



RAR REVIEW

The White Lady and Atlantis, Ophir and Great Zimbabwe: investigation of an archaeological myth, by JEAN-LOÏC LE QUELLEC. 2016. Archaeopress, Oxford, 319 pages, illustrated in colour, softcover, ISBN 978-1-78491-470-7.

Flaws of greatness: the abbé Breuil and rushing to judgement

A book review by Duncan Caldwell

Le Quellec's exposé of a pernicious set of archaeological myths is so compelling that it seems out of place beside the site reports and drier tomes in my library. It is such a well-written and cautionary tale about the ways that archaeological observations were once hijacked and commercialised in the service of racism and colonialism that it's a major work of intellectual and cultural history. Although it's often as fast-paced as *King Solomon's Mines* and other adventure stories of the Lost World genre (which the author shows distorted both the observations and common sense of one of the most influential prehistorians of the 20th century, the abbé Breuil), this investigation is so well-researched that it should satisfy everyone from scholars who demand precision to laymen who want to follow and test every link in an argument.

It's also a detective story travelling into one of the darkest hearts of Western culture — a place that spawned myths about lascivious white queens threatened by the very black 'savages' they (naturally) ruled, and about fictitious Phoenician, Cretan and Egyptian colonisers, whose supposed presence in southern Africa long before the *voortrekkers* became a foundation myth for European settlers looking for historical precedents on which to base their claims. What could be more cogent at a time when scientific findings are routinely denied or distorted in the service of religious and political hucksters (and the powers behind them) than this tale of one of the twentieth century's greatest scientific minds — Breuil's — bending under the weight of his own prejudices and those of his companion, Mary Boyle, and host, Field Marshal Jan Smuts — the leader of South Africa — who realised that Breuil's 'discovery' of a pre-Historic 'White Lady' near the southern tip of the continent could elevate tales of early white dominance there to accepted dogma?

Le Quellec is far kinder to Breuil in his conclusions,

though, than he was to many of the authors of archaeological nonsense in another of his books on the subject, *Des Martiens au Sahara: chroniques d'archéologie romantique* (Le Quellec 2009), where he took no prisoners and mauled his gallery of fools and conmen with wit and erudition. I almost felt that he was letting Breuil off too easily when he suggested, towards the end, that the abbé was simply influenced by his milieu and had become increasingly vulnerable to being manipulated as he lost his sight and judgement (pp. 247, 251).

The reason it was hard to be quite so indulgent is that Le Quellec also shows how Breuil ignored repeated warnings from rock art experts, ethnographers and prehistorians (including Dorothea Bleek, Lawrence G. Green, Clarence Van Riet Lowe, John F. Schofield, K. R. Robinson and Revil Mason) that the rupestrian figure, which the abbé had interpreted as a 'white woman, Diana-Isis' (pp. 47), fit indigenous practices and rock art traditions — and might even be male (*more on this later*). So this isn't just the tale of a faltering 'expert' becoming the inevitable creature of his age (if I may be permitted a pun) — it is also one with heroes who rose above current prejudices by keeping and even stretching their critical faculties, adding an equally important moral to this tale.

I also had trouble forgiving Breuil — or rather Breuil and his co-author and consort, Mary Boyle — for other reasons after reading this damning account. These include the fact that they denigrated the painting's real discoverer, Reinhard Maack, tried to divert credit for the discovery — in the sense of 'properly' interpreting it — towards themselves, and dismissed their critics with such irrelevant arguments as Breuil's innuendo that Van Riet Lowe was just being spiteful because he'd been jilted (p. 84) — apparently by Mary, who'd implicitly stuck with the better man (even if that man was a Catholic cleric). The story just gets steamier and seamier by the page as Mary Boyle turns out to be the real white queen of this strange tale.

I could not wait to find out what happened next as Le Quellec gave almost every culprit in the book — and there are many — plenty of rope to hang themselves in the form of uninterrupted quotes. Hence, we hear Breuil and his companion claiming that Maack found the 'White Lady' and its surrounding paintings 'quite by chance' (p. 31), when Maack's notes show that he was actually 'in a hurry to explore new areas' for 'paleolithic and bushman shelters' ... 'where one finds

parietal paintings' when he found the panel (pp. 19, 21). As if that weren't bad enough, Breuil belittles Maack by saying the German chanced on the shelter while rushing to reach water and civilisation; and then entered it just to sleep in the shade, which he must have wanted a lot of, since Breuil goes on to claim that Maack didn't wake up till morning (p. 68). To top it off, Breuil says Maack didn't even notice the paintings till he finally awoke, making Maack sound blind to the possibility of art in such a shelter — when, in fact, Maack fell behind his companions in an effort to explore every last cavity, squirmed into the entrance to look for art, saw it immediately, and instantly erupted from the rock pile to shout until his friends turned back.

After stooping to such lies, Breuil goes on to dismiss Maack's 'appalling' rendering as a 'poor crude drawing ... made by a German' (pp. 80, 56), although Maack's sketches were actually more faithful in some details than Breuil's laborious tracings. As if that were not bad enough, Le Quellec demonstrates that Breuil even took credit for any fame Maack achieved with the words 'thanks to my intervention, I made him celebrated 30 years after his discovery' (p. 68). Talk about the sin of pride!

Breuil's high opinion of himself as a gatekeeper and mandarin comes through again both when he prefaces his remarks by saying 'it goes without saying' (p. 80) and when he puts such critics as Schofield in their place by claiming the support of 'other' — unnamed — 'persons of distinction' (p. 83) against such upstarts. No wonder he was nicknamed the 'pope of prehistory'!

But Le Quellec's book makes clear that Breuil also shared a corrosive mix of racism and prurience with many of his white contemporaries. The racist element seeps through when the abbé insists that the 'White Lady' had to have been made by colonisers from around the Mediterranean because it was 'markedly superior to the art produced by local African people' (p. 50) while his fantasies crop up when he imagines his ancient white pioneers 'recruiting their (black) women ... after a few scuffles/skirmishes' (p. 51). Such musings about civilised white colonisers trafficking in women (p. 132) or being overwhelmed by black brutes were so insidious that they even reversed the supposed course of art from Europe, where Breuil thought Palaeolithic art had increased in finesse, to Black Africa, where he thought pre-Historic art had regressed (p. 49).

But the strange thing is that Breuil wasn't the first person to usurp credit for an archaeological discovery in southern Africa. Le Quellec goes on to recount how a man named Karl Gottlieb Mauch permitted himself 'to be somewhat proud' of his discovery of the ruins at Great Zimbabwe, although he had to admit that he had been taken there by a fellow white named Adam Render, whom he dismissed along with the black natives by saying that he'd outsmarted them all by getting them drunk (pp. 102–103). Le Quellec does a remarkable job of showing how the appropriation of such discoveries by Breuil and Mauch paralleled the

way racists, colonists and Biblical fundamentalists used such 'discoveries' to advance delusions about ancient white colonies in the area. For example, the Bible places a gold-rich land called Ophir and the boats that went there on the land-locked Red Sea (before boasting that the quantity which was brought back was both immeasurable and a precise amount). But Christian fundamentalists have found candidates for the land (and its gold, which seems to tempt believers into orgies of greed) all over the world, including, of course, Great Zimbabwe (pp. 106–107). Having determined that the Bible mentioned southern African gold, they have taken the identification as a mandate to extract the gold themselves.

The audacity of colonial propagandists was just as self-serving. Not only did such a writer as H. Rider Haggard fantasise about beleaguered colonists from the Mediterranean Basin trying to hold onto wondrous constructions in the heart of Africa, but he even deigned to say that the mythical colonists, whom he thought were Phoenicians, were the English of their time — except for their lack of English honour (p. 111). When an archaeologist named David Randall-MacIver dared to dispute the association of the ruins with the Queen of Sheba by showing that they had been built by local Africans during the European Middle Ages, the co-founder of an engineering firm involved in gold mining, Harold Clarkson Fletcher, expressed the opinion of many colonists when he declared 'I was so historically offended' by the notion that such ruins could have been built by blacks 'that I never wanted to go near the place' (pp. 113–114).

As late as the mid-1960s, hack writers were still dismissing the attributions of the 'White Lady' and Great Zimbabwe to natives, although archaeologists had already contextualised both the rock art, by finding tens of thousands of other paintings made by Bushmen in southern Africa, and the ruins by dating them with carbon 14 (p. 255). One of these authors even had the audacity to dismiss the ¹⁴C dating as being the work of a 'politico-archaeologist', as if he wasn't the one usurping a find for political purposes. As Le Quellec makes clear, the implication of such fabricators was always the same: if blacks destroyed a white civilisation in southern Africa, then they deserved to be taught a lesson and even be supplanted.

One of the most egregious expressions of such racial arrogance and self-aggrandisement is found in Cecil Rhodes' remark that 'We are the finest race and the more we expand the better ...' (p. 111) — in other words, from the Cape to Cairo, following in the footsteps of those ancient colonists, who had supposedly staked out the length of Africa — or rather, the world — for modern white successors. For the book shows how similar myths were used by advocates for white expansionism from North Africa, which colonial mythologisers claimed was the site of Atlantis (making it somehow right in their minds for Europeans to 're-possess' it from Berbers (p. 182), to the American

heartland, where Phoenician, Egyptian, Semitic, Viking and Celtic explorers had supposedly staked implicit claims for fraternal white colonists centuries later (p. 111). What's incredible is that all this comic-book nonsense about Atlantis, Ophir and other lost worlds isn't even based on the distortion of finds, but on febrile speculations about myths, which puts us into the realm of myths squared.

I wish I could say that books like Le Quellec's were no longer necessary, because the public has learned to recognise when belligerent scammers have bent facts and myths out of shape in an attempt to lure people into participating in their greedy schemes. But I can't. I wish I could also say I thought such well-researched books would change enough minds to make a difference in an age when a large percentage of the population actually believes the scammers when they scream that fact-checkers are the ones generating 'fake news'. But, once again, I can't. All I can do is hope to persuade you, my reader, to arm yourself with such texts, so you can continue to fight hard for integrity and reason.

Sure, I could find faults with the book under review — little things like typos on pages 57, 61, 103, 145, 159, 214, 229, 239 and 243 — but Paul Bahn's translation is so smooth and natural that it's hard to believe the text wasn't originally written in English. That quality is largely due to the nature of Le Quellec's writing in French, which is so impassioned and colloquial when he's trying to free archaeology of its parasites that it's far closer to the natural rhythms of speech than the phraseology of academia. For the author — who is both an archaeological and mythological expert — is on a crusade to debunk myths that exploit pseudo-scientific credentials by pointing out everything from their methodological flaws to their crass dishonesty.

But now we must pause, for any heartfelt and headlong fight in the service of a just cause risks falling into lapses, excesses and contradictions. The rest of this essay might seem like nit-picking, since it will deal with flaws that hardly ripple the book's surface, but I hope to show that they add up to a case for paying attention to the risks of rushing to judgement both in Breuil's time and our own.

One lapse in Le Quellec's book is so tiny that it actually appears in a footnote (36 on page 25), but it is so troubling, that I'll zoom in on it for a moment. The note is about Altamira's paintings, but it fails to even mention their discoverer, Marcelino Sanz de Sautuola, or that Emile Cartailhac was the mandarin who brought de Sautuola into disrepute by implying that he was a crank and forger, although the effusive note says that Cartailhac's 'recognition of their authenticity ... and then the publication of the great monograph produced by this same author with the abbé Breuil ... destroyed the final resistance by their contemporaries to the very possibility of a prehistoric art'.

Despite the fact that French writers used to exalt Cartailhac's *Mea culpa* d'un sceptique, which appeared in 1902, for its heroically self-effacing apology (please

read between my lines), I didn't expect to find such a glorification of Cartailhac's 'recognition' in a book by such a shrewd and sarcastic observer — especially at this late date and in association with another false note, since the authenticity of both Upper Palaeolithic parietal art (in the grotte Chabot and grotte de la Mouthe in 1894, and Pair-non-Pair, which was made a national monument in 1901), and mobiliary art had been recognised by many French prehistorians long before Cartailhac thought fit to apologise to anyone (let alone that person's ghost). It's high time to recognise that Cartailhac was simply cornered, and should not be unambivalently glorified.

I've dwelt on this glitch because its sleight-of-hand and one-sidedness crop up in other places where the author's indignation at outrages and readiness to jump into the fray, which make him such a bold researcher and articulate critic of archaeological cranks and profiteers, also seem to drive him occasionally to shoot from the hip. What worries me is that this tendency is the same one that led such swashbuckling researchers as Breuil and Cartailhac to make some of their own mistakes. What a shame it would be if the author should join them in throwing out one or more babies with the bath water.

Despite the fact that Le Quellec has performed an important service in demonstrating the flaws of romanticised archaeology, I'd love to see him pay as much attention to the more difficult subject of outliers like de Sautuola, who have played *positive* roles in archaeological discovery ever since Boucher de Perthes showed that deeply buried tools were present at St. Acheul. If he were to devote as much passion to investigating archaeologists like Cartailhac and some of our contemporaries who have suppressed findings that they couldn't grasp or co-opt, and other authorities, who've suppressed discoveries which threatened building, mining, and real estate interests, he could ignite a truly important debate while presenting a surprising rogue's gallery of fellow luminaries.

The reason I'm worried about the babies is that the author has come close to throwing one out a few times when settling a political score (always with the best of intentions). Once, for example, he told an audience of admirers and reporters, who had gathered at the Sorbonne to celebrate the publication of his book, *Vols de vaches à Christol Cave: histoire critique d'une image rupestre d'Afrique du Sud* (Le Quellec et al. 2009), that it was impossible to ask nearby natives about the possible significance of paintings in the rockshelter (on Ventershoek farm No. 504 near Wepener, South Africa), because whites had expelled all the natives who'd lived nearby.

That's true, but only if you limit the zone of inquiry to a radius of less than a mile, since Lesotho is a short walk away, and the natives there have remained in place. None of the journalists at the book launch seemed to notice that this popular (and justified) attack on Apartheid and its antecedents masked a partial

absurdity.

The problem is that there are some similar false notes in the book: little things, like the remark that a steatite bird was 'stolen' from Great Zimbabwe in 1889 (p. 111), when the notion of theft implies that some jurisdiction or person claimed ownership to the statue at that time. It may well be that somebody did have such a claim, but it would be nice to see proof, rather than being left with the feeling that the opinion is based on political correctness and hindsight.

The author might have been a bit quick to jump to a conclusion elsewhere as well — this time when he said that 'It would take us too far from this book's general theme to make a detailed critique' of Tudor Parfitt's speculations concerning Lemba 'oral traditions', which claim that they have some Jewish ancestors (pp. 259–260). The reason this omission gave me pause is not because I think the Lemba accounts are likely to be well-founded genetically, but because Bantuphone informants from the Fulani to the Fang have made similar claims (Caldwell 2015: 42), suggesting that such stories have spread and stuck, perhaps within the last few centuries. Although it's just a quibble, it would have been nice to see the author acknowledge (at least in a footnote) that the range of such claims makes them ideologically intriguing and worth investigating.

Another place where I stumbled was on page 28, where the author states that Breuil's nickname for one of the figures on the 'White Lady' panel — the 'Horned God' — 'seems to reflect a Christian mythology in which horns can only be a diabolical attribute.' Although Le Quellec demonstrates that the abbé had plenty of faults, this statement is so categorical ('can only') and out of sync with Breuil's celebration of horned and antlered beings in French caves that it seems slightly unfair. It seems all the more so when the author later undermines his own argument by showing how Breuil and Boyle associated the horned figure not with the devil, but with 'the "Men of Horns" ... hunting the Crocodile god of evil in Egypt' (p. 75). So which is it — did Breuil see the horns as being good or evil?

Le Quellec also seems quick to the draw when he lumps together a controversial statue at the Royal Ontario Museum that the excavator of Knossos, Sir Arthur Evans, dubbed 'Our Lady of Sports' (ROM registration No. 931.21.1) with other 'Minoan' figurines of bare-breasted women as being another *incontestable* forgery (pp. 241–244). As Kenneth Lapatin (2002) has shown, several of the statues are indeed suspect, but at least two faience figurines with bare breasts are probably authentic since they were found in situ in an area to the south of the Throne Room at Knossos that Evans named the 'Temple Repositories' (Evans 1921: Fig. 377; Cooper 2014).

The reason I'm uncomfortable with the author's dismissal of the ROM statue is that it's based on canonical arguments involving its unusual hemline and possession of both male and female attributes, rather than empirical evidence. This makes me uneasy because

canonical arguments often don't allow for outliers, and result in the disparaging of authentic pieces. It should also be noted that both the dark central figure and light-skinned flanking figures, which might be female, in the Taureador Fresco at Knossos are shown wearing the same bulging garment that the author interprets as a 'phallic sheath' (p. 241), which weakens his dismissal of the accoutrement as a forger's way of pandering to Evans' expectations (pp. 241) and 'manifest interest in images of slight boys' (pp. 243).

Furthermore, it's hard to make canonical arguments when a 'canon' is as small as the number of accepted Minoan statues of this calibre since one is faced with taphonomic problems and an unreliable data set. Plus, there are still more reasons to be cautious. First, because a careful examination of the statue's ivory showed that the weathering 'was certainly old, and it had been carved while the ivory was still "alive"' (Cooper 2013). Second, because there are at least three points where AMS analyses might produce results that could help define the statue's age despite it's being adulterated by conservation efforts (Cooper 2014) — namely, deep inside a leg, and at the figure's extremities, which have been burnt (meaning they have been carbonised, and will therefore give results, which will be illuminating, even if they are modern).

Furthermore, it would be interesting to see if the gold metallurgically matches other Minoan gold, and test the surfaces with Raman fluorescence, which might tell us how long the artefact has been exposed to ground-piercing radiation (Walley 2012). In the absence of such analyses and of any signs of modern tool marks, even under the gold clothing, I just cannot see how one can reject the statue so categorically.

The author's latest book touches on yet another subject that raises concern about his occasional dismissiveness and quickness to judgement. This time it is linked to the author's condemnation of Henri Lhote's archaic methods for rendering pre-Historic paintings, which involved moistening (and, therefore, damaging) them, and contempt for Lhote's more outlandish interpretations (although his treatment of Lhote shifts from book to book). In one of archaeology's ironies, Le Quellec used Lhote's painted reproductions of two panels at Ti-n-Tazarift to show that they do not correspond to the details of a Fulani cattle ritual called the *lootori* as interpreted by Amadou Hampaté Bâ and Germaine Dieterlen (1961, 1966) and embraced by Lhote (1966), because the paintings don't have enough cattle for the ceremony, which requires at least 28 (Le Quellec 2004) — only to be partially contradicted when Bernard Fouilleux used image-enhancing software championed by Le Quellec himself (DStretch) to show that the painting not only existed, contra Lajoux (2006: 127–148), but contained numerous details that Lhote had missed, including 12 more cattle! Although the new observations did not unconditionally rehabilitate Bâ's and Dieterlen's interpretations, Fouilleux tactfully

suggested that they 'showed that they constitute, until serious contradictory evidence is produced, a path for reflection, which is still interesting' (Fouilleux 2007: 181). So one must be careful.

My final (and most important) reservation actually involves an illustration the book is missing — a close-up of the penis the author is so sure graces Breuil's supposed 'White Lady'. The photograph on the cover unfortunately seems to crop this very feature (if it is conceived as projecting from the crotch), which might appear as a compact triangular bulge in Obermaier and Kühn's 1930 rendering on page 21 and the discoverer's — Reinhard Maack's — original sketch on page 20 and later rendering on page 23. The only good photo of the Lad(y) inside the book (on page 26), is too small for readers to make up their own minds since the triangular candidate is reduced to a vague conjecture while an alternative penis rears up in the form of a thin red and white horizontal arc, which is almost certainly a trick of the light and pareidolia. The lack of clarity is so confounding that one is tempted to sympathise with the poor abbé, except for the fact that Le Quellec has already shown what a cad he could be.

But this confusion over the penis masks something more disturbing, which is reminiscent of the fact that both light and dark Minoan figures are shown wearing an accoutrement over the belly that many interpret (rather categorically) as a 'codpiece'. This time it concerns another line on the 'White Lady', which I suspect is the actual feature that Le Quellec and others have been pointing to as the missing member — a nearly vertical red line within a thin white strip that joins the thigh to the belly, rather than anything outside that contour or projecting from the crotch. The problem is that the two figures to the left of the 'White Lady' also have such vertical red lines within or near their crotches (Rudner and Rudner 1974: Pl. 15), although one of them — the top left figure — can be read as a woman with both breasts and large buttocks shown in profile (Fig. 1). This suggests that Jalmar and Ione Rudner's (1974: 73) interpretation of the vertical red lines in the crotches of all *three* figures as the kind of short aprons once worn by San women (Stow 1905) is worth considering. If the line that Le Quellec interpreted as a penis is really an apron, then his male figure might be female after all. I'm not saying it is, but wonder whether the author's treatment of the figure's sexuality is another example of a tendency to rush to judgement.

I know these are strong words, but this essay should not be taken negatively, since this is a meditation on perils that all researchers — myself included — tend to succumb to at some point. It is also a meditation on the way the drive that propels such bold scientists as Le Quellec, Breuil and Cartailhac towards their breakthroughs can sometimes trip them up. Let me give an example, which might illustrate both tendencies: I was among the first to applaud when the author argued that there might be a link



Figure 1. Jalmar and Ione Rudner argue that the vertical red lines in or near the crotches of Breuil's 'White Lady' and the two figures to its left are illustrations of the short aprons worn until recently by San women (Rudner and Rudner 1974: Pl. 15).

between the headless beasts of Wadi Sora and the chimeric monster that swallows the bodies and souls of the deceased in the Egyptian Book of the Dead (Le Quellec et al. 2005: 253), although the association might be anachronistic (Caldwell 2013: 176–177). The reason I was so pleasantly surprised was because Le Quellec's argument was not only provocative, but thought-provoking.

In short, his willingness to plead the case of daring hypotheses springs from the same traits that make him such a brilliant prehistorian. For make no mistake about it, the faults I have noted are those of greatness, and the author's books about archaeological frauds are great and strong despite these quibbles. I want to reiterate that this lavishly illustrated book should be given pride of place in every archaeological, anthropological and cultural library bar none. You owe it to yourself and to the fight for factual integrity to read both Le Quellec's book on the 'White Lady', *Great Zimbabwe and Lost Worlds*, and its predecessor — his equally remarkable volume, *Des Martiens au Sahara*. Go buy them now.

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