

Apocalypse Past/Future: Archaeology and Folklore, Writ Large

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If we recall that our history's end has not yet been written, and that we ourselves are its coauthors, then perhaps we will come to see that no ending is inevitable, and that the saving bliss of catastrophe is a luxury we can ill afford. (O'Leary 1994:228)

During several years of researching prehistory's importance to people in Britain, and the many forms which its interpretation takes, multiple lines of connection between archaeology and folklore quickly became evident to me. There are, for example, frequent links between archaeological sites and local traditions or legends in Britain, as well as the strong tendency for avocational researchers there to be interested in both, rather than either subject in isolation. This is intriguing territory indeed. But if one adopts a broader definition of folklore, moving outwards from "the traditional beliefs and stories of a people" (Concise Oxford Dictionary) to include all stories, including religious narratives, which play an important role in societies today, there emerge many more lines of connection with archaeology. One example is that of Western apocalyptic writings, both secular and religious, for these versions of history can easily be seen in parallel to modern archaeologically based narratives. Followed far enough, these lines intertwine in surprising ways, and put fairly ordinary observations about the popularity of archaeology, or the importance of history, into larger contexts – contexts which archaeologists may find worthwhile to consider as they read and write upon their subject, for the archaeologist's role in modern society can be more substantial than is sometimes assumed.

Archaeology is important socio-politically, and not only in explosive situations like India's Ayodhya (Ascherson 1998), but also in the way that archaeologically based narratives are woven, just as folklore is, into the very fabric of our lives. This has increasingly been the subject of study for scholars, especially those concerned with national and ethnic identities and their representation and construction through archaeological material (e.g. Ronayne 1997; Piccini 1997; Kohl and Fawcett 1995). But there is another dimension in which archaeology is socially consequential, which is becoming ever more obvious now, in a time when idle conversation often turns to the fast-approaching year 2000 AD. Archaeology is also important because of the role it plays in generating narratives about the way our world will end. These narratives in turn are important *socially* (not just to academics and ideologues) because human beings understand and describe their world through stories, and more than that, because stories help us to situate ourselves, as individuals and as groups, in time. More significantly still, stories – whether born of history, religion, science, or myth – tell us how to live. And sometimes, they tell us how to die.

The Millennium Cometh¹

A former professor from Taiwan named Hon-Ming Chen is now the leader of God's Salvation Church, and has been, at least until recently, patiently waiting in a Texan suburb with 150 devoted followers for God to return to Earth. Specifically, they were waiting at 3513 Ridgedale Drive in Garland, with a "spacecraft" made of radial tires, plywood, and lamp posts, where they spent each day reading Chen's books and praying in preparation for God to come in a spaceship, to save all humanity from nuclear war. But, despite Professor Chen's assurances that on Wednesday March 25th, 1998, "the Almighty will make a preliminary appearance on Channel 18 of every TV set in the world" – interestingly enough, the Home Shopping Network in Texas – God has so far been a no-show (Perkins and Jackson 1998:24).

This is, by now, a familiar sort of story, for there is an increasing amount of coverage in the media about activities relating to the end of this millennium. Interest is not climbing only in isolated religious groups, however; this is a secular phenomenon too, and has been growing steadily for decades (Russell 1978:23,

Zamora 1982). The word 'apocalypse', allusions to the Book of Revelation, and even photographs of the Four Horsemen, are showing up with amusing regularity in tabloid newspaper headlines, while elements of the storyline from Revelation are often used in movies, in fiction, and vividly in comic books. One particularly lurid tale of extraterrestrial invasion even opens with a line from Revelation: "And I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous, seven angels having the seven last plagues" (Wheeler 1996). This is not surprising, for it can be argued that the obsession with extraterrestrials now gripping much of the West is a result of this end-of-the-millennium, end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it mindset. Certainly, the themes of extraterrestrial visitation and the end of the current world order were blended in some of the most popular Hollywood films of the late 1990s, from *Independence Day* to *Men in Black*, *Contact*, *Sphere*, and *Starship Troopers*. Themes of mass destruction by inexorable natural forces are played out in *Deep Impact*, *Armageddon*, and in different ways in *Titanic*, *Volcano*, *Twister*, and the remake of *Godzilla*. Cities or even countries being laid waste are apparently almost prerequisite to engaging the American movie-going public's attention; and as Ralph Melcher commented, "at the end of the Millennium the highest achievement of popular culture is the construction of the perfect disaster" (1998:2).

Of course, academics are not exempt from end-of-the-world fervour, and so there has also been a proliferation of scholarly interest in social behaviour as the millennium approaches. There seems to be a new sociological, historical, or literary book out every week analyzing apocalyptic or millenarian movements, or offering general comment on what has come to be known as 'pre-millennial tension'.

There are also many *very* popular books being published which are specifically preoccupied with dramatic ends to ancient civilizations, and with looking to sources of ancient wisdom which may help us to avoid a dramatic end of our own. As an archaeologist with an interest in the ways in which 'alternative prehistory' over the last century can illuminate the influences operating on academic archaeologists, and interest in the complex relationships between accepted and marginalized discussions of the past, I have found this to be well worth examining in considerable detail. As that is a book in itself, however, I will here only sketch, at the most general and omissive level, some areas of connection between such popular books, apocalypses and their social role, and archaeological writing.

Apocalypse

It is probably wise to begin with what "apocalypse" means. For most of us, in general usage, the word "apocalypse" means disaster, or the end of the world. Bible readers may even have some more specific images in mind, like the four Horsemen bringing unspeakable cataclysm, the blowing of trumpets, fire in the sky, and the sea turning to blood, or plagues of exceptionally nasty locusts, and stars falling into the sea, poisoning the water. But actually, the word "apocalypse" properly means "revelation".

The essence of apocalypse is captured by Revelation 6:1-8, where the four Beings, in sequence, lead St. John by the hand to show him the Horsemen, crying "Come and See!" Similarly, all the events we associate with "the apocalypse" – again, the Horsemen, various scenes of destruction and heavenly intervention – are integral to the story, but it is St. John's experience, his revelation, that is apocalyptic. The four Horsemen are not the *bringers* of the apocalypse, they are characters in the story which is *itself* the substance of the apocalypse.

Thus, Biblical scholars speak of "apocalypses", including the apocalypse of Daniel, of St. John as written in Revelation, the apocalypses of Zachariah, Isaiah, Joel, Enoch, Baruch, Ezra, Abraham, and the apocalypses of Greco-Roman, Gnostic, and Persian origin (Hellholm 1983). Apocalypse or "apocalyptic" is in fact a literary genre, including narratives dealing with divine revelation through dream, vision, or supernatural intermediary. It usually pertains to eschatology, or "the study of the End Times", but not invariably. Sometimes it emphasizes the bad things that are going to happen to everyone on the face of the earth, and sometimes it emphasizes the subsequent happiness for the righteous in the glorious kingdom of God.

Apocalyptic is complex, and there is a great deal written about it, not only about interpretation of the texts themselves, but also about their purposes. Most pertinent here is the observation made by Christopher

Rowland, in his book *The Open Heaven*, that Judaeo-Christian apocalyptic writings did not deal only with what was to come – they covered past, present, and future, explaining history and contemporary events in terms of prophecies for what lay ahead. This is critical to their interpretation. In short, they sought not only to relate divine wisdom about the future, but to provide an understanding of all history.

Bernard McGinn, in his book *Visions of the End*, wrote that

The structure and meaning of time, the meeting place of this age and eternity, are consistent concerns... The desire to understand history – its unity, its structure, its goal, the future hope which it promises – is not a passing interest or momentary whim, but a perennial human concern. A sense of belonging in time, as well as the need to understand the special significance of the present, is the anthropological root of apocalyptic systems of thought. (1979:30)

One could say that it is also the root of the disciplines of history and archaeology. These different studies and writings are all about *our* place in time, *our* place in history, and *our* relationship to the beginning and the end.

But more than this, in our modern era, archaeology provides some of the raw material of revelation. Voices from the past replace divine messages. And accordingly, popular archaeology books have at least partly replaced traditional religious wisdom in guiding our thought about who we are, where we've been, where we're going, and how we should live.

Popular Archaeology, Revelation, and Eschaton

The popular archaeology books that will be discussed here have the elements that can be considered the chief hallmarks of apocalyptic. They tell elaborate stories based on epiphanies (revealed, in this case, by the archaeological record), make eschatological statements, and also make comments on the state of society today, and recommendations for our future action. There are many books with similar themes, so only two of the most recent bestsellers will be discussed here. These are also, happily, two of the better ones, which are at least somewhat grounded in the interpretation of material archaeological reality.

The Mayan Prophecies, published by Adrian Gilbert and Maurice Cotterell in 1995, is an international bestseller which revolves around the notions of the end of the world, and of revealed wisdom from another sphere. Their claim is, essentially, that in some Mayan carvings, particularly the Lid of Palenque, there are secret messages that can be decoded and understood. Further, the authors argue that the Mayan obsession with calendars concerned cycles of sunspots. They then relate sunspots to dramatic drops in human fertility, and thus explain the hitherto-apparently-enigmatic Mayan collapse. It is all entwined with the Popol Vuh, the sacred Mayan book which can itself be considered an apocalypse of sorts, concerned as it is with prophecy, the past, and the future. Based on the Mayan calendar, Cotterell and Gilbert make specific predictions for the year 2012, of the greatest catastrophe that mankind has ever known. We are to expect a reversal of the magnetic field, pole changes, giant floods, submerged landmasses, a drop in temperature... the works. We are entreated to sit up and take note while we still can.

The second popular archaeology book may become even more widely read. My copy of the best-selling *Fingerprints of the Gods* bears the notable cover blurb, "a Quest for the Beginning and the End". But the author, Graham Hancock, was just warming up with his proposal that Antarctica is the place to look for the high civilization that spawned all others. Its recent sequel, *Keeper of Genesis*, by Hancock and Robert Bauval (of *The Orion Mystery* fame), says that the monuments of the Giza acropolis, together with the ancient texts and rituals which are linked to them, were specifically designed to transmit a message to us, across time. They say that this specially encoded message pertains to the predecessors of the ancient Egyptian civilization, and to their quest for immortality, and the transcendence of their physical being. Once again, the authors plead with us to take heed, for if we can decode and understand this message, it could mean a wonderful renaissance for humanity, and the solution to many of our problems.

This theme is played out, too, in another very popular book of a somewhat different kind. Unlike *The Mayan Prophecies* and *Keeper of Genesis*, however, this one is written as fiction, but fiction of that particular New Age sort which is implied to be deeply truthful at its core. *The Celestine Prophecy* has spent years on best seller lists, and millions of copies are in print². The cover reads: “In the Rain Forests of Peru, an ancient manuscript has been discovered. Within its pages are 9 key insights into life itself – insights each human being is predicted to grasp sequentially, one insight then another, as we move towards a completely spiritual life on earth.” (Here we have both the elements of revealed wisdom from a distant archaeological source, and in this case, a happy ending – a jolly eschatology.) Although this book is presented as fiction, the author James Redfield, a sociologist, also puts out a special newsletter chronicling his experiences with the spiritual renaissance now occurring on our planet. There is also a sequel – *The Tenth Insight*, presumably based on a new Peruvian manuscript – and a series of spin-offs, including Celestine Prophecy Pocket Guides, Experiential Guides, and audio tapes. Indeed, there is a full-blown Celestine Prophecy industry, and apparently, the books are being used by spiritual study groups the world over. The specifically archaeological slant seems more a rhetorical device used for legitimation than anything else, but it is difficult to suppose that all the book’s earnest readers reject the central premise, that the Maya were the source of these prophecies and they disappeared because by raising their energy vibrations through meditation, they actually crossed over into a higher plane, transcending all materiality and even death.

Typically, most archaeologists respond to such books with derision, or respond not at all. The books are seen as either bad archaeology, or nothing to do with archaeology. However, this is underestimating the complexity of these narratives and of their position within society, not to mention taking a rather narrow view of archaeology, and there are more productive ways to look at the situation.

These books are hugely popular around the world. People’s lives are changed by them, and their views of the past and future transformed. Why should that be so? Archaeologists often suspect that books like *The Mayan Prophecies*, *Keeper of Genesis*, and *The Celestine Prophecy* are so well-received as historical or cultural reading by the general public simply because of an appetite for the supernatural and the sensational in place of the human and the ordinary. This may be part of it, but it is just as likely that their popularity is due to the way they are written. This is not to say that they are presented in an accessible style, because some of the time, such books are overly long, every bit as dense as an archaeological site report, and twice as boring. Rather, they may well be popular because they use the age-old formula of the apocalypse, which tells us about the beginning, the end, and where we are in relation to them, and what we can do about it. This formula continues to have great resonance for people today, as it always has (Russell 1978); the implications of this, in the context of the creation and relation of history, are worth considering.

Apocalypses Within Social History

All old stories – whether folklore, religion, or history – must be seen in the social and political contexts of their origination and perpetuation, and the early Judaeo-Christian apocalypses are no exception (Hanson 1979). They were written in times of great oppression. For example, the book of Daniel was written when Antiochus Epiphanes was attempting to annihilate Judaism, and St. John wrote Revelation from prison, convinced, correctly, that tribulations lay ahead for the churches of Asia Minor (Russell 1978:16).

And so, Biblical scholars consider that these writings were in part about revenge and a reversal of power (Hanson 1979). Indeed, in the Book of Enoch, it says that “the evil doers [will] be consumed, and the power of the guilty be annihilated...” and that “This Son of man ... shall hurl kings from their thrones and their dominions... Darkness shall be their habitation, and worms shall be their bed” (Laurence, trans. 1995:178, 51). In Revelation 19 and 20, John describes the triumph of God and the angels over the False Prophet and the Great Beast – who are best understood as representing political figures – as well as the subduing of the eternal characters of Satan and the Dragon. But more than revenge, the apocalypses, especially the Revelation, were letters of consolation to the oppressed, for there is a happy end for the righteous, after all the carnage is finished. These writings did not intend to incite rebellion or active

resistance against the oppressors of the day, because the final war between good and evil would take place in heaven, not on earth, and God would deliver the protagonists from their enemies (Rowland 1982).

But the historical context of the perpetuation of apocalypses is not necessarily the same as that of their origination. In reference to some American apocalyptic movements, Hanson points out that today, “no longer are war and desolation prerequisites for the apocalyptic response. A vague feeling of dissatisfaction with modern life seems sufficient basis for laments over ‘the late great planet earth’.” (1979: 427)³ But what remains – regardless of the reality of the oppression – in apocalyptic narratives is what Rowland called “an insistence on the working out of God’s will through the processes of history” (1982:159). History is seen as a trajectory which people cannot change. But in practice, that does not mean that people don’t choose how to act, for they do. They can make the choice to be passive and let history take its course, or they may become very proactive, because although the trajectory cannot be changed, the end can be hastened.

An example of the latter behaviour may be found in the 1997 millenarian mass suicide of the Heaven’s Gate group in California – 37 people killed themselves in the belief that a spaceship following in the wake of Comet Hale-Bopp would take their spirits to a higher plane. It was generally considered to be a bizarre anomaly, but this is not the only way to see it. If one actually peruses the group’s web site or official literature, and reads beyond the sensationalist news coverage, it becomes apparent that this was not merely an isolated group of lunatic UFO enthusiasts, but that the eschatology of the Heaven’s Gate group was based on traditional tenets held dear by many western Christians; in short, their doctrine was the syncretic end result of combining “apocalyptic Christian bits and pieces with folk myths of our own contemporary culture” (Gould 1997:53). Baudrillard made sense of acts like this when he wrote, “Whole communities have gone to the point of putting their lives on the line to hasten the advent of the Kingdom. And since this has been promised to them at the end of time, all one had to do is put an end to time, immediately (and personally)” (1997:4). And so they did, just as many others have before them, and others will again.

Just as the contexts of perpetuation of apocalyptic are highly varied, O’Leary relates that the roles played by apocalyptic beliefs in recent centuries, and the political consequences of those beliefs, are diverse – apocalyptic cannot be seen as only radical, only conservative, only encouraging passivity, or only a call to arms (1994:12). But what remains constant is the high human cost. Gould makes it clear that the price has been exacted many times, in many places. He writes that “the fusion of Christian millennialism with traditional beliefs of conquered (and despairing) people has often led to particularly incendiary, and tragic, results”, citing as examples the nineteenth-century defeat of the Xhosa of South Africa, and the Ghost Dance movement of Native Americans in the late 1800s, which led to the massacre at Wounded Knee (1997:52).

It is critically important that despite the striking drama of these human tragedies, these were not anomalies or deviations from ‘normal history’, although this is how they are usually represented. Millennial history specialist Richard Landes asserts that traditionally, historians of apocalypticism, messianism, and chiliasm have had difficulty transforming their observations into “productive historical analysis” – that although they “have identified a number of times and places where eschatological beliefs played a central role in a culture’s imagination (e.g., first-century Palestine, fifth-century Mediterranean, thirteenth-century Europe, seventeenth-century England, eighteenth-century America, nineteenth-century China)”, such phenomena have been considered as contained events (1996:165). Landes argues that there has been a significant and systematic underestimation of apocalyptic beliefs as ‘normal’ historical forces, and that careful study of their influence in history is warranted, given that “in favorable circumstances, apocalyptic beliefs can launch mass movements capable of overthrowing (and forming) imperial dynasties and creating new religions” (1996:165). He also submits that apocalyptic rhetoric – as analyzed in exhaustive detail by O’Leary (1994) – is given its persuasive force by “apocalyptic time”⁴, and that an awareness of this perception of time, and its effects on the believer’s behaviour, is essential to understanding the historical influence of eschatology on society. Most importantly, Landes suggests that this understanding is in turn essential to a real comprehension of our modern age, steeped as it is in the resurgence of religious fundamentalism worldwide (1996:166).

Apocalyptic movements, then, emerge and spread in both unpredictable and predictable places, have the force of inexorability behind them, act in themselves as strong and underestimated historical forces, and seem to be particularly relevant on the world stage at the moment. They provide narratives that can and do guide people's actions in a very real way, for stories specifically about the end of the world, or of a world, are exceptionally powerful in their effect on people. Archaeologists contribute to those narratives – these stories to live and die by – both directly and by implication, as the popular works discussed in the previous section remind us, and as professional academic archaeologists have long been aware.

Archaeology and Apocalypse: Adapting the Formula and Changing the Ending

It is, by now, a commonplace observation that narratives created by archaeologists to explain the past are coloured by what we see happening around us in the present. What is less considered, but surely equally important, is the fact that in turn, *these stories about the past shape people's view of our future*. Some have written about this, and some have acted upon it.

In his *History of Archaeological Thought*, Bruce Trigger acknowledges the power that archaeology has to contribute to the narratives by which people today understand their current situation and choose how to live. For example, he wrote that 'cataclysmic' evolutionary archaeology encourages a world view which

attributes the shortcomings of a world economy to largely immutable evolutionary forces rather than to specific and alterable political and economic conditions that have evolved under American hegemony. This explanation has attracted a willing audience among the insecure middle classes of Western nations, who are anxious to believe that they are not responsible for the fate they fear is overtaking them. (1989: 323)

Trigger retains the hope, however, that archaeology can also have the "ability to act as a positive force in human history" (1995:279). This is a hope that other archaeologists share. The best example, worth discussing at some length, comes from Paul Bahn and John Flenley's 1992 book, *Easter Island, Earth Island*. The line on the cover, "A message from our past for the future of our planet", is a noteworthy parallel to the theme central to *The Mayan Prophecies* and *Keeper of Genesis*.

Bahn and Flenley, rather than fixating on the traditional questions of how Easter Island's inhabitants got there, and how they made those amazing statues, concern themselves with the evidence surrounding the culture's violent decline, after centuries of peace and stability. They ask: "What cataclysm could have had such a devastating impact on the island's culture?" (1992: 9), and introduce their case without mincing words:

the answer to this question carries a message that is of fundamental importance to every person alive today and even more so to our descendants. Given the decline of the island's culture, we should consider the parallels between the behaviour of the Easter Islanders in relation to their limited resources and our cavalier disregard for our own fragile natural environment: the earth itself. This is more, therefore, than an account of the rise and fall of an extraordinary prehistoric culture... it is, indeed, a cautionary tale relevant for the future of all humankind. (1992:9).

The ecological catastrophe that befell Easter Island centered on the disappearance of the once-abundant palm trees. Without trees, there could be no canoes to go deep-sea fishing, erosion became a problem, and fresh water supplies dried up. As the stresses increased, there was war, a drastic population decline, and a rapid degeneration of the society. Finally, the great statues were toppled over and mutilated, providing a powerful metaphor for the end of a 'golden age'. European visitors later on reported that to the Easter Islanders, "even driftwood was looked on as a treasure of inestimable value, and a dying father frequently promised to send his children a tree from the kingdom of shades" (Bahn and Flenley 1992:172).

It's a gripping tale, but what is especially relevant to this discussion is the way that Bahn and Flenley chose to tell it. There were three main factors that contributed to the complete deforestation of the island: drought, tree cutting, and rats eating the trees' seeds. Where others have argued for climate being the most

important variable, Bahn and Flenley choose to emphasize the factor which was under human control. Their message was this:

Easter Island is small, and its ecosystem relatively simple. Whatever one did to alter that ecosystem, the results were reasonably predictable. One could stand on the summit and see almost every point on the island. The person who felled the last tree could see that it was the last tree. But he (or she) still felled it. (Bahn and Flenley 1992:214)

A more poignant historical parable is hard to imagine. Yet, surprisingly, some might read such a powerful true story about humanity's relationship with the natural world and remain unmoved. Stephen Jay Gould, in making the point that it is not only the socially downtrodden or oppressed who hold millenarian beliefs, relates this intersection of apocalyptic thought and ecology:

James Watt, Ronald Reagan's unlamented secretary of the interior, a deeply conservative thinker and prominent member of the Pentecostal Assembly of God, stated that we need not worry unduly about environmental deterioration (and should therefore not invest too much governmental time, money, or legislation in such questions) because the world will surely end before any deep damage can be done. (Gould 1997:50)

It is at this point that the real importance of the intersection of apocalypse and archaeology becomes clear. It is here that the spheres of political philosophy, eschatology, and archaeology come together, and – at the risk of sounding prophetic – it is here that the line must be drawn. For although Bahn and Flenley use many elements of traditional apocalypses in their writing, including the ideas of revelation of wisdom from another dimension, and the situating of the reader within a timeline, there is a crucial departure from the formula which makes all the difference: Bahn and Flenley reject inevitability, they reject the notion that we are on a historical trajectory which cannot be changed, and in so doing, they put the responsibility for our future back, squarely, on our human shoulders. They write that the Easter Islanders

carried out for us the experiment of permitting unrestricted population growth and profligate use of resources, destruction of the environment, and boundless confidence in their religion to take care of the future. The result was an ecological disaster leading to a population crash. A crash on a similar scale (60 per cent reduction) for the planet Earth would lead to the deaths of about 1.8 billion people.... Do we have to repeat the experiment on this grand scale? ... Would it not be more sensible to learn from the lesson of Easter Island history, and apply it to the Earth Island on which we live? (1992:213)

Bahn and Flenley have written this book in the knowledge – almost instinctive to historians, archaeologists, and prophets alike – that stories about the past and the future are the axes around which revolve the worlds of listeners in the present. This is the point made by Landes and others, above, that apocalypses are historical forces in themselves. But Bahn and Flenley depart from the traditional formula because they place the making of future history into human hands. In short, they deliberately use the revelatory might of archaeology, with their ecological agenda made transparent, and their eschatology explicit. Whatever else one may say about this remarkable book, it is therefore honest and courageous.

Trigger implies that archaeological narratives about the course of history can neatly excise a population's political conscience. Bahn and Flenley hope that archaeological narratives can help restore ecological responsibility and save us from ourselves. Perhaps, indeed, there is no time better than the present for a consideration of the place where archaeology, apocalypse, and matters political meet. For in addition, the manner in which archaeologists represent past societies may well affect the future in ways which are less direct but no less important.

In journals of political science and international relations, one can often see reviews of books like *Anticipating the Future: Twenty Millennia of Human Progress* (Buzan and Segal 1998). In this case, the book starts at the beginning, with prehistory, charts what the authors consider to be the (progressive) trajectory of human development, and makes predictions for the future on that basis. This is significant, not just because books like this exist, but because of who reads them and why. High-profile popular futurists Toffler and Toffler (1998) reviewed *Anticipating the Future* for *Foreign Affairs*, for a readership that is not

just intellectually curious about what the coming years will bring, but is actively involved in designing corporate and political strategies for survival in those years. The extent to which prophecies like those of Buzan and Segal can actually shape the future through this influence is inevitably difficult to ascertain, but the potential cannot be neglected.⁵ Toffler and Toffler, committed to a view of history as discontinuous, punctuated by massive revolutions or waves, disagree with Buzan and Segal's continuist stance, but moreover, claim that such a stance "blinds them to some of the most important changes that lie ahead" (1998:136). More specifically, Toffler and Toffler argue that although both ways of interpreting history have merit, their own model of "wave conflict" – strife between societies on opposite sides of historical discontinuities, "rural vs. urban, agrarian vs. industrial" – might enable one to "do a better job of anticipating hot spots before they blast their way into the headlines" (1998: 136). Toffler and Toffler suggest that a better academic understanding of the processes of world history, from its very beginning, could help the international community prevent the human tragedies of Bosnia, or to better interpret the actions of the Taliban in Kabul. So then, what better time than the millennium for archaeologists to take stock of their role in the production of social knowledge for the future?

Conclusion

Our world is growing smaller and the communities in which we live are growing larger. Traditional stories are told not only from one to another in villages, but replicate themselves in news reports on the Internet. They change, die, and are reborn in different forms, and never cease to exert an influence on the minds of those they touch. Indeed, they are living forces in themselves.

So if we take the word "folklore" writ large, at its broadest and most forward-looking; if we conceive of "archaeology" at its most extensive, meaning the study and the creation of the past in the present; if we understand popular books with strange theories about the ancient Egyptians and the Maya not as somehow deviant, but as indicators of what matters to people, and how they read history; if we see "apocalypses" as revelatory stories situating ourselves in relation to the beginning and the end; if we recognize the role of the archaeologist in creating narratives which can be understood as apocalypses; and if we are concerned that these narratives be forces for good... then perhaps the intersection of archaeology and folklore, history and story, is a stranger, more important, and more remarkable place than is usually suspected.

There is a suggestion embedded in popular alternative archaeology books like *Keeper of Genesis* and *The Mayan Prophecies*, and echoed by critics like Trigger, that part of archaeology's task is to help us recover ancient knowledge which we desperately need today to avert disaster. This may or may not be so, but one thing is clear. Archaeology has never been only about that which has gone before. It is also about that which is yet to come.

ENDNOTES

¹ I am finishing this final draft at precisely 514 days and 13 hours before the new millennium. (At least, this is true according to the school that arbitrarily designates January 1, 2000, as the first day of the new era. See Gould (1997) for alternative notions.) I have included references to current events, and presently popular books and films, although this will undoubtedly make this contribution seem dated quickly. But this essay *is* dated, and a product of its time; I see no reason to camouflage this fact. It is my hope, however, that the larger point will stand the test of time and remain thought-provoking for later readers.

² A review in *The Economist*, on 7th December 1996, p.6, noted that *The Celestine Prophecy* had at that point been on American bestseller lists for nearly three years, and that 6 million copies were then in print worldwide.

³ Similarly, O'Leary remarks that "The early Christians who responded favorably to the book of Revelation were, by most historical accounts, subject to intense persecution that included execution and public torture. If the largely middle-class group of fundamentalist Christians in the United States who today form the core of [apocalyptic prophet] Hal Lindsey's [very extensive] readership believes itself to be similarly persecuted, this is surely a rhetorically induced perception; for there is an obvious difference between being torn apart by lions in front of cheering crowds and being forced to endure media onslaughts of sex, violence, and secular humanism. As one critic puts it, "the crucial element is not so much whether one is actually oppressed as whether one feels oppressed"; and this is always a subject for persuasion." (O'Leary 1994:11)

⁴ Landes defines "apocalyptic time" as this: "that perception of time in which the End of the World (variously imagined) is so close that its anticipation changes the behavior of the believer." He goes on to remark that "Such perceptions of time operate on several levels of cognition, of individual, group, and mass psychology, and have been closely studied by anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists for decades. The historian, however, has been largely removed from the subject because his documents almost always reflect the perspectives or the editorial blade of post-apocalyptic, normal time, with its retrospective knowledge that the end did not come." (1996:165)

⁵ Books forcefully combining humanity's history and future have undeniable power; those who doubt need only see Marx and Engels (1848) and a textbook of twentieth-century European history for an effective reminder.

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