

Obsession and Longing: How the Lost City of Z was created to be forever lost

Obsesión y anhelo: Cómo la Ciudad Perdida de Z fue creada para ser perdida para siempre

David S. Anderson

Radford University, danderson10@radford.edu

Abstract: *Claims for the existence of lost cities represent a problematic form of pseudoarchaeology. If an archaeologist insists the city does not exist, then they are closed minded. Or instead, if the archaeologist goes looking for a city and fails to find it, they have not looked hard enough. Once such legends exist, they develop a pernicious hold on popular perceptions of the ancient world. This article examines British explorer Percy Fawcett's claim that a lost city exists in the heart of the Amazon jungle, and argues that the best way to overcome pseudoarchaeological claims for lost cities is not to dismiss them but to openly discuss how the legends originated and developed.*

Keywords: *Pseudoarchaeology, Lost City, Percy Fawcett, Amazon*

Resumen: *Las afirmaciones defendiendo la existencia de ciudades perdidas son una forma problemática de pseudoarqueología. Si un arqueólogo insiste que la ciudad no existe, es acusado de tener una mente cerrada. Si, en su lugar, el arqueólogo va en busca de la ciudad y no logra hallarla, es acusado de no buscar lo suficiente. Una vez dichas leyendas existen, logran arraigarse en las percepciones populares del mundo antiguo. Este artículo examina las afirmaciones del explorador británico Percy Fawcett acerca de la existencia de una ciudad perdida en el corazón de la Amazonia. Se defenderá que la mejor forma de superar afirmaciones acerca de ciudades perdidas desde la pseudoarqueología es no desecharlas, sino discutir abiertamente cómo dichas leyendas se originaron y desarrollaron.*

Palabras clave: *Pseudoarqueología, Ciudad Perdida, Percy Fawcett, Amazonia*

1. Introduction

The British explorer Colonel Percy Fawcett was last seen in 1925 heading upriver into the heart of the Amazon basin with his son Jack Fawcett and Raleigh Rimell. The men were on a quest to discover the Lost City of Z, a settlement that Fawcett believed would be found in the heart of the jungle. The precise route of the expedition had been kept secret out of fear that other explorers might beat them to the city; as a result, when the Fawcett party failed to reemerge from the jungle no one could say quite what had happened to them. Was the party dead? Were they being held captive by natives? Or, had they reached their destination? Speculation on the fate of the party continued for decades until even the most ardent supporters had to admit Fawcett must be dead. Even still, the lore of Percy Fawcett did not disappear as occasional expeditions continued to search for any trace of his remains or his fabled city. Interest in Fawcett and the City of Z has recently resurged due to the publication of David Grann's book *The Lost City of Z* (2005), the release of James Gray's (2016) film by the same name, and with an expedition and documentary film planned by James Lynch in search of Fawcett's final resting place¹. With this renewed attention comes the question, how should archaeologists engage with the City of Z?

Tales of lost cities in Latin America have been told since the earliest days of the European conquest. The most famous of these stories is that of the lost city of El Dorado, a legendary place bursting with gold that has drawn many explorers into the most remote corners of the New World (Bray, 1979). El Dorado, however, does not stand alone. Stories of Ciudad Blanca in Honduras also date back to the 16th century (Begley 2016), and ever

since Francisco Vázquez de Coronado went looking for the seven golden cities of Cibola in 1541, people have continually speculated about possible lost cities throughout the Americas (Koch 2009). Lost city legends hold a special romantic appeal that implies hidden or restricted knowledge. After all, for a tale of a lost city to exist someone must have been to the city or in some other manner hold knowledge of its existence that has been withheld from the rest of us.

This intrigue and romance has generated considerable public interest in the notion of lost cities. We see this interest reflected in movies, pulp fiction, and other forms of popular entertainment that take up legendary places such as El Dorado or Atlantis for their backdrops (Bergeron 2000; Evans 1983; Gardner 2007; Gray 2016; Jordan 2016; Trousdale and Wise 2001). The lines between truth and fiction, however, become blurred as many of these same forms of popular culture also incorporate known historical or archaeological details. Take for example the animated film *The Road to El Dorado* (Bergeron 2000), while the plot of the movie involves a search for the fabled city, it also depicts 16th century Maya culture complete with elements of dress, architecture, and activities such as the Maya ballgame. Young viewers of the film will naturally walk away at the end associating the Maya culture with the El Dorado of legend. These lines between truth and fiction are further blurred in the modern news media which frequently uses the term lost city to refer to known archaeological sites. In 2015, for example, CNN ran a story about the career of eminent Mayan archaeologist Ivan Šprajc titled "The Real-Life Indiana Jones Who Finds Lost Cities in the Jungle,"

¹ The author was interviewed by the television production company preparing to film this expedition.

(Charney 2015). This kind of verbiage in news stories might help draw in readers but it further obfuscates the difference between legendary lost cities and actual archaeological research.

The popular interest in lost cities hits straight to the core of the problems inherent to pseudoarchaeology. The hunt for El Dorado, Ciudad Blanca, and even the City of Z all make for good stories. If any of these cities were real, their discovery would justifiably be headline news and rewrite much of what we know about pre-Columbian Latin America. Pseudoarchaeology often holds a glamor, or a romance, that research archaeology does not. Compounding the problem is the stereotypical lack of response from archaeologists on claims they have judged to be pseudoarchaeology. By dismissing such claims without discussion, archaeologists actively help to create a taboo on these topics that furthers their intriguing nature. If centuries of rumor suggest a lost city exists deep in the heart of the jungle, and authority figures scoff and dismiss those rumors without investigation, it is eminently understandable that some members of the public would start to believe a cover up might be in process. Archaeologists need to address pseudoarchaeology, ignoring the inherent intrigue that it carries only strengthens the case that these claims might be true.

Lost cities present a special challenge for archaeologists seeking to debunk pseudoarchaeology. By definition, they are lost! If an expedition is mounted to look for El Dorado, the failure of that expedition would do nothing to undermine the belief that the city exists. The city was lost before the expedition and it remains lost afterwards. To engage with a lost city claim we must examine the roots of the story and the context in which it developed. This paper will examine Percy Fawcett's

claims for the City Z by first considering what influences Fawcett himself brought to the story of the city, and then by exploring how Fawcett amassed different pieces of evidence to support the city's existence. From Fawcett's perspective, he had constructed a coherent epistemological base that justified his knowledge that the city existed. We will find however, that an examination of that base leaves little reason to believe that Z is a real place.

2. Percy Fawcett: Explorer or Spiritualist?

Percy Fawcett's background and life story greatly affected his interest in Z, but not in the way many people have presumed. Stories of Fawcett's life typically focus on his career in the military and as a surveyor and how these experiences led him to look for the City of Z (Fawcett 1953; see Brian Fawcett's commentaries; Grann 2005; Gray 2016). Fawcett enlisted in the military serving as a young man in the British colony of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and later in World War I (Grann 2005). After returning to Britain from Sri Lanka, Fawcett trained as a surveyor at the Royal Geographical Society where he developed the aptitude and contacts to land his first job surveying the border between Peru, Bolivia, and Brazil (Fawcett 1953). After successfully completing this job, Fawcett went on to carry out numerous additional surveying jobs across the Amazon basin. While this career track certainly brought Fawcett to the Amazon and gave him the physical skills to thrive in its jungles, it was his spiritual background that inspired the notion of the City of Z.

Fawcett had a notable interest in the burgeoning Spiritualism movement of the early 20th century, and in the final years of his life he became a contributing author to the esoteric magazine *Light*. His interest in Spiritualism can be traced back to the

time he spent in Sri Lanka (Grann 2005: 37). As a British colony, Sri Lanka was home to sizable populations of Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, and Christians, all of whom vied for influence in the public square (Brendon 2008: 447). On a basic level, living in Sri Lanka exposed Fawcett to a complicated non-European religious milieu that most young Englishmen had never seen. Fawcett, however, went past simply observing this milieu. Grann (2005: 49) reports that family members recall Fawcett embracing Buddhism and publicly swearing to uphold the five precepts of the religion that forbid killing, stealing, sexual immorality, lying, and drunkenness (Keown 2013). Fawcett's interest in Buddhism is particularly significant given that the religion had a strong impact on the developing New Age spiritual movement. In essence, Fawcett, and many other Westerners, brought the religions of the Orient back to the West and combined them in novel ways with their own esoteric traditions fostering the creation of the New Age movement (Albanese 2007; Schmidt 2012).

During this period Fawcett was also exposed to Theosophy, a new religious movement that sought to find universal threads uniting the religions of all humanity. Theosophy as a specific spiritual tradition originated with the founding of the Theosophical Society in 1875 in New York (Gomes 2016: 250). The most influential and prolific member of this group was Helena Blavatsky. Madame Blavatsky, as she was known, was an extraordinarily charismatic and controversial figure (Hodgson 1885; Lachman 2012). After a short-lived marriage to a Russian noble, Blavatsky left Russia for Istanbul and from there launched a life of travel (Gomes 2016; Lachman 2012). Throughout her

world travels, she was perpetually drawn to esoteric and occult spiritual movements. Gradually she began to posit that the world's religious wisdom showed signs of a single primordial origin (Lachman 2012). As Theosophy grew in popularity, so apparently did Blavatsky's personal spiritual powers. Over time she claimed to have developed many abilities that have provoked skepticism among the incredulous; for example, she would perform psychic readings and manifest objects from thin air (Hodgson 1885; Johnson 1994; Newman 2016). Most importantly to the Theosophical movement, Blavatsky claimed to maintain a correspondence with two Mahatmas, ancient Tibetan spiritual gurus, via written letters that would materialize in a special cabinet in the Theosophical Society headquarters (Gomes 2016; Johnson 1994).

While Fawcett was stationed in Sri Lanka, his older brother Edward was living in India with members of the Theosophical Society, including Madame Blavatsky herself. According to Grann (2005: 48), Edward Fawcett was not only a member of the Theosophical society, but aided Blavatsky in drafting her most famous (and longest) work, *The Secret Doctrine* (Blavatsky 1888). This book is largely billed as a translation of the *Book of Dzyan*, an alleged ancient Vedic text. While the *Book of Dzyan* has been mentioned by several later authors, including Eric Von Däniken (1974: 141) and H.P. Lovecraft (see his short stories "The Diary of Alonso Typer" and "The Haunter of the Dark"), there is no clear evidence, outside of Blavatsky's claims, that the book ever existed. In *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky states that humanity is developing through a series of root races². According to her writings, humanity currently exists in its

² In this context "race" is used in a sense more akin with "epoch" or "era" than it is ethnicity.

5th root race, and our previous 4th root race lived in the lost continents of Lemuria and Atlantis. While living on these lost continents our ancestors had been enlightened by spiritual beings from beyond our planet, a claim that serves as one of the inspirations for the modern Ancient Aliens movement (Colavito 2005). For Blavatsky, this shared point of origin in Atlantis and Lemuria ultimately explained what she saw as similarities in religions around the world.

Percy Fawcett not only had family connections to Theosophy, but he also personally proclaimed an interest in the spiritual group (1922). It is also clear that Theosophy, and Spiritualism writ large, influenced how he engaged with claims for ancient ruins in the jungles of the Amazon. Throughout his personal memoir, *Exploration Fawcett* (1953), he made references to psychic abilities, the influence of spirits, and telltale condemnations of science of academic experts. He also drew multiple connections between the City of Z and Atlantis. Fawcett went so far as to state that “the connection of Atlantis with parts of what is now Brazil is not to be dismissed contemptuously, and belief in it—*with or without scientific corroboration*—affords explanations for many problems which otherwise are unsolved mysteries,” (Fawcett 1953: 14, emphasis added). In examining Fawcett’s private papers, Grann (2005: 299) discovered that Fawcett explicitly suggested the City of Z was home to a “White Lodge,” which in Theosophy is a revered space where the Mahatmas instructed students of the primordial tradition (Johnson 1994). Grann (2005: 299) further noted that Fawcett described Z as “the cradle of all civilizations,” thus we can clearly see that for Fawcett the City of Z was not merely a city but a pivotal place in a spiritual narrative of humanity’s origins.

Fawcett’s association with Spiritualism was not limited to his belief in the City of Z. Following the end of World War I, much of Europe was swept up in a revival of the *séance* tradition as people sought ways to assuage the grief associated with the loss of loved ones in the war. Fawcett himself attended many such *séances* and at these gatherings became acquainted with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. While Doyle is best known today as the author of the Sherlock Holmes mysteries, he was also one of the most influential voices of the Spiritualism movement (Doyle 1926; Fowler 2016). In their friendship, Fawcett told Doyle his stories of adventure in the Amazon jungle, and likely confided in him his suspicions that the jungle held more mysteries than the world knew. These discussions would ultimately inspire Doyle to write his novel, *The Lost World*, which tells the stories of British explorers discovering a relic population of Dinosaurs in the Amazon basin (Fawcett 1953: 122).

As Fawcett became more engaged with the Spiritualism movement he would go on to write pieces for *Light* magazine positing his own metaphysical interpretations. Given that Fawcett appears to have been obsessed with finding the City of Z (after Grann 2005), his 1922 article titled “Obsession” offers a fascinating insight into his personal psyche. In this piece Fawcett describes obsession as a form of spiritual possession that occurs when an individual has been compromised in some way. More specifically “psychically considered the result of nervous agitation is to loosen the association of the astral and physical vehicles, and so offer a possibility of forcible substitution, or sensitiveness to suggestion, by those lower passionate entities which hover on the borderland of physical matter,” (Fawcett 1922: 476). Fawcett reports that one way a person can experience such dangerous “nervous agitation,” is through the consumption of alcohol and drugs, thus demonstrating

that Fawcett's well-known aversion to alcohol was deeply tied to his spiritual beliefs. Sadly, Fawcett's article offers no clear insight regarding whether he was aware of his own personal obsessions.

We should not ignore Fawcett's background as a military officer and surveyor. This training and experience gave him the skills that he needed to survive in the jungle. But, it was Fawcett's background in Spiritualism that made Z a place of profound personal interest.

3. The Construction of Z

Despite the recent cinematic portrayal as such, Fawcett did not have a sudden epiphany regarding the existence of the City of Z, rather his belief in the city was gradually constructed as he continued to explore the Amazon and become familiar with the region's history and cultures. While there are external influences in this construction in the form of tales told to Fawcett by Amazonian natives, no single person envisioned the City of Z prior to Fawcett. Fawcett's data points regarding the city's existence fall into three categories: physical artifacts, indigenous stories, and historical accounts from early conquistadors and explorers.

3.1. Physical Artifacts

The physical artifacts that inspired Fawcett were relatively scant. In his numerous Amazonian expeditions, Fawcett encountered and was shown collections of pottery sherds suggesting that the region had a long history of occupation (Fawcett 1953: 28, 48, 222). These finds, however, do not appear to have significantly impacted Fawcett's thought process and only received brief mention in his memoir. Instead, Fawcett (1953: 176) was clearly more attracted to unusual objects; for example, he described in detail an encounter with a man who was selling "six queer metal figures ...

reminiscent of Ancient Egypt." Apparently, the seller would not tell Fawcett where he had acquired the figurines, thus further firing Fawcett's imagination; "without question they were very old, and probably linked up with those things we were about to seek," (Fawcett 1953: 176).

The unusual artifact receiving Fawcett's greatest attention, however, is a mysterious carved idol. The opening chapter of his memoir is devoted to this object and describes it in detail. "I have in my possession an image about ten inches high, carved from a piece of black basalt. It represents a figure with a plaque on its chest inscribed with a number of characters, and about its ankles a band similarly inscribed," (Fawcett 1953: 12). Fawcett goes on to say that anyone who held the idol felt an electric current coursing from the object, the current was allegedly so strong that some could not stand to hold the object for long. The idol was given to Fawcett by Sir H. Rider Haggard, best known as the author of *King Solomon's Mines* and other stories of adventure fiction. Haggard was both an enthusiast of the ancient world and had more than a passing interest in Spiritualism (Burdett 2005), but he only knew that this particular object was said to be from Brazil. Curious to see if he could learn more about the object's origins, Fawcett showed it to "experts at the British Museum," who were unable to identify the object's place of origin but who nonetheless declared that it was not a fake.

In a continued quest to learn more about this object, Fawcett took it to an unnamed psychometrist who performed a psychic reading to determine the history of the idol (Fawcett 1953: 14). The results of this reading as recorded in *Exploration Fawcett* tell a story of a priest who saved the idol from a temple while the surrounding lands were in the process of sinking beneath the ocean. The psychic did not name the idol's homeland as Atlantis,

but it is the clear intention of the story and Fawcett himself interpreted it as such. Upon the strength of this psychic reading and the object's unusual properties, Fawcett was convinced that the idol must have come from a lost city in the heart of Brazil that was associated with Atlantis.

3.2. Indigenous Tales

Fawcett's belief in the City of Z was primarily nurtured by frequent stories he was told by indigenous inhabitants of the region. Over the years, Fawcett collected numerous stories of ruins to be found somewhere in the heart of the jungle. "I was told of a cave near Villa Rica in the Alto Paraná, where curious drawings and inscriptions in an unknown language are to be seen," (Fawcett 1953: 113). "All the superior Indian tribes had traditions of a once great civilization to the east, of a race which may have sired the Incas," (Fawcett 1953: 172). "Rock inscriptions had been found there; in the forests of the River Preguiça fine ceramics were discovered and an antiquated silver sword-hilt; near Conquista an old man returning from Ilheos lost his ox at night, and following the trail through the *mato* found himself in the plaza of an ancient town. He entered through arches, found streets of stone, and saw in the middle of the square the statue of a man" (Fawcett 1953: 222). With each new story, Fawcett undoubtedly became increasingly convinced that there must be a city of some kind lost in the jungle.

It was not these rumors of ruins alone, however, that convinced Fawcett something important could be found in the heart of the Amazon. In addition to stories of ruins, Fawcett also recorded stories that alleged a mysterious race of white Indians were to be found deep in the jungle. In one such story an informant told Fawcett (1953: 67) "You meet whites who have gone Indian, and sometimes you

see Indians who are white. I've seen them myself—people with red hair and blue eyes, like a *Gringo*. Ask any of the men in the Brazilian *baracas* up this way, and they'll tell you the same". Throughout his memoir Fawcett continues to mention contemporary tales of "white Indians". In addition, he expands upon a 19th century claim backed by numerous scholars (see Evans 2004: Chapter 4) that the central Mexican Toltec culture, which the Aztecs looked to as a golden age of architecture and learning (Smith 2012: 35), were in fact an immigrant "white" culture. Fawcett (1953: 242) describes the Toltec as "delicately featured, of a light copper colour, blue-eyed, probably with auburn hair," and he explicitly states that the Toltec were a superior race. "To the degenerate autochthones the Toltecs were superior beings. They constructed great cities and huge temples to the sun; they used papyrus and metal implements; and were accomplished in civilized arts undreamed of by the inferior races," (Fawcett 1953: 242).

Fawcett did not simply believe that the City of Z existed because he had heard rumors of ruins and found some possible material remains. The stories of ruins with writing and elaborate architecture convinced Fawcett that the jungle had been home to a Civilization, and in his mind only certain races were capable of Civilization. In one of Fawcett's final letters home to his family, he related the story of an Amazonian native who claimed that his ancestors had once built cities in the jungle. In response Fawcett (1953: 290) claimed "this I am inclined to doubt, for he, like the Mehinaku Indians, is of the brown or Polynesian type, and it is the fair or red type I associate with the cities." Fawcett's belief that the City of Z was real was profoundly entangled with his belief that dark skinned native Amazonians were incapable of Civilization.

3.3. Historical Accounts

The final piece of evidence that led Fawcett to believe in the City of Z were two historical accounts of Spanish explorers. The earlier of these two accounts was that of the voyage of Francisco Orellana. Orellana led the first foreign expedition to cross the Amazon basin and trace the river to its mouth in the Atlantic. Accounts from this expedition claimed that the Spaniards encountered numerous villages and extensive territories ruled by powerful chiefs, and Orellana was convinced that he and his men had only scratched the surface of what lay in the heart of the jungle (Levy 2011). Today, anthropologists and archaeologists presume that these claims were essentially true, that is to say that prior to contact the Amazon basin was home to an extensive population (Heckenberger et al. 2008; Lombardo & Prümers 2010; Pärssinen et al. 2009), but in the 19th and early 20th century many historians thought that Orellana had exaggerated or outright lied about these elevated population levels. The primary historical study of Latin America mentioned by Fawcett in his memoir is William H. Prescott's *The History of the Conquest of Peru* first published in 1847. In this work Prescott suggested that Orellana exaggerated the tales of his voyage through the Amazon but that his contemporaries should not be blamed for believing him because "in an age of wonders, when the mysteries of the East and West were hourly coming to light, they might be excused for not discerning the true line between romance and reality," (Prescott 2000: 1078). After having spent years in the Amazon seeing its people and hearing stories of ancient ruins, Fawcett clearly favored Orellana's version over Prescott's skepticism and furthermore likely saw Prescott's skepticism as a conspiratorial bias against the existence of his City of Z.

Fawcett's second historical source is somewhat more problematic. In the Brazilian government archives, Fawcett (1953) claims to have discovered an "old document" that recounts a journey by a group of Portuguese explorers. These explorers, whose names were apparently not recorded, spent 10 years wandering the Amazon basin looking for gold and silver mines that had been rumored at the time of contact. At the end of a fruitless expedition, the explorers were seeking a route back to the coast when they unexpectedly encountered steep mountains covered in quartz crystals that glistened in the setting sun. The next day they searched for hours before finding a pass through the mountains, this route passed through a narrow crevasse that showed signs of being partially carved and paved. After a steep three-hour climb, the men stepped out on a ledge and before their eyes lay a "huge city". Upon exploring the city, they reported massive stone arches, wide streets, plazas, two storied houses, stone slabbed roofs, and carved inscriptions. One such inscription was found beneath a statue featuring a young beardless man who carried a shield and wore what appeared of be a "wreath of laurel" upon his head. The inscription was written in "characters remarkably like those of ancient Greece" (Fawcett 1953: 8). Fawcett tells us that after leaving the city and returning to Portugal the leader of the expedition reported their findings to the Viceroy, but apparently nothing was done to follow up on this remarkable tale.

With these historical narratives in hand, Fawcett became convinced that the City of Z was real. After all, he had a mysterious black idol covered with unusual inscriptions in his hands. He had heard rumors of both ruined cities and white Indians that he felt were capable of building those ruins, and now he had historic documents suggesting such cities had been seen hundreds of years ago. Fawcett had assembled both a materialistic and

spiritual argument for the existence of Z. How could he have been wrong?

4. Deconstructing Z

Claims to knowledge are only as strong as the information upon which they are built. As such, many a beautiful idea has been slain by an ugly fact. While Fawcett's claim that Z was a real place has the virtue of being internally consistent, today we can show that there are many significant problems with the information on which this claim was built.

4.1. Physical Artifacts

While the occasional pottery sherds encountered by Percy Fawcett during his explorations of the Amazon did not seem to have a profound impact on the story of Z, they are the objects of greatest interest to contemporary archaeologists. Thanks to these sherds, as well as the identification of anthropogenic soils throughout the Amazon basin, we now can confirm that prior to contact the region was home to an expansive human population (Heckenberger et al. 2008; Lombardo & Prümers 2010; Pärssinen et al. 2009). These archaeological findings have been used to suggest that Fawcett's city of Z may have been grounded in reality (Grann 2005; Gray 2016), but this suggestion ignores both that Fawcett was unimpressed by broken pieces of pottery and that the sites identified by archaeologists bear no similarities to the descriptions of ruins reported in *Exploration Fawcett*.

Unusual artifacts, such as the mysterious black idol given to Fawcett by Haggard, clearly had a greater impact on the construction of Z, but it is difficult to say exactly what this object is/was. The fact that the idol was given to Fawcett by an influential author of adventure fiction, however, seems

significant. Fawcett's description of an idol of uncertain origin complete with weird glyphs and mysterious electrical properties would find a perfect home in the pages of 1920s pulp fiction, particularly in *Weird Tales* magazine. Pulp fiction authors of the time, such as Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, and Clark Ashton Smith, made frequent use of ancient idols or ruins, and often suggested these objects carried occult powers (Colavito 2005). As their literary predecessor, if not inspiration, Haggard likewise made frequent use of occult and archaeological themes in his fiction (Burdett 2005). The authors of weird fiction also frequently blurred the line between truth and fiction. Lovecraft was notorious for incorporating real world people, places, and concepts to heighten the realism of his stories. As a result of this blurring of truth and fiction, people have claimed that Lovecraft's stories about the occult were in fact truth disguised as fiction (Colavito 2005; Poole 2016). While it seems unlikely that Haggard gave the idol to Fawcett as a spoof, it is possible that Fawcett's (and/or Haggard's) understanding of the object was confused by a blurred boundary between truth and fiction.

Fawcett's description of taking the idol to the British museum for authentication also deserves some scrutiny. As limited details are offered in *Exploration Fawcett* we cannot be certain who he spoke with at the Museum, however, based on personal experience I can suggest that when someone appears at a museum with an object that is alleged to be from Atlantis that person is typically not escorted into the Director's office. The key piece of information that Fawcett took away from this interaction with the British Museum was that an institution of authority had confirmed the authenticity of his artifact, after all someone at the museum had told him it was not a fake. Pseudoarchaeolog-

ical claims typically have a complicated relationship with authority; in brief, if an authority figure supports the claim, that is seen as an important marker of authenticity, but if an authority figure discounts the claim, that too is seen as an important marker of authenticity (Fagan 2006). The endorsement of the British Museum in this sense was a triumph for Fawcett. It should be noted, however, that if one does not know an object's place or culture of origin then there is no corpus of art to compare it to. As a result, determining whether something is a "fake" by appearance alone would be more or less impossible. The physical evidence for the city of Z, thus rests solely on a dubious claim of authenticity from an unnamed museum employee.

4.2. Indigenous Tales

The tales of ruins lost in the jungle are certainly among the most intriguing elements in the story of Z. As we saw, however, it was not tales of ruins alone that captured Fawcett's imagination. The notion that these ruins were associated with stories of white Indians was a reinforcing claim that matched Fawcett's worldview. Today we can say unequivocally that the claims for white Indians living in the Amazon, either as descendants of the Toltecs or as some other immigrant group, is in no way supported by modern data. Archaeological, linguistic, and genetic evidence all support the claim that Native American populations are descendent from Asian immigrants (Dillehay 2000; Gonzalez-Jose et al. 2003; Hey 2005; Horai et al. 1993; Ward 1999). The stories of white Indians that Fawcett was so intrigued by simply cannot be true.

A close reading of *Exploration Fawcett* shows a pattern of recording legend and rumor as fact. For example, in describing anacondas, Fawcett (1953: 114) stated that "their usual length was

from fifteen to thirty feet, but the really big ones reached quite twice the size-and even more". A recent study, however, found that the average length of female anacondas was 10.2 feet, and that male anacondas averaged just 7.9 feet (Rivas 2000: 36). This is a far cry from Fawcett's claim that the snakes *typically* measured from 15 to 30 feet long. Fawcett also reported the existence of animals that have never been documented by anyone else, such as a species of bird that pecked through hard stone with the aid of a special leaf, a toothless freshwater shark in the Paraguay river, a snake that telescoped into itself before striking, and "brutes" that were part ape and part human (Fawcett 1953: 76, 113, 194, and 201). Additional examples of this pattern are found in stories of ghosts, giants, and a claim that the Inca possessed a secret liquid that temporarily softened stone to the consistency of clay (Fawcett 1953: 158, 27, and 252). Throughout his memoir, Fawcett shows a pattern of uncritically accepting secondary sources; that is to say, he believed whatever people told him.

This issue is particularly relevant to the rumors of ruins recorded by Fawcett. Even in the early 20th century, many of the features of these stories would have struck an educated listener as improbable. The claims for written inscriptions are particularly problematic. No writing system indigenous to South America has ever been documented, with the possible exception of the Inca quipu, which was made of knotted strings (Cummins 1993). While it is not impossible that new evidence could come to light, a skeptical reaction should be the default response to a claim of written inscriptions in South America, particularly when the inscriptions are claimed to be similar to ancient Greek writing. Many of the details found in the stories of these ruins, likewise, more closely resemble European material culture than that of pre-Columbian Latin America. In particular, descriptions of two-

storied buildings with stone slabbed roofs, statues, and a silver sword hilt, all stand out as objects that are more likely to be found in a European setting than a pre-Columbian city. If we were to accept all of the rumors that Fawcett reported as true, the Amazon would be a very different place from how we know it today.

4.3. Historical Accounts

Finally, we turn to the historic accounts that inspired Fawcett's claims for a lost city. Francisco Orellana's claims for large populations in the Amazon are now largely accepted by scholars as more and more archaeological sites have been documented in the region (Heckenberger, et al. 2008; Lombardo & Prümers 2010; Pärssinen, et al. 2009). The existence of archaeological sites, however, does not automatically give credibility to the claims for Z. As noted above, Fawcett regularly critiqued science and authority figures throughout his memoir. The fact that Prescott and other scholars of the day dismissed Orellana's claims would have been a powerful motivating factor for Fawcett. Spiritualism was a movement grounded in a claim that mainstream religion and science were too dogmatic and narrow minded (Gutierrez 2016). The fact that the foremost authorities dismissed Orellana would have made his claims all the more attractive to Fawcett. Thus, while contemporary archaeologists and Fawcett might be in agreement on the veracity of the accounts of Orellana's voyage, we can see that they are arriving at the same conclusion for different reasons.

Fawcett's account of an unnamed group of Portuguese explorers is much more problematic. As with the stories of ruins that Fawcett personally recorded, the architecture and inscriptions described in this story do not match what we know of other pre-Columbian sites. The description of a

Grecian style statue and inscription in this account is particularly unlikely, but these details would have appealed to Fawcett's notion that Brazil was associated with Atlantis, which was in turn associated with Greece. Exactly what this account represents is difficult to say. Perhaps the unnamed Portuguese explorers inadvertently traveled as far away as the Andean mountains and discovered an Inca settlement such as Machu Picchu. If this is the case, they may have based their description of that site on a Greek model simply in an attempt to understand what they were seeing (see Evans 2004). It is also possible, however, that these explorers simply thought an elaborate story of a ruined city was better than returning empty handed after 10 years of exploration. With no corroborating evidence that this expedition even took place, it is hard to give much credence to this account of a city lost in the jungle.

5. Conclusion: The Epistemology of Lost Cities

Pseudoarchaeology represents a pernicious problem for archaeologists and those who wish to promote awareness of cultural heritage. Claims of ancient alien architects, sunken continents, and lost cities, all represent alluring romantic tales that can easily attract public attention over an archaeological report describing lithic production strategies as revealed through debitage analysis. Confounding this problem is the silence that echoes from a majority of the archaeological establishment regarding pseudoarchaeological claims. Those who publish and propagate these claims describe archaeologists as conspiratorial agents actively covering up the truth (Fagan 2006). By refusing to engage with pseudoarchaeological claims, or simply dismissing those claims, archaeologists are reinforcing the existing narrative that paints our discipline as conspirators. To overcome these problems, I argue that archaeologists must

take an active role in deconstructing these alternative claims about the past. We must understand the epistemological structures on which they are based, and the reasons that public audiences find them so alluring.

The critical epistemological problem of “lost city” lore is that it represents a non-falsifiable hypothesis. One of the most important components of the scientific method is that your hypothesis must be falsifiable, which is to loosely say that you must be willing to consider that your ideas are completely and utterly wrong. Good archaeological survey operates under a falsifiable hypothesis. A survey of a region is conducted because we have hypothesized that archaeological sites exist within the region. If nothing is found on the survey, an archaeologist should report that the original hypothesis was in fact wrong.

Lost cities are treated differently. No matter how many failed expeditions are mounted in search for them, believers presume that the city just has not been found yet. El Dorado is not only the most famous of lost cities in the Americas, it is also a great example of this phenomena. The original expedition mounted in search of the golden city was led by Gonzalo Pizarro, with the aforementioned Francisco Orellana as second in command (Levy 2011). Even though this voyage failed to find the El Dorado of lore, Orellana immediately petitioned the Spanish crown for their support in mounting a return journey to find the lost city. Over the subsequent centuries, numerous people have searched for the city, including expeditions mounted by Pedro de Ursúa and Sir Walter Raleigh (Levy 2011; Naipaul 1969). Although no hint of El Dorado has ever been found, it’s legendary existence still survives today as popular folklore and pop culture (Bergeron 2000; Bray 1979; Turteltaub 2007).

Fawcett’s City of Z had the same non-falsifiable nature. After each subsequent voyage to the Amazon, Fawcett became more and more convinced that the city existed, even though he had not found it. Prior to his final exhibition in search for Z, Fawcett met with a French explorer who told him that he had thoroughly explored the region where Fawcett claimed Z was located and that no such city existed. Fawcett’s (1953: 270) private response was to state “frankly, I have little confidence in the Frenchman. To have been all over such a region is hardly possible. There are sandy areas devoid of water; cliffs bar the way; even a single valley may remain hidden for centuries”. While Fawcett’s statement might be considered simply skeptical, it was also colored by his personal beliefs when he notes that “the Frenchman had an alcoholic breath, and I cannot consider drinkers fully reliable” (Fawcett 1953: 270). The nature of Z as a non-falsifiable hypothesis is further confirmed when Fawcett states that “to hear tales of an ancient city in the vicinity of certain Indians, and then to find that nothing of the sort exists, must not be taken as evidence that the traditions have no grounding in fact” (Fawcett 1953: 225).

For Fawcett, the City of Z existed regardless of the failed attempts to find it. In fact, it was those failed attempts that stoked Fawcett’s obsession and helped to convince him that the city must be real. The nature of Z as a spiritual belief becomes clear in this context. If Fawcett had found his City of Z it would cease to be lost and instead become a settlement, an archaeological site, a place of mundane reality. By avoiding this mundane reality, Z could serve as a blank canvas on which Fawcett painted his deepest desires. The irony is palpable when we consider that Fawcett’s remains have been subjected to the same obsessive treat-

ment that he showed for Z. After Fawcett's disappearance in 1925, expeditions in search of any sign of the expedition were mounted for years to come (Grann 2005). Rumors regularly came out of the jungle with people claiming to have seen Fawcett even decades after his disappearance. To this day,

people are still mounting expeditions in search of Fawcett's remains. While Percy Fawcett was in fact lost in the Amazon, his remains disintegrated in the acidic jungle soils many, many, years ago, and thus much like his city, he too will never be found.

Bibliographic references

- Albanese, C.L. (2007): *A Republic of Mind & Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*. Yale University Press, New Haven.
- Begley, C. (2016): The Lost White City of the Honduras: discovered again (and again). In J.J. Card & D.S. Anderson (eds.) *Lost City, Found Pyramid: Understanding Alternative Archaeologies and Pseudoscientific Practices*. The University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa. 35-45.
- Bergeron, B. (2000): *The Road to El Dorado*. DreamWorks SKG.
- Blavatsky, H.P. (1888): *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy*. 2 vols. Forgotten Books.
- Bray, W. (1979): *Gold of El Dorado: From the Exhibition Gold of El Dorado, The Heritage of Columbia*. American Museum of Natural History, New York.
- Brendon, P. (2008) *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire, 1781-1997*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York.
- Burdett, C. (2005) Romance, Reincarnation and Rider Haggard. In N. Brown (ed.) *The Victorian Supernatural*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Charney, N. (2015): *The Real-Life Indiana Jones Who Finds Lost Cities in the Jungle*. CNN.
- Colavito, J. (2005): *The Cult of Alien Gods: H. P. Lovecraft and Extraterrestrial Pop Culture*. Prometheus Books, Amherst.
- Cummins, T. (1993): Representation in the Sixteenth Century and the Colonial Image of the Inca. In E.H. Boone & W.D. Mignolo (eds.) *Writing Without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerican and the Andes*. Duke University Press, Durham. 188-219.
- Dillehay, T.D. (2000) *The Settlement of the Americas: A New Prehistory*. Basic Books, New York.
- Doyle, A.C. (1926): *The History of Spiritualism*. Cassell and Company, LTD, London.
- Evans, C.J. (1983): Wildmen, Pul and Fire - Archaeology as Popular Fiction. *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* 2(1): 68-70.

- Evans, R.T. (2004): *Romancing the Maya: Mexican Antiquity in the American Imagination 1820-1915*. University of Texas Press, Austin.
- Fagan, G.G. (2006) Diagnosing psuedoarchaeology. In G.G Fagan (ed.) *Archaeological Fantasies: How Pseudoarchaeology Misrepresents the Past and Misleads the Public*. Routledge, London. 23-46.
- Fawcett, P. (1922): Obsession. *Light* July:476-477.
- Fawcett, P. (1953): *Exploration Fawcett: Arranged from his manuscripts, letters, log-books, and records by Brian Fawcett*. The Overlook Press, New York.
- Fowler, A. (2016): Arthur Conan Doyle's Spiritualist British Commonwealth: "The Great Unifying Force". *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 59(4):456-472.
- Gardner, A. (2007): The Past as Playground: The Ancient World in Video Game Representation. In T. Clack & M. Brittain (eds.) *Archaeology and the Media*. Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek. 255-272.
- Gomes, M. (2016): H.P. Blavatsky and Theosophy. In G.A. Magee (ed.) *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. 248-259.
- Gonzalez-Jose, R., A. Gonzalez-Martin, M. Hernandez, H.M. Pucciarelli, M. Sardi, A. Rosales & S. Van der Molen (2003): Craniometric Evidence for Paleoamerican Survival in Baja California. *Nature* 425: 62-65.
- Grann, D. (2005): *The Lost City of Z: A Tale of Deadly Obsession in the Amazon*. Vintage Books, New York.
- Gray, J. (2016): *The Lost City of Z*. Amazon Studios.
- Gutierrez, C. (2016): Spiritualism. In G.A. Magee (ed.) *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. 237-247.
- Heckenberger, M.J., J. Christian Russell, C. Fausto, J. Toney, M.J. Schmidt, E. Pereira, B. Franchetto & A. Kuikuro (2008): Pre-Columbian Urbanism, Anthropogenic Landscapes, and the Future of the Amazon. *Science* 321(5893): 1214-1217.
- Hey, J. (2005): On the Number of New World Founders: A Population Genetic Portrait of the Peopling of the Americas. *PLOS Biology* 3(6): e193.
- Hodgson, R. (1885): Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate Phenomena Connected with the Theosophical Society. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychological Research* 3:201-400.
- Horai, S., R. Kondo, Y. Nakagawa-Hattori, S. Hayashi, S. Sonoda & K. Tajima (1993): Peopling of the Americas, Founded by Four Major Lineages of Mitochondrial DNA. *Molecular Biology and Evolution* 10(1): 23-47.
- Johnson, K.P. (1994): *The Masters Revealed: Madame Blavatsky and the Myth of the Great White Lodge*. State University of New York Press, Albany.
- Jordan, D. (2016): Archaeology and the Supermen: Comic Book Representations of Archaeology. In *That Was Then, This Is Now: Contemporary Archaeology and Material Cultures in Australia*, edited by U. K. Frederick and A. Clarke, pp. 134-157. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne.

- Keown, D. (2013): *Buddhism*. Very Short Introductions. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Koch, P.O. (2009): *Imaginary Cities of Gold: The Spanish Quest for Treasure in North America*. McFarland & Company, Inc., Jefferson.
- Lachman, G. (2012): *Madame Blavatsky: The Mother of Modern Spirituality*. Tarcher/Penguin, New York.
- Levy, B. (2011): *River of Darkness: Francisco Orellana's Legendary Voyage of Death and Discovery Down the Amazon*. Bantam Books, New York.
- Lombardo, U. & H. Prümers (2010): Pre-Columbian Human Occupation Patterns in the Eastern Plains of the Llanos de Moxos, Bolivian Amazonia. *Journal of Archaeological Science* 37(8): 1875-1885.
- Naipaul, V.S. (1969) *The Loss of El Dorado*. Penguin Books, New York.
- Newman, A. (2016): Conjuring the Magic in New York's Past. In *The New York Times*.
- Pärssinen, M., D. Schaan and A. Ranzi (2009): Pre-Columbian Geometric Earthworks in the Upper Purús: A Complex Society in Western Amazonia. *Antiquity* 83(322): 1084-1095
- Poole, W.S. (2016): *In the Mountains of Madness: The Life and Extraordinary Afterlife of H.P. Lovecraft*. Soft Skull Press, Berkley.
- Prescott, W.H. (2000): *History of the Conquest of Mexico and History of the Conquest of Peru*. Cooper Square Press, New York.
- Rivas, J.A. (2000): *The Life History of the Green Anaconda (Eunectes murinus), With Emphasis on its Reproductive Biology*, The University of Tennessee.
- Schmidt, L.E. (2012): *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*. University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Smith, M.E. (2012): *The Aztecs*. Third ed. The Peoples of America. Wiley-Blackwell, Malden.
- Trousdale, G. & K. Wise (2001): *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*. Walt Disney Pictures.
- Turteltaub, J. (2007): *National Treasure: Book of Secrets*. Walt Disney Pictures.
- Von Däniken, E. (1974): *Gods From Outer Space*. Perma-Bound, New York.
- Ward, R. (1999): Language and Genes in the Americas. In B. Sykes (ed.) *The Human Inheritance: Genes, Language, and Evolution*. Oxford University Press, Oxford: 135-157.