

Ancient Astronaut in a Cactus – An Interview with Erich von Däniken (1979)*

PIET HEIN HOEBENS**

Editorial Introduction

Piet Hein Hoebens owned sizeable files of material, collected during the late 1970s and early 1980s, on what has become known as “astro-archaeology” or “Palaeo-SETI,” and he had read many of the relevant books. However, that field, almost single-handedly popularized in the West by Swiss author Erich von Däniken since the mid-1960s, rarely turns up in Hoebens’ newspaper articles, and it is hardly ever mentioned in his scholarly writings either.

Nevertheless, in the summer of 1979, Hoebens seized the opportunity to attend a conference of the Ancient Astronaut Society in Munich and to conduct an interview, in English, with Erich von Däniken. As far as we have been able to ascertain, the tape-recorded and transcribed text of the interview was never published in any language. Conceivably, Hoebens may have published an abridged Dutch version of the interview, but even after extensively searching his comprehensive files as well as potentially relevant newspapers and magazines, we have been unable to trace any. Also, knowledgeable long-term observers of the “astro-archaeological” scene, such as Ingbert Jüdt and Jonas Richter, were unaware of this interview.¹

The text of the interview that is printed below, presumably for the first time, was found in the Hoebens Files. We have tacitly corrected a number of typing errors, provided the basic structure, and added the title, references and footnotes. It goes without saying that the interview text itself literally follows the transcript. (Eds. [Gerd H. Hövelmann, J.A.G. Michels])

* With the permission of the editors and the Hoebens Estate, this interview is taken from the forthcoming book *Legitimacy of Unbelief: The Collected Papers of Piet Hein Hoebens*, ed. by Gerd H. Hövelmann & J.A.G. Michels. Eindhoven: Synchronicity Research Unit, 2012. (Red.)

** Piet Hein Hoebens (1948-1984) was a Dutch journalist and a prominent skeptic of parapsychology and other areas of what today we call “anomalistics.” Even today, his work is widely considered a model of skeptical fairness and responsibility. (Red.)

1 Ingbert Jüdt, personal communication to Gerd H. Hövelmann, 2 May 2009; Jonas Richter, email to Gerd H. Hövelmann, 24 September 2009. (Richter is preparing a Ph.D. thesis on von Däniken at the University of Göttingen).

Introduction

I had the pleasure to meet Mr. von Däniken at the 6th World Conference of the Ancient Astronaut Society in Munich where I also met astro-archaeological luminaries like Prof. Dr. Luis E. Navia, Dr. Gene M. Phillips, Zecharia Sitchin, Dr. George Sassoon and Dr. Duncan Lunan – who is, in fact, a skeptic.

The conference was held at the Munich Sheraton Hotel, 14th to 16th June, 1979, and was attended by some 600 to 900 people. The faithful were kept happy with the promise that an AAS-sponsored expedition would soon return from the Brazilian jungle, where, according to “reliable sources,” lives an Indian tribe possessing a 12,000 year old library of extraterrestrial provenance and numerous alien artifacts. There was even talk of well-preserved little green bodies resting in a secret tomb. It sounded very much like a beautiful hoax perpetrated by a slightly malicious Indian chief. There was a lot of ritual shouting at the pig-headed skeptics, but I was surprised by the relative sophistication of some of the speeches. As Mr. von Däniken was in charge of the whole organization of the Conference he could spare me only an hour, although he invited me to come and visit him at his home in Switzerland. I got the strong impression that he is basically sincere: He truly believes the Gods were Astronauts. His enthusiasm is almost contagious. He is, however, only faintly aware of the difference between “Dichtung und Wahrheit”.² He is so confused in his reasoning he doesn’t even understand what his critics have against him. His disregard for the rules of logic are, I think, clearly demonstrated in his answers to my well-prepared questions. I was somewhat dismayed when he started blaming his publishers for the glaring inconsistencies in his books. His version of what happened in the caves is less than satisfying. My private impression is that he is willing to resort to untruths in order to save a theory he really believes is true.

The Interview

Piet Hein Hoebens: Mr. von Däniken, I have taken it for granted that most of my readers will be familiar with the gist of your theories. They may be less aware of the criticism that has been leveled against it. For the purpose of this interview I have read or re-read almost everything you have published, and all the criticism I could lay my hands on. After all this reading I was left with quite a few questions. Let me begin with the so-called Sirius Mystery, which you and others consider to be one of the best pieces of evidence in favor of the Ancient Astronaut hypothesis. Surprisingly you never seem to have made any attempt to refute the criticism of this evidence by Mr. Ian Ridpath.

2 *Dichtung und Wahrheit* [From My Life: Poetry and Truth] is a proverbial allusion to Goethe’s autobiographical writings, which comprised 20 books, arranged in four volumes, written between 1810 and 1831. (Eds.)

Erich von Däniken: Ridpath? Who is he?

PHH: You should have known. He sent you a copy of his book *Messages from the Stars*³, which you acknowledged ...

EVD: Can't remember, what does he say?

PHH: He says it's not necessary at all to postulate alien visitors to explain the Dogon mythology. There is no reason to suppose that those parts of the tribe's legends that suggest advanced astronomical knowledge are really very old.

EVD: Was he the one that spoke about this medieval university at Timbuktu?

PHH: No. That was Professor Ovenden.⁴ Ridpath disagrees with him. He says Mr. Temple⁵ used an old mythology, ignored those elements not consistent with his theory and interpreted some highly ambiguous facts in a rather selective and fanciful way. For instance those sand drawings. Temple claims one of those drawings clearly shows Sirius B circling Sirius A in an elliptical orbit, whereas the drawing shows both symbols *within* an egg-shaped object – if it is an object at all. And there are more symbols in it than just Sirius A and Sirius B. Well, his main point is: The Dogon myth is an oral tradition, and like all oral traditions subject to additions and embellishments. Let's assume the tribe really had an ancient myth somehow centering on the Dog's star. Since the beginning of this century, decades before Mr. Temple's oft-quoted anthropologists appeared on the scene, the Dogons had been in contact with western civilization, mainly through missionaries. It is only natural that they wanted to discuss their divine star with the white visitors, and it is equally natural that those visitors told them what *they* knew of Sirius. The missionaries may even have tried to combat local superstitions by giving the poor heathens the true facts about Sirius. Instead of converting, however, the Dogons happily incorporated some recent astronomy into their tribal lore. I find this entirely convincing, because the Dogons' astronomical knowledge is modern by the standards of the twenties, not by the standards of today.

EVD: Yes, but according to Robert Temple and Madame Griaule, I met her in Paris, the Dogons have their knowledge of the Sirius myth for at least 900 years! And not since recent times, because there are many many things ... They make these wooden masks, and the main dancer has for every Sirius ceremony another mask. And, as I have understood it, the mask of the main dancer may be used only once. Once the ceremony is over they hang the mask on a tree or whatever, and every fifty years, or sixty years, I am not sure now, there is only one of these

3 Ridpath (1978). (Eds.)

4 Ovenden (1962). (Eds.)

5 Temple (1976). (Eds.)

masks. Well, there are so many of those masks, the oldest one should be 900 years old. But there are many other reasons to believe the tradition is really old, but I don't remember these right now. But by the way, this Sirius Mystery is really Robert Temple's idea, not mine. I heard Temple defending himself at a meeting in the USA where he was heavily criticized, but he did it brilliantly. But I am not his defender, I don't know if he is right or wrong.

PHH: Well then, let's leave that subject. But just one thing. You write about this Sigui ceremony and claim this is performed once every fifty years, nicely fitting into the Ancient Astronomy hypothesis. But according to Robert Temple and the anthropologists he always quotes, the Sigui is celebrated once every *sixty* years. They admit this does *not* fit into the theory. Why did you change the number of years?

EVD: But I have my fifty years from Robert Temple! I know him. We met in London several times. He told me the Dogons have several ceremonies, one in every fifty years, one every sixty years, one is even every eighty years, because they have several planets. And he told me the fifty-year ceremony was the one related to Sirius B.

PHH: Well, I couldn't find this in Temple's book!

EVD: You should ask this to Temple. Maybe he is wrong, why not?

PHH: Well, let's continue with the theories that are really yours. You have often been criticized for being inconsistent in your handling of the evidence. I found what looks like a striking example of that in your books. It concerns your treatment of the Nazca Markings. In *Chariots of the Gods*⁶ you say they "remind you of landing-grounds." In your book *Kreuzverhör*⁷ [Cross-Questioning] you complain of having been wrongly quoted.

EVD: I never said they were landing-grounds – as a matter of fact, in my *Zurück zu den Sternen*⁸ [Return to the Stars] I said just the opposite: They are *not* landing-grounds.

PHH: Well. What do we read on the very last page of your *Beweise* (British edition: *According to the Evidence*)⁹? I quote: "So it was a landing-ground for the extraterrestrials. Wait and see." Is this a contradiction or not?

EVD: It is entirely correct what you say. And this is one of the mistakes in the books. It was wrong, wrong, wrong. I cursed against it. You know, this was inserted by my lector, you know, the man who edited the book for the publishers. I was not at home then. I travel most of the

6 Däniken (1968). (Eds.)

7 Däniken (1978). (Eds.)

8 Däniken (1969). (Eds.)

9 Däniken (1977). (Eds.)

time. When I returned I saw what they had done. Wrong, wrong, wrong! But it was too late to stop it. And the translations were published at the same time. I was very sad. It was wrong, and you are right.

PHH: Another contradiction. On page 290 of your *Beweise*, British edition again, you explain why the extraterrestrials are not officially contacting the Earth now. They're afraid of contagious diseases, you say. Why didn't they think of that when they visited us 400,000,000, 20,000 and 5,000 years ago?

EVD: Well, if there are really UFOs and extraterrestrials in them, it is by no means certain that they are the same who visited the Earth before. Maybe it's another group.

PHH: Why then don't they contact us by radio? No fear of bacteria there!

EVD: I don't know.

PHH: Your astronauts often strike me as quaintly old-fashioned. You quote the old book of Ezra, where the messengers of God – astronauts, according to you – instruct the prophet to collect all the scribes of the area in order to take down a message. Isn't that odd? Why should an advanced civilization need the help of scribes? Didn't they have type-writers, tape recorders or xerox machines? Or, at least, more durable writing materials than papyrus and parchment? Why so primitive?

EVD: Well, we don't believe that those visitors from outer space have been very, very advanced to us. We think they were only twenty or thirty years ahead of us. They are described as coming down with a lot of noise and smoke, and this doesn't sound very advanced. This is not my calculation, by the way, but Blumrich's.¹⁰ Then, according to some mythologies, there was something like a fight between the gods. The ones that came down to Earth were something like rebels. Maybe they did not have all the technology they needed because they were cut off from the mother spacecraft. What do I know? Maybe they really needed scribes!

PHH: There is something else about these old books. On page 197 of *Beweise* you quote the Book of Ezra where the astronauts tell the prophet to keep secret almost all the books dictated by the Gods. One page earlier you had quoted the Book of Enoch, where the astronaut tells the prophet he may *not* keep secret any of the divine books. Your gods seem to be of two minds!

EVD: You're right. It is a paradox. But that's what the books say.

PHH: Of course, but I wonder how you can use two sources that flatly contradict each other in support of one and the same theory.

10 Blumrich (1974). (Eds.)

EVD: Well, I see both texts as a clear indication that we have been visited by beings from outer space. Maybe the conflicting passages were inserted later.

PHH: Like what happened to your books.

EVD: Yes. You see, my critics always say, when I quote the Bible, that I only take what I like, and ignore the rest. That's correct. That's what I'm doing. That we call selection. Every scientist, every theologian in this case, uses exactly the same method. Absolutely the same thing. The Bible is like an onion. You peel and you peel. And layer after layer you throw away, until you get at a hard core – an old tradition that shows the people of that time knew something they could not have known. Most of the Book of Enoch is just rubbish. I can't do anything with it. But when it comes down to the astronomical part ... you know, "These are the Names of the Guardians in the Sky," etcetera, that's damn interesting. Who told them those names?

PHH: There have been allegations against you that much of the evidence you use is not genuine, and that you allow your imagination to run away with you. Some of your facts are not facts at all. An example. In *Chariots of the Gods* you mention a "calendar" found in the mud at Tiahuanaco. It proves, you claim, that the people who carved it had astronomical knowledge far ahead of ours. As Ronald Story¹¹ rightly wonders: Where on earth is that thing? Nobody except you seems to have seen it.

EVD: The calendar of Tiahuanaco I was referring to is in fact the gate of Tiahuanaco! The same thing! Mr. Story should read the book of Bellamy.¹² Bellamy has, in a very convincing way, demonstrated that the gate of Tiahuanaco is in fact a calendar.

PHH: Why didn't you say so in your book? In *Chariots of the Gods* I couldn't find a single passage confirming what you just claimed. You treat the gate and the calendar as if they were two separate things. Bellamy's calculations, apart from being utter hogwash à la Hörbiger, concern the Great Idol of Tiahuanaco, which you clearly say is not the calendar.

EVD: Let me say this to you, concerning *Chariots of the Gods*. When I had written this book it was 411 pages. I sent it to twenty publishers, and nobody accepted it. Finally, I found a publisher who was willing to publish it, but only on the condition that I agree that it would be edited into a much shorter work. After all these frustrations I was so mad I agreed to everything. The publisher said it was too long, and too scientific, nobody would read it. Well, I agreed. And the publishing house cut it down to 210 pages. So *Chariots of the Gods* is not a scientific book. It is a provocative, explosive book, but in no way scientific. So it may well be, and I accept this kind of criticism, that there are some misinterpretations, and some wrong ideas and too much fantasy

11 Story (1976). (Eds.)

12 Bellamy (1956). (Eds.)

in *Chariots of the Gods*. By the way, Ronald Story is a funny man. All these critics are. We had in the US the first book against me, called *Crash go the Chariots*.¹³ Believe it or not, this Mr. Wilson ... he claims he is an archaeologist which he is not, he is a minister, a priest, from Australia, we know each other, we had public debate at the North Dakota University, for five hours ... well, this Mr. Wilson is like the other critics. First they attack me, and as soon as they are well-known they go on writing their own books – in favor of these theories. Mr. Wilson's second book was a flying saucer book.¹⁴ The same thing with Ronald Story. Story wrote this book against me, making a lot of money, quoting a lot of rubbish by the way, from *Playboy* etcetera, and now Story's second book is a UFO book. Pro UFO!¹⁵

PHH: Are you serious?

EVD: Oh yes!

PHH: Let's go to the South American gold caves. In your book *Kreuzverhör* you finally face an accusation you had ignored in *Beweise*: Mr. Móricz' claim that you have never set foot into those caves. I must admit I find your version of the facts a bit difficult to swallow. You claim in *Gold of the Gods*¹⁶ that you have "seen and photographed the incredible truth in person," and the only person alive who could have corroborated your story says you're lying. Now you claim you have been speaking the truth. You have the evidence, but cannot show it to us. You have promised not to reveal the secret, and you're afraid of powerful enemies in Ecuador in case you break that promise ...

EVD: That's true enough, by the way ... yes. Well, Mr. Móricz says I have never been in the caves. Yet I have published, in *Beweise*, a photograph where Móricz and I are sitting in front of the cave. How can he say we were not there?

PHH: That's not what he is denying. According to the interview in *Der Spiegel*¹⁷, you have been shown a blocked side entrance, and have never been inside it.

EVD: But why the hell should I go with him for at least 36 hours just to sit before a cave and take

13 Wilson (1972). (Eds.)

14 This is not quite correct. Among almost three dozen books by Clifford A. Wilson that we are aware of (almost all of them popular and sometimes lamentably superficial works), including several on flying saucers and related phenomena, there seems to be none that really argues „in favor of these theories,“ as Däniken maintains. (Eds.)

15 This time, Däniken was right. Ronald Story wrote or edited several books on UFOs from what may be described as a proponent's perspective. (Eds.)

16 Däniken (1972). (Eds.)

17 Móricz (1973). (Eds.)

a photograph? I have taken photographs down there which I have not published. We have a few here¹⁸, we are showing them. Taken inside the caves.

PHH: Did you overcome your fear of your Ecuadorian enemies? I thought you were not allowed to show those pictures!

EVD: Different things again. I was not allowed to show the pictures taken inside the metal library. In other parts of the caves, where there are many objects, it was not so secret. Hundreds of objects there. Very impressive.

PHH: You often accuse your critics of being pig-headed, doctrinaire, intolerant and even ignorant. How could such terms refer to a man like Dr. Duncan Lunan, who came to this very conference, at your invitation, to serve as a panel member? He is not afraid at all to be associated with a conference like this. And yet he is a critic. He thinks the evidence you have collected is of poor quality, confused, ambiguous. It points too many ways to be convincing.

EVD: Well. I don't agree with him ... In this case. Because we know so many theories, about the beginning of the universe, the rise of life, mankind's anthropology etcetera etcetera, which are generally accepted by science, and if you question those theories you will soon find a lot of facts that speak against them. But nobody says so. In this case, my theory, we have so many indications, and all these indications form a puzzle we call the evidence. Now I have no doubt whatsoever that some of these indications may be wrong, clear, but this is true of any other science! What is to say against the idea that extraterrestrials were here in antiquity?

PHH: Well, nobody takes that line of criticism. Story doesn't. He clearly states there is nothing absurd about the idea of aliens having visited our planet in ancient times. He just claims the evidence you present is faulty. The same with Carl Sagan. He never said the idea is preposterous a priori. Maybe they have been here, maybe not. It's just the way you have tried to prove they have that makes no sense to your critics.

EVD: Ah, Sagan! Sagan! You know, he said about *Chariots of the Gods* it's "the most illogical book of the century." Well, in my newest book, *Prophet der Vergangenheit*¹⁹ [Prophet of the Past], I say this is the most stupid argument of the millennium. Ha Ha. Now, he is arrogant, this Sagan. Absolutely arrogant. Many years ago I admired him. But I have now lost all respect. It's gone ...

PHH: You seem to have a lot of trouble with the people you once admired! You admired Heyerdahl, and Heyerdahl attacked you...

18 At the Munich conference, that is. (Eds.)

19 Däniken (1979). (Eds.)

EVD: Oh, I still admire Heyerdahl. I just disagree with him ...

PHH: Another unrequited love: I recently bought a book by Professor Hoimar von Ditfurth. On the cover was a glowing recommendation – by Erich von Däniken. In a recent series of TV programmes on the German network Hoimar von Ditfurth called you a crank, a mystery monger, a crackpot whose distortion-ridden pseudoscientific pamphlets constitute a danger to society!

EVD: What are you telling me now? Oh, yes, I do remember. Yes, I once did write a recommendation. That's what surprises me so much in these people. That suddenly they crash down on you without even talking to you. I never met Ditfurth, I never met Sagan²⁰ ... I invited Ditfurth to come here and speak against us. He didn't come. I invited many critics, as we have very prominent critics. No one came!

PHH: Duncan Lunan came!

EVD: But he is not a critic.

PHH: Oh yes, he is. Haven't you read his book *Those Mysterious Signals from Outer Space*²¹ He pokes fun at you, and tells his readers there is no reason whatsoever to believe a word of your theories. In his lecture here he called the sort of evidence you collected all but worthless ...

EVD: Oh? I had no time to attend his lecture ... [short pause] Ah, there are so many indications, so many ... Why is nobody explaining it? Just take the case of Enoch. Why is Enoch telling us, "These are the names of the 200 Watchmen of the Sky that have descended"? Why is nobody attacking that statement? Have you seen that picture of the sculpture at El Baul in Guatemala? The man with the space-mask, and the cylinder on his back? I showed it to archaeologists. One of them said: To me it looks like a maize-farmer with a maize-bier on his back. Another said it was a ball-player. Okay, that it possible, everything is possible. But what is the most logical? Look: the helmet totally closed, with this object on his back, the air coming out, this tube ... I don't know. 2,500 years ago the extraterrestrial said to the prophet Ezekiel: "You human beings, you have eyes to see, and yet you do not see." Certainly you can attack every damn piece of evidence, that's possible. Every indication can have a different explanation. It is the total of indications that makes the puzzle. I find it fascinating. How many different interpretations have we heard, scientific interpretations, of the planes of Nazca? About seven! And every time we hear a new one they say: Now we know it. Well, nobody knows. I don't know it either. But at least my speculation should have the same value as other speculations. Why are we not taken seriously?

20 In April of 1987, one of the editors (G.H.H.) had an opportunity to spend an evening with Carl Sagan in Pasadena. On that occasion, Sagan reported that he and von Däniken had in fact met. This, of course, may have happened after 1979 when Hoebens and von Däniken had this interview. (Eds.)

21 Lunan (1978). (Eds.)

PHH: It is not the hypothesis as such that is ridiculed, but the way you set out to prove it. Your critics are not used to your kind of arguing. They can't know it was your publisher who made *Chariots of the Gods* from over 400 pages of sound science into just over 200 pages of incoherent speculation.

EVD: Yes, but I didn't do that!

PHH: Of course, but haven't your critics the right to criticize the books as they are published?

EVD: Absolutely!

PHH: And *Chariots of the Gods* as it is now is very odd indeed. Most arguments in the book are not arguments at all, but rhetorical questions.

EVD: Yes, there are 238 question marks in *Chariots of the Gods*!

PHH: Question marks are hardly a convincing way to prove your point. A question may be answered in more than one way. But on the one hand you ask a question, and on the other hand you make it clear that you will accept only one answer. Remember how you interpreted the Palenque Astronaut. A child can see it's someone in a rocket, you say. Who could possibly doubt it? Well, I can!

EVD: Do you doubt it? Don't you see it?

PHH: Yes. To me the Palenque Astronaut looks like an Indian chief who fell into a cactus and now is crying for first aid.

EVD: Are you serious? You are joking, aren't you? Hahahaha!

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