

## PENNSYLVANIA ARCHAEOLOGICAL COUNCIL

*President: Ira Beckerman, Ph.D., RPA*

*Vice President: Jonathan Libbon, MA, RPA*

*Secretary-Treasurer: Hannah Harvey, MA, RPA*

December 20, 2022

Ms. Bela Bajaria  
Head of Global Television  
Netflix Inc.  
100 Winchester Circle  
Los Gatos, CA 95032

Ms. Rachel Corp  
Chief Executive Officer  
ITN  
200 Grays Inn Rd.,  
London, WC1X 8XZ

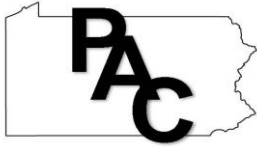
Dear Ms. Bajaria and Ms. Corp,

The Pennsylvania Archaeological Council has asked me to write this open letter to you objecting to your labelling of a recent series airing on your service - Ancient Apocalypse, hosted by Graham Hancock. The series is called a Social and Cultural Documentary, and a Docuseries. Both labels suggest the series meets the basic test of a documentary - to document reality. In this one main test, Hancock and Netflix has failed. We are not arguing that it be removed from Netflix, but more properly be categorized as Sci-Fi and Fantasy, or Action and Adventure.

The Pennsylvania Archaeological Council is as it suggests, a statewide group of professional archaeologists. We are an affiliated society with the Register of Professional Archaeology and a regular partner with the Society for Pennsylvania Archaeology. Relevant to the discussion below, most of us are not in academia, tracking the national profile. Most of us work for private consulting firms or state or federal agencies, not universities.

Graham Hancock's contention is not really with archaeologists. It is with science. Archaeologists at heart are social scientists, trying to figure out humans and human behavior for cultures no longer here to be interviewed or studied in person. We tell the story of our history, but use the scientific method. What makes us scientists is not the fancy equipment, the ground penetrating radar, radiocarbon dating, dna testing, etc., but the subscription to the concept that a theory of the past is testable, that it can be validated and refuted with archaeological data. This is ultimately the difference between Hancock's approach and ours. We look to understand human behavior in the past through the scientific method while Hancock seeks to explain human history based on speculation, cherry picking facts, and assertion. It is no wonder he is upset with us, by definition, our discipline challenges theories and asks to see the data.

The scaffolding of Hancock's theories are as old as Plato and Atlantis. They have been repeatedly disproven, such as by Cyrus Thompson of the Smithsonian 130 years ago. The idea that indigenous peoples were incapable of building large-scale construction projects, such as pyramids and earthworks, and therefore had to rely on the expertise of a smarter, older vanished civilization is highly disrespectful at the least. With insinuations of this vanished civilization



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coming from Europe, it is also highly racist, being long-baked into the American psyche of theories of racial superiority.

Hancock also mis-understands archaeology as a discipline and archaeology as currently practiced. There is no unified front of archaeological academics. First, most of the practicing archaeologists in the US are not in academia, but in private consulting or government. Secondly, the idea of a unified front of practically any group of archaeologists is preposterous. Practicing science in archaeology is more like a brawl than a cabal, with competing schools going at each other tooth and claw. Real science is a process, and highly disruptive because it creates room for new ideas and the ability to be wrong and still do science. There is no canon of beliefs in archaeology, and now more now more than ever with new methods and techniques, existing theories are thrown out and replaced with new ones. Hancock has created a strawman in “Big Archaeology,” and it just is not accurate.

Archaeologists are no saints, by any means. In a normal day, we work with very small tools on very big spaces trying to extract the bits of history that we can try to interpret as a cohesive narrative. On better days, we can effectively challenge existing theories and offer something that makes more sense but can also be tested and eventually replaced with something else again. On our best days, we can assist silenced communities to help them tell their stories, using our proven methods and techniques. For example, the Tulsa Race Riots. This is something Hancock cannot do, nor frankly understand.

Ancient Apocalypse utilizes many of the same divisive tactics to gain viewership as cable news and political advertisements. It also uses misinformation to create controversy, so it is no surprise that Joe Rogan makes regular cameo appearances. Judging by the popularity of Mr. Rogan and other reality television entities these days, there apparently is a place for this kind of entertainment. However, reality television should not be confused with documentaries, and as an archaeologist, I can say that classification does matter. If your viewers are presented with Ancient Apocalypse as a documentary, then you are misleading your customers at best. More appropriately, you are defaming archaeology as a discipline and many hard working archaeologists and social scientists without the opportunity to defend ourselves.



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We do not ask for Netflix to remove Ancient Apocalypse, only to reclassify it as science-fiction, even though it is all fiction with no science. Unfortunately, Netflix does not offer Misinformation as a category. If Hancock is interested in interfacing with our discipline and presenting his ideas in an open forum for debate, we would happily welcome to annual Society for American Archaeology Meeting. However, I get the impression that he needs “Big Archaeology” as his strawman and sensationalism as his methodology and is not interested in any debate rooted in science.

Sincerely,

Ira Beckerman, Ph.D., RPA, President  
Pennsylvania Archaeological Council