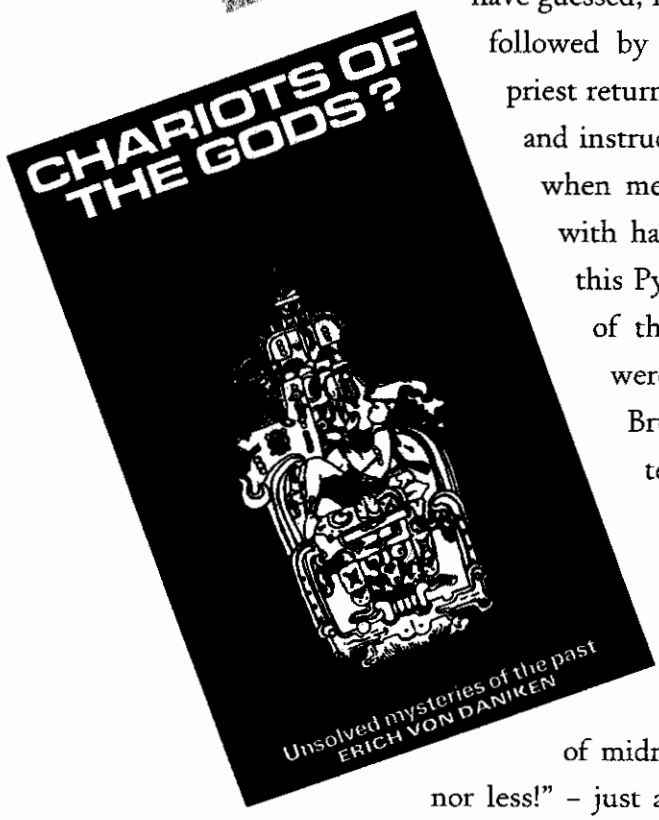
Although Brunton was not a cynical man, nor exploitative in any crass way, Masson recalls, he loved to cultivate an air of imponderably deep mystery about himself, usually by hints and cryptic smiles rather than blatant assertion. He liked, for example, to give the impression that he was a visitor from another planet, once calmly informing the young Masson that the reason he did not drive was that there were no cars on Venus. When Masson grew older and more skeptical, he challenged Brunton about the nature of his much-flaunted doctorate. Brunton eventually conceded that it had been awarded by Roosevelt University in Chicago – an institution which, Masson later discovered, has no records for him. At other times, he would murmur that his true higher education had been conducted at the Astral University, located somewhere in the far reaches of the cosmos.



Aleister Crowley, self-styled Great Beast 666, claimed to have spent one of his honeymoon nights in the King's Chamber.

Meanwhile, back in Egypt, Brunton's famous Pyramid night went, he said, something like this: a sense of physical cold, followed by the psychic impression that the Chamber was "peopled with unseen beings." Then fear: "There was something abroad which I sensed as evil, dangerous. A nameless dread flickered into my heart ...." Then pure panic, followed by a sort of Temptation of Saint Anthony: "Monstrous elemental creations, evil horrors of the underworld,





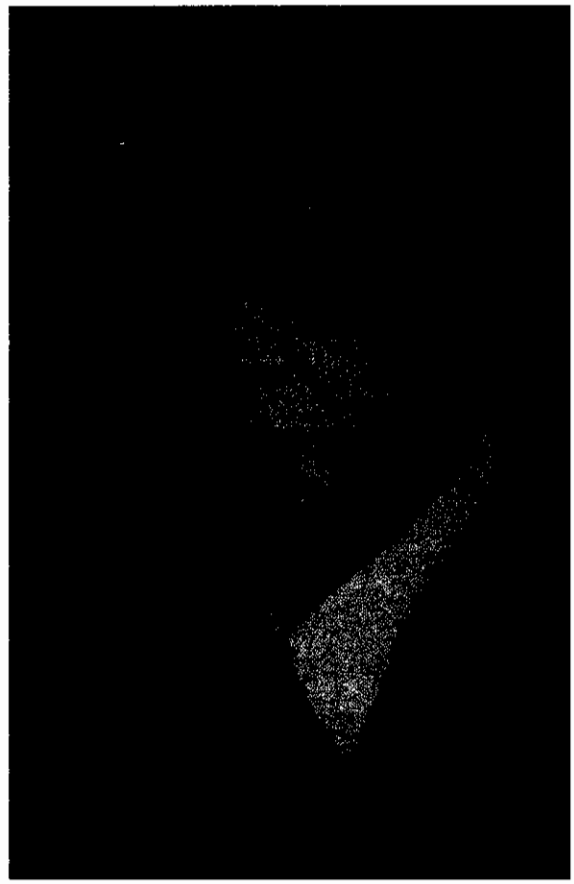
forms of grotesque, insane, uncouth and fiendish aspect gathered round me and afflicted me with unimaginable repulsion." But a better class of apparition soon showed up. A couple of tall, wise figures, recognizable to the erudite Brunton as wearing "the unmistakable regalia" of Egyptian high priests, came to him and asked: "Why dost thou come to this place, seeking to evoke the secret powers? Are not mortal ways enough for thee?"

The apparitions then tried to get rid of Brunton with a few veiled threats, but, stout fellow, he would have none of it. Next, one of the duo ("I dared place no guess of years upon him") took him, put him into the sarcophagus and induced a trance-like state bordering on death. (Had the priest been reading his Madame Blavatsky? Or had Brunton?) As connoisseurs of such stories may by now have guessed, Brunton then had an out-of-body experience, rapidly followed by reunions with departed loved ones. Finally, the priest returned, told Brunton a thing or two about the universe and instructed him to "Take back with thee the warning that when men forsake their creator and look on their fellows with hate, as with the princes of Atlantis in whose time this Pyramid was built, they are destroyed by the weight of their own iniquity, even as the people of Atlantis were destroyed ...." Various other oddities happened to Brunton after this dark threat, including a bit of a tease with secret chambers ("The mystery of the Great Pyramid is the mystery of thine own self. The secret chambers and ancient records are all contained in thine own nature ..."). And then he woke up. Astonishingly, his watch showed him that it was "precisely the melodramatic hour of midnight, both hands pointing to twelve, neither more nor less!" – just as if the whole thing had been scripted by a hack writer of ghost stories. Brunton makes more Egyptian revelations, but it would be impolite to ignore the hint dropped by his high priest and we should now move on.

THE ATLANTEANS

The story of the mythical island continent of Atlantis has been told and retold many times, and all the more often since Plato wrote down his version in his two dialogues, the *Timaeus* and the *Critias*; like Dr. Brunton's priestly friend, he asserted that the island sank beneath the waves as a result of its inhabitants' decadence. The definitive modern version of the Atlantis fad, however, can be attributed not to Plato but to an all-but-forgotten American author, Ignatius Donnelly (1831–1901), whose enormous best-seller *Atlantis* (1882) fired the imaginations of readers on both sides of the Atlantic. They included no less eminent a Victorian than Britian's then Prime Minister, W. E. Gladstone, who was strongly tempted by the idea of raising an expedition to discover the sunken remains – squarely located by Donnelly in the mid-Atlantic.

Thanks to Donnelly – who was also an advocate of the crackpot theory that Shakespeare's plays were written by Francis Bacon – Atlantis has been lodged firmly in the popular imagination ever since. Some of his lesser contentions have proved equally tenacious, such as the view that the gods of just about every known civilization from Greece to India were actually the kings and queens of Atlantis in imperfectly remembered forms, and that Atlanteans colonized places as far afield as Scandinavia, South America ... and Egypt. Great chunks of Donnelly's work, unattributed, have been discovered in Madame Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine*. Dreadful cynics might wish to follow the link from Donnelly to Blavatsky, from Blavatsky to Brunton, from Brunton ....



Edgar Cayce believed that Atlantean builders of the Great Pyramid had left behind a Hall of Records crammed with secrets.

That would, at least, be one of the ways in which the link between Egypt and Atlantis wormed its way into modern myth. The other route can be traced back to a man who, again, is now little known outside occultist and related circles, but remains an enduring force within them: Edgar Cayce (1877–1945). Between 1901 and his death, the poorly educated Cayce regularly went into trance states in which he would advise his attentive listeners of many things – often medical matters, but he encompassed grander themes, too.

From about 1923 onwards, one of the items of "information" Cayce would often tell his listeners was that they had lived previous lives in – where else? –

Opposite, top
Ignatius Donnelly's *Atlantis*, first published in 1882.

Opposite, bottom
Erich Von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods?*, a best-seller since 1969.

Atlantis. (Note that even by 1901, when Cayce began, Donnelly's book had been in circulation for almost twenty years.) He himself, it seems, had been an Atlantean priest in his time – he went by the name of Ra-Ta. About 20 per cent of Cayce's 14,246 readings concerned Atlantis. The most influential of his tales was that the more enlightened Atlantean citizens had fled the coming deluge and set up home in Egypt around 10,500 BC. Whatever the archaeologists might have said, Cayce maintained that the Great Pyramid was built – or, at the very least, designed and laid out – *c.* 10,400 BC. The Atlanteans, he continued, had also left a Hall of Records, possibly in the Pyramid itself or very close by, crammed with their most marvelous secrets, which would be uncovered in the last twenty years of the millennium.

Now, unless someone at Giza is keeping very quiet indeed, Cayce seems to have shot wide of the mark. If his Hall of Records has not yet been located, it has not been for the want of trying. A surprising number of otherwise sane people continue to take Cayce and his prophecies seriously, undaunted even by the sobering fact that his Atlantean readings began only after he met Arthur Lammers, a wealthy amateur reader of Theosophical texts, which included those of Madame Blavatsky. Fringe Egyptological circles were abuzz in the late 1990s, expecting at any moment the announcement that Cayce's Hall of Records had finally been found. None came.

THE EXTRATERRESTRIALS

The reputation and principal idea of Erich Von Däniken (b. 1935), the Swiss hotelier turned radical archaeologist, are well known. His book *Chariots of the Gods?* was first published in English in 1969 and is still in print after many editions. It has been so popular that its main contentions are known even to those who have never read a word of his highly idiosyncratic prose. Essentially, Von Däniken has adapted the nineteenth-century idea that a higher civilization once populated the world at a time when our species was still primitive, that its records are preserved in the world's oldest monuments, and that our collective mythologies are a record of actual events, with Atlantean figures remembered as Gods. All Von Däniken did was to give the old story a twist suitable for the space-age 1960s. For Atlanteans, read visitors from other planets or galaxies.

There is little point, and not very much fun, in addressing Von Däniken's arguments, such as they are. (Although it is worth mentioning his interesting

estimate that the Pyramid would have taken at least 664 years to build, using available Old Kingdom technology.) Although it is sometimes hard to make out precisely what Von Däniken is claiming and what he is merely playing with, at the heart of his Egyptology appears to be the claim that the Great Pyramid was a sort of freezing chamber, where the significant dead could be preserved until Ra – an extraterrestrial astronaut – came back from the heavens to revive them; and that it was built with the help of laser beams and helicopters. Von Däniken has made a great deal of money from his books and others have followed his lead.

PYRAMID POWER

In the 1960s and early 1970s there was a short-lived fad which attributed miraculous powers not only to Khufu's Pyramid but to anything made in a similar shape, no matter its scale or substance – cardboard, paper or plastic would do just as well as limestone and granite. The craze seems to have originated in the 1920s, when a Frenchman, Antoine Bovis, visited the Great Pyramid and noticed that there were garbage containers in the King's Chamber (how did they get there?) containing dead cats (how did they get there?) which, instead of decaying in the humid air, had inexplicably mummified. He went home and built himself a wooden scale model of the Pyramid, 3 feet (1 meter) high, and placed a convenient dead cat beneath it. Sure enough, it mummified, as did other organic matter he placed there.

In the 1960s Karel Drbal, a Czech radio engineer, read reports of these antics and made a few experiments of his own. He claimed that a used razor blade, placed underneath a cardboard pyramid just 6 inches (15 cm) high, would be restored to its original sharpness, and that this enabled him to shave some two hundred times using the same standard razor blade without undue pain or bleeding. Delighted, he took out a patent on his "Cheops Pyramid Razorblade Sharpener," making them first of cardboard and then from Styrofoam. Elsewhere in Europe, reports reached the press of small pyramids being used to keep yogurt and milk fresh without refrigeration.

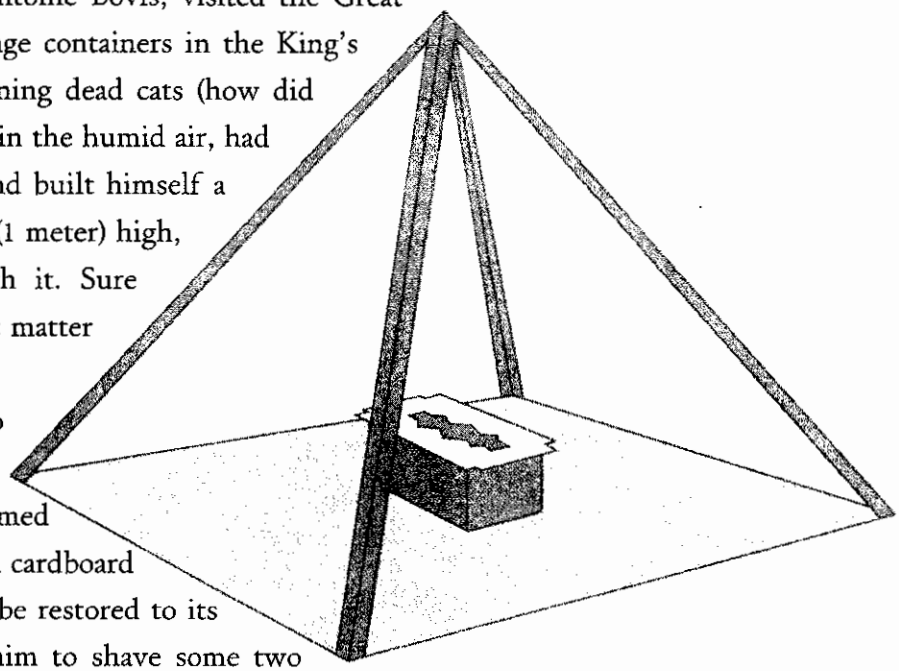


Diagram of Karel Drbal's "Cheops Pyramid Razorblade Sharpener."

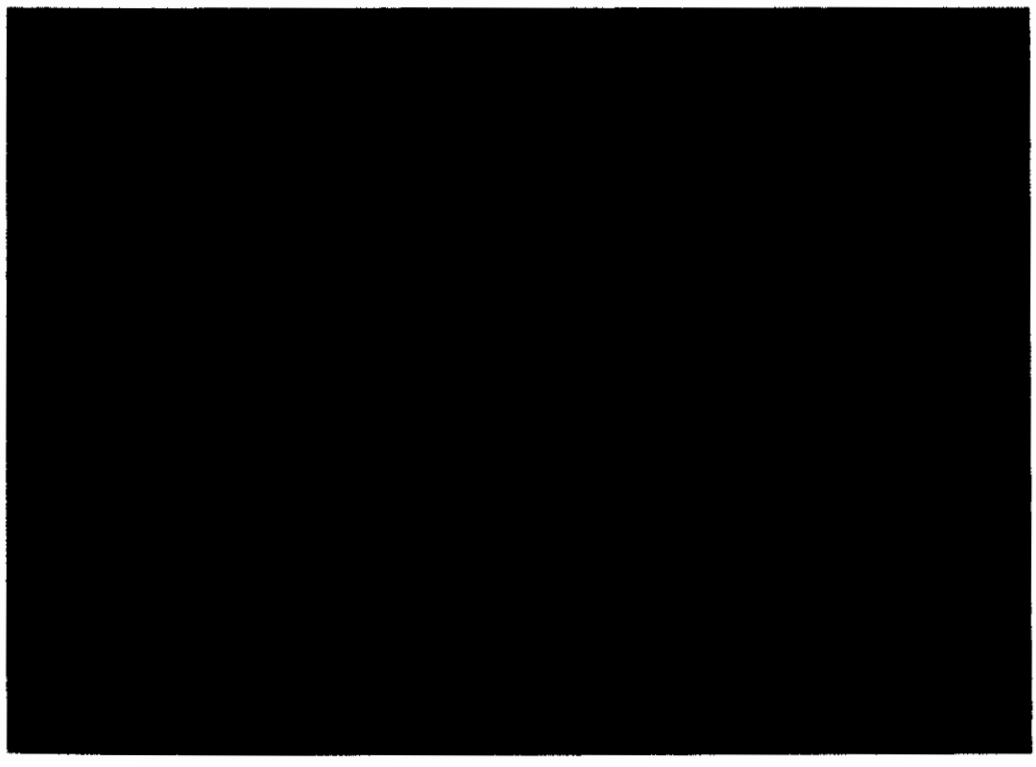
RECENT PYRAMIDOLOGY

To bring this survey up to date, let us conclude with a summary of some of the things that have been said of the pyramids in the last couple of decades or so, generally in books that have sold extremely well.

The extraterrestrial theme has been pursued in a series of popular books with the collective title *The Earth Chronicles*, by Zecharia Sitchin, including *The Twelfth Planet* (1976), *The Stairway to Heaven* (1980) and *The Wars of Gods and Men* (1985). Using ancient Mesopotamian texts as his authority, Sitchin contends that the human race was created by a form of genetic engineering, and is in fact the brainchild of a race known as the Anunnaki, inhabitants of an undiscovered planet in our own solar system.

Sitchin maintains that the Great Pyramid was a key component in a kind of large-scale spaceport runway for the flying craft of the Anunnaki, who apparently favored Baalbeck in Lebanon as their regular landing site. (Sitchin, incidentally, is one among many non-orthodox writers who believe that Howard Vyse faked the hieroglyphic graffiti in the spaces above the King's Chamber.)

Yet another variant on the ET theme looks not to an unknown planet but to our familiar neighbor Mars, and specifically to the shape photographed by the American space probe *Viking II* in 1976, which to some looks like a humanoid



The so-called "Face on Mars" rock formation photographed by the American space probe *Viking II* in 1976, in which some people have seen the likeness of the Giza Sphinx.

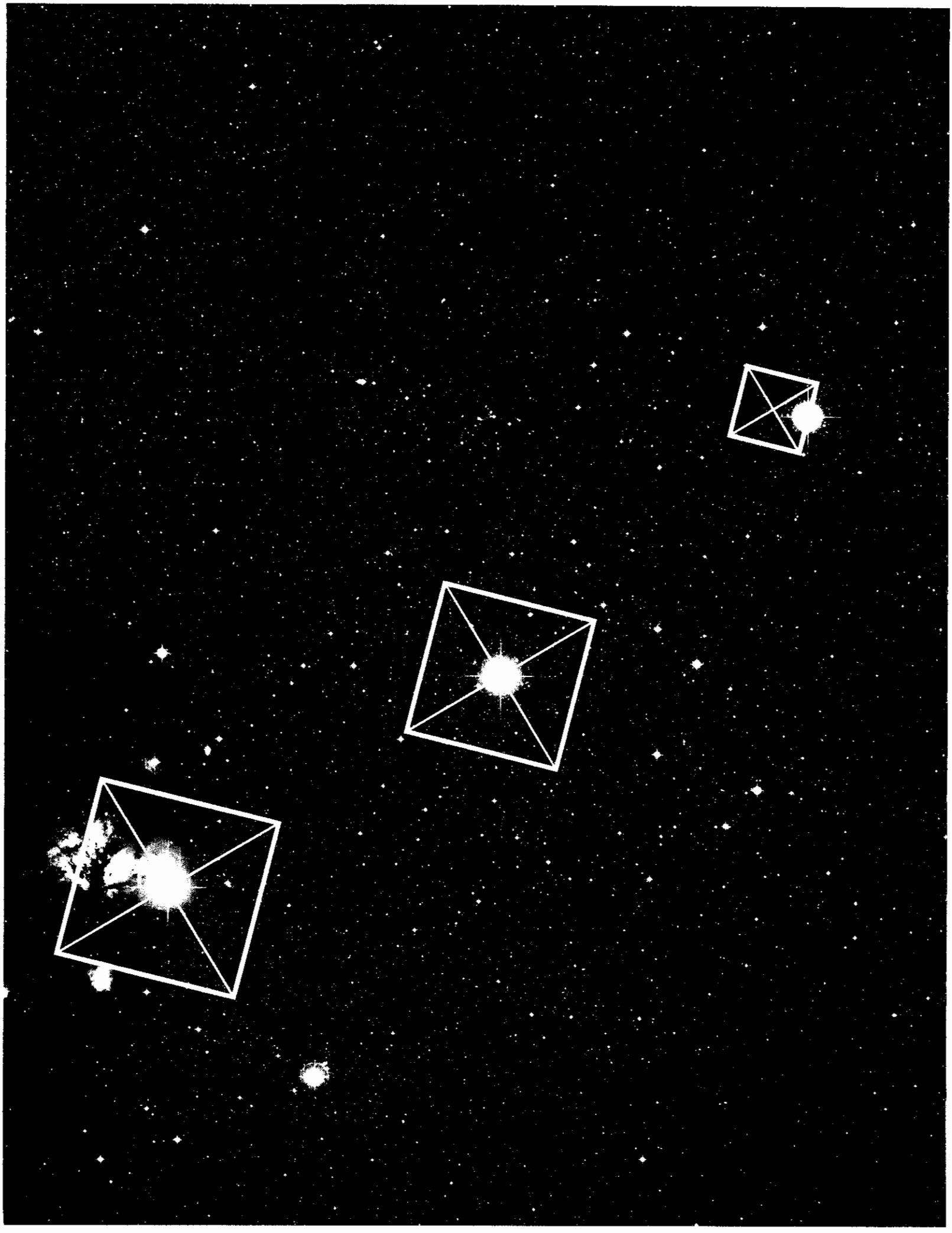
face and to others like a group of random shadows on rock. Various electronic tinkerings with the so-called "Face on Mars" pictures have accentuated its similarity to the face of the Sphinx, leading some observers to the not immediately self-evident conclusion that the Sphinx was actually carved by émigré Martians, fleeing an imminent comet impact some 12,000 years ago. One of the principal advocates of this case is Richard Hoagland, a former NASA consultant.

The presence of such ET themes in popular fiction and films should not be overlooked. Highly successful movies such as *Stargate* and *The Fifth Element* take for granted a kind of diffuse modern folklore linking ancient Egypt to the distant reaches of the cosmos, while at least one recent science-fiction novelist has played with the idea that the pyramids were used as a huge protective shield for sorcerers who had found a way to tap the energy of the Van Allen belts (regions of intense radiation partly surrounding the earth), channeling it down through the earth's atmosphere to the tip of the Great Pyramid itself.

The "ancient knowledge" theme has developed quite a few interesting new variations of late. One, which can be found in the work of Alan Alford (*Gods of the New Millennium*, 1997; *The Phoenix Solution*, 1998), echoes both New Age and science fiction ideas by proposing that the Pyramid was, among other functions, a giant energy generator. Much the same line of argument may be found in Christopher Dunn's *The Giza Power Plant* (1998). Andrew Collins – the author of *From the Ashes of Angels* (1997) and *Gods of Eden* (1998) – and others have put forward the related suggestion that the Egyptians may have known how to levitate large stone blocks, possibly by the use of sound. This "sonic" theme probably has a lot of mileage left in it.

Another widely circulated proposition returns to the theme of superior astronomical knowledge. In *The Orion Mystery* (1995), Robert Bauval and Adrian Gilbert contend that the three Giza pyramids were laid out to reflect the three main stars in the "belt" of the constellation of Orion. As fringe theories go, this was relatively modest, and the authors, although doubtless aware of the huge potential readership for the ancient mystery genre, were careful not to attribute any of their observations to magic or aliens. (However, rationalists will have noted that another of Gilbert's publications is entitled *The Cosmic Wisdom Beyond Astrology*, and that he is the founder of Solos Press, which specializes in "Christian Mysticism, Gnosticism and the Hermetic Tradition of Egypt." Moreover, among the authorities acknowledged in his books is one Erich Von Däniken.)

Gilbert and Bauval have since given up their collaboration, but the latter went on to write *Keeper of Genesis* (1997), with the well-known "alternative"



historian of ancient civilizations, Graham Hancock. More recently, their *Mars Mystery* (1998) looked at the "Face-on-Mars" notions of Hoagland and others.

Finally, for as long as the so-called "door" in the shaft running up from the Queen's Chamber remains unopened (see Chapter 4), there will be plenty of people confident that it leads to an unknown chamber, containing all manner of mysteries.

The popular appetite for fringe beliefs about the pyramids seems all but insatiable. A longer discussion would have to take in work by writers who cannot be dismissed as readily as Von Däniken, and whose work currently occupies a curious position, well outside standard academic orthodoxy but at some distance from the airport bookracks.

For example, there is the substantial body of work by Schwaller de Lubicz, a genuinely erudite, if maverick, scholar. His books, mainly in French, though now being translated into English, resume the now-familiar theme that, as his exponent John West puts it, "Egyptian science, medicine, mathematics and astronomy were all of an exponentially higher order of refinement and sophistication than modern scholars will acknowledge."

Then there are two notable defectors from the straight academic world to the shadows of "pyramidology": Livio Catullo Stecchini and Giorgio de Santillana. The latter is a renowned historian of Renaissance science and author of a major book on Galileo. Despite his authority, de Santillana could not find an academic publisher for *Hamlet's Mill: An Essay in Myth and the Frame of Time* (1969), which he wrote in collaboration with H. Von Dechend. The academic verdict on such books has generally been either damning or sublimely indifferent, but it is likely that they will continue to influence the wilder fringes of non-professional Egyptology for a long time to come.

Having given so much airing to the mystics, the occultists, the prophets and the connoisseurs of extraterrestrial life, it seems fitting to hand over the final verdict on pyramidology to the acknowledged father of modern Egyptology, Flinders Petrie, who in his memoir *Seventy Years in Archaeology* wrote: "It is useless to state the real truth of the matter, as it has no effect on those who are subject to this type of hallucination. They can be left with the flat earth believers, and other such people to whom a theory is dearer than fact."

Opposite
In *The Orion Mystery* (1995), Robert Bauval and Adrian Gilbert contend that the Giza pyramids were laid out to reflect the three main stars in the 'belt' of the Orion constellation, which they very nearly do. The stars, from top to bottom, are: *Mintaka* (Menkaure's pyramid), *Al Nilam* (Khafre's pyramid) and *Al Nitak* (Khufu's pyramid).