

White gods, white researchers, white lies¹

Review of *Thor Heyerdahl og jakten på Atlantis* by Per Ivar Hjeldsbakken Engevold, Humanist Forlag (2019)

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We need to have a serious talk about Thor Heyerdahl. According to the book, *Thor Heyerdahl og jakten på Atlantis* [Thor Heyerdahl and the Search for Atlantis], newly published by Humanist Forlag, the Norwegian scientist, public speaker and adventurer had a little-known theory, inspired by Nazi-Germany's great race ideologist Hans F. K. Günther, about a white master race that came from Atlantis and spread civilization to primitive people. The book's author is the 32-year-old Per Ivar Hjeldsbakken Engevold, who received support from the Norwegian Non-Fiction Literary Fund while writing the book. Engevold published the book's main arguments in the Norwegian periodical *Humanist* as early as the summer of 2013, before receiving his MA Degree in history from the University of Oslo.²

According to the information on the book's cover, *Thor Heyerdahl og jakten på Atlantis* "deals in depth with Heyerdahl's theories and sheds new light on one of Norway's greatest heroes." At first glance, the source material looks impressive, with 709 endnotes and 132 references. One might, however, wonder how the book is able to shed new light on a thoroughly-researched national icon like Thor Heyerdahl when the author has consulted neither the Kon-Tiki Museum nor the Heyerdahl family archives. Along with Heyerdahl's own books, Engevold's principal sources consist of biographical accounts.

White gods, white lies

The core argument in *Thor Heyerdahl og jakten på Atlantis* is that Heyerdahl's theories contain "a consistent thread that connects the many expeditions and archaeological excavations".³ The author claims to have identified a "meta-theory"⁴ that Heyerdahl himself never completely presented. Apparently, throughout his entire career the beloved adventurer pursued the idea of a master race of white disseminators-of-culture, who were worshipped as gods by their primitive cultural recipients. And Engevold suggests that both Odin and Kon-Tiki are distant relatives in the world of Heyerdahl's theories, they being representatives of the same mysterious, white gods who brought the arts of civilization from pre-Inca Peru to Polynesia. Heyerdahl identified the ancestors of this master race on the eastern side of the Atlantic in the shape of fair-skinned, reddish-blond peoples such as Guanches, Berbers, Hittites, Phoenicians, Redins⁵ and Ases⁶. He followed this trail right back to the beginnings of civilization, when these white-skinned, light-haired people

sailed up rivers in the Nile Valley, Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley, establishing the first high cultures of the Megalithic. But from where did these people originate? From the mythical lost city of Atlantis, if we are to believe the author.

Heyerdahl, it is suggested, was a pseudo-scientific hyper-diffusionist in that he believed that all ancient civilizations were initiated by white-skinned people originating in Atlantis. As such, Engevoid wishes to highlight a potential underlying racism in Heyerdahl's migration theories. According to the author, the popular ocean journeys on the balsa raft *Kon-Tiki* and the three reed boats, *Ra*, *Ra II* and *Tigris*, were in reality intended only to reconstruct the migratory routes of a white master race. And as a result, claims Engevoid, Heyerdahl believed that all civilizations could be attributed to these seafaring culture-bearers, and thus his theories robbed the indigenous peoples of the honor for the monuments constructed by their own ancestors.

That Heyerdahl had an overall theory about white culture-bearers is “the thing that is new about the book,”⁷ as the author said on the news programme *Dagsnytt 18* on the Norwegian broadcasting corporation NRK in 2019. On several occasions he has also expressed his “shock” about “what he has found.”⁸

Interesting is the fact that Engevoid is by no means the first person to have discovered the so-called meta-theory. Heyerdahl's biographer Christopher Ralling presented the same idea in his book *The Kon-Tiki Man* (1990). This book is regularly cited by Engevoid, but noticeably so not in this context. “Always the legends [Heyerdahl is concerned with] speak of tall, fair-skinned, red-haired people,” Ralling writes, “[b]ut to date, [he] has never attempted to draw these many threads together into a single theory.”⁹ The biographer makes an attempt to do so, however, in the following chapter, which in the Norwegian edition is given the descriptive title “Gathering the threads.”¹⁰ This sounds unmistakably Engevoidish. The meta-theory crops up again in the Norwegian book *Thor Heyerdahl og verdenshavenes mysterier* (1995), written by Tor Edvin Dahl and Tron Øgrim, which also features in Engevoid's bibliography. But when the authors claim that Heyerdahl “perceives a pattern” that “connects all the various countries and histories with which he worked,” they are contradicted by Heyerdahl himself: “I have no [meta-]theory.”¹¹

The idea of a meta-theory is also found in the book *A Hero for the Atomic Age* (2010) by the Swedish author Axel Andersson.¹² This too is included in Engevoid's bibliography. Andersson's back-cover text states that the book addresses “the problematic nature of Heyerdahl's theory that a white culture-bearing race had initiated all the world's great civilizations.” Nevertheless, the sense that we are reading a chapter of *Thor Heyerdahl og jakten på Atlantis* is never felt more strongly than in an article written by Andersson only a couple of years before Engevoid published his own findings in *Humanist*. Andersson's article was published in *Fortid*, the University of Oslo history students' own academic journal. Heyerdahl, writes Andersson, “searched for the

mysterious white people around the world,” he sailed *Ra*, *Ra II* and *Tigris* “on the tracks of the mysterious race, while his Odin theory demonstrated “his desire to join the dots.”¹³ Engevoid never refers to this article, but Andersson can confirm that he has read it.¹⁴

Andersson pointed out that “Heyerdahl’s last big project on the origins of Odin demonstrated [...] the pseudo-scientific nature of his method.”¹⁵ This is a description with which the author of *Thor Heyerdahl og jakten på Atlantis* appears to be in agreement. *Ingen grenser* (1999) and *Jakten på Odin* (2001), which were only issued in Norwegian, are “[b]ooks in which, after a long career as a scholar, he finally gave himself over to pure pseudo-science.”¹⁶ Engevoid dedicates an entire chapter to criticizing the author’s poor methodology, from which the following is an extract:

The critics accused Heyerdahl [...] of presenting existing and well-known theories as though they were new discoveries. In a review, professor of archaeology, Christian Keller, wrote that the book [*Ingen grenser*] was full of “unclearities” of this sort. Keller believed that “common decency requires that material that is already familiar should not be published as ‘new discoveries’. Nor should one present other people’s discoveries in one’s own name.”¹⁷

In one of his own critical remarks Engevoid writes: “Interestingly enough,” Heyerdahl neglects to reference other researchers in *Jakten på Odin*, instead, giving the “impression of having taken the theory directly from Snorri Sturluson.”¹⁸ As though destiny is at play here, the historian Engevoid is doing the exact same, in his writing, as Heyerdahl.

We sense three maidens sitting by the Well of Urðr, smiling knowingly.

Günther, Bryn and Leden

Engevoid continues to stumble along in Andersson’s footsteps as he claims that Hans F. K. Günther, Nazi-Germany’s most read race scientist, was the person who put Heyerdahl on the track of these white culture-bearers. On his way home from Fatu Hiva in 1938, Heyerdahl stopped off in Berlin, where during a visit to the Günther family he presented the race scientist with a Polynesian skull. Heyerdahl himself gives an account of this in *Fatu-Hiva* (1974): “After my visit to the Völkerkunde Museum in Berlin, Hitler’s chief anthropologist, Professor Günther, had even written and asked me to bring him a skull from the Marquesas Islands, since he was sure that the Polynesians must be Aryans.”¹⁹ Instead of going directly to the primary source, Engevoid relies on the Norwegian biographer Ragnar Kvam Jr.’s somewhat imprecise paraphrase of the quote in *Mannen og havet* (2005). This rendering suggests that Günther wrote a letter to Heyerdahl, giving the impression that the two corresponded.²⁰ The Heyerdahl archives, however, contain no such letters, as Engevoid would have known had he chosen to consult them. As Engevoid himself points out in his book, the context of Günther’s request was the fact that he was married to a close friend of Heyerdahl’s mother-in-law. Thus, the most likely explanation, is that Günther’s request arrived

in a letter addressed to *her*. Again, consulting the Thor Heyerdahl Archives would have revealed that letters from Heyerdahl to his family written in Berlin after his visit to Günther, contained no enthusiastic descriptions of anthropological discussions. Such elements are entirely absent, in striking contrast to letters written after his stay with Henry Lie at Hiva Oa, which contain page after page of observations and comments from their conversations.

In order to establish that Heyerdahl was inspired by Günther's theories of the superiority of the so-called Nordic race, Engevoold refers to a chapter in *På jakt efter paradiset* (1938), Heyerdahl's first book about the trip to Fatu-Hiva which was only published in Scandinavia.²¹ Here, the future Señor Kon-Tiki gives an account of his preliminary theories that there were two separate migrations into Polynesia. By rephrasing and quoting from this paragraph, Engevoold relates how Heyerdahl proposed that Polynesia had first been occupied by a mysterious, white race of an almost Nordic appearance that some 700 years ago was forced up into the mountains by warlike Polynesians. It was the people of this first migration who had blond and red hair, and it was they who had erected the Easter Island statues and brought Megalithic high culture to Polynesia. This, according to Engevoold, confirms that Heyerdahl was in full agreement with Günther. After all, the German Nazi professor had a theory about Aryans in Polynesia. The problem is not so much that the author uncritically and without any reference other than Heyerdahl's own clumsy comment, attributes to Günther a theory which, as far as we can see, he never expressed himself.²² Rather, it is that Engevoold cannot possibly have read the paragraph in the 1938 book, at least not very carefully. Heyerdahl writes:

In this way, they [examples of prehistoric rock art in the Omoa Valley] had been standing for centuries, since the times when an unknown culture flourished on the Marquesas Islands. This was a mysterious race which is an unsolved puzzle for science. From whence they came, and who they are, is unknown. The only clue one has is impressive walls and terraces of huge rocks. They are a branch of the unknown people who once erected the remarkable stone heads on Easter Island. They have long since been eradicated. They were forced up into the mountains and killed by the warlike Polynesians who came over the sea to the Marquesas presumably 700 years ago. *This* race, too, the remains of which still live on the islands, is a completely unsolved mystery. Where they sailed from in their little boats across the endless ocean, no-one knows.

Fair-skinned, tall, with wavy hair, they have an almost Nordic appearance. Some of the members of this old pure race are actually blond. They could have been descendants of the old Vikings, these most skilful mariners of the world. But no-one knows their ancient dwelling-place. There are no clear legends about their origins. But the first of them to come ashore initiated some strange family trees. These were plaited from coconut hemp, with knots tied for every single generation. Each family had its family tree when the white man arrived at the islands, and by counting these knots, it has been calculated that their ancestors reached land about 700 years ago.²³

Thusly it was the Polynesians – the *later* immigrants – to whom Heyerdahl attributes an almost Nordic appearance. He makes no comment whatsoever about the physiognomy of the mysterious Megalithic people. Consequently, it is impossible to conclude from this paragraph that Heyerdahl was inspired by Günther, or that in 1938 he was operating with any hyper-diffusionist theory of a white-skinned high culture race. Did Engevoid not read this primary text at all? Did he just rely on Andersson’s article in *Fortid*, in which the Swedish author, remarkably enough, made the exact same error?²⁴

It is not until his *later* writings that Heyerdahl identifies the so-called Megalithic people of Polynesia, or the Easter Island culture, with white prehistoric mariners. The same is true of the intricate knot system, which he only *later* identified with the “quipu” of the Incas. Similarly, it is not until *later* that he attributes the rock art at Fatu Hiva to the secondary immigrants; in other words, the closest ancestors of the Polynesians.²⁵ It is a fact that Heyerdahl implies in his 1974 book, *Fatu-Hiva*, and in more recent publications, that his theory had been fully developed as early as 1938. But, it should be immediate apparent to anyone who looks into the matter that these texts are not immune to anachronisms. It is remarkable that Engevoid, an historian trained in critical method, does not consider this alternative perspective. Had he read a little more in another Heyerdahl book from which he occasionally draws, *American Indians in the Pacific* (1952) that is, he would have discovered something interesting. Heyerdahl writes here about a dark-skinned Megalithic people about whom he collected legends during his stay on the Marquesas Islands in 1937-38, and who, according to the tales, had escaped into the mountains and taken refuge behind great walls in order to elude the incursions of the Polynesians:

I collected traditional accounts, on both Hivaoa and Fatuhiva, which described a smaller and darker population originally inhabiting these islands, but who, when the Polynesians arrived from Hawaii by sea, fled to the most inaccessible peaks and mountain ridges, where they fortified themselves with stoneworks and ditches. The Polynesians have shown me stone walls and fortifications attributed to this early alien people in the peaks above the Puamau valley on Hivaoa, and above the Omoa and Ouia valleys on Fatuhiva.²⁶

Engevoid’s “selective sources” and “need to prove things rather than to research,” to use one of his own descriptions of Heyerdahl, might perhaps create sensational stories to be put in a book, but this is not the in-depth exploration of Heyerdahl’s theories that readers were promised.²⁷

However, Engevoid is only starting to connect Heyerdahl to Nazis and dubious race scientists. To the author’s great horror, Heyerdahl refers to the “outdated”²⁸ Norwegian anthropologist Halfdan Bryn’s book *Menneskerasene og deres utviklingshistorie* (1925) in his 1952 volume. It does not make things better, he writes, that Bryn and Heyerdahl had “a mutual acquaintance”²⁹ in Hans F. K. Günther, thus implying guilt by association. It should be made evident, however, that Heyerdahl’s references to Bryn are unproblematic in the sense that they in no way support Bryn’s

racist ideas about the superiority of the “Nordic race.”³⁰ Engevold cannot possibly have read what Heyerdahl writes elsewhere in the same book:

Neither physical anthropology nor native lore have furnished us with evidence justifying the use of the terms Caucasian, European, or Nordic, occasionally used to describe this non-Mongoloid type, occurring sporadically and quite unexpectedly on the lonely islands of the Pacific.³¹

In short, Heyerdahl distanced himself from any Güntherian theory identifying the legendary light-skinned Megalithic peoples in Polynesia with the so-called Nordic race. His reference to the Norwegian race scientist may be unfortunate, but the suggestion that Bryn’s academic literature was outdated and thus not in use after the Second World War, is somewhat an exaggeration. As late as 1950, in the third edition of the Norwegian two-volume popular-history book, *Norge vårt land*, edited by Werner Werenskiöld, references to Bryn had still not been deleted.³² It should be noted that Werenskiöld was a recognized scholar in his day, who distanced himself from Bryn’s racist views. In an article, written in 1922, in which he presents the then up-to-date racial teachings of his day, he concludes by emphasizing that “it is an unacceptable idea that one race is better than another.”³³ Werenskiöld, incidentally, was Heyerdahl’s geography professor during his studies at the University of Oslo (then called the Royal Frederick University) in the 1930s, and may actually have been the person who introduced him to Bryn’s writings.

Perhaps the most powerful evidence that Heyerdahl did not share Bryn’s racial views is a research protocol he prepared for shipping magnate, Thomas Olsen, in 1939, written on the occasion of his upcoming expedition to Bella Coola, in which he gives an account of the latest version of his emergent theory on Polynesian origins. In this document, Malays, Northwest Coast Indians, culture-bearers from Peru and the two separate groups of people settling Polynesia, are all described as belonging to the “Indo-American race,” a term he likely borrowed from Bryn and from the book to which Heyerdahl refers in *American Indians in the Pacific*. Bryn, however, classifies this race as “inferior.”³⁴ Engevold could easily have made this observation himself as the text of the document has been reproduced in several of the Heyerdahl-biographies cited in *Thor Heyerdahl og jakten på Atlantis*.³⁵ “One may look east or north – or even for a local evolution when searching for the origin of the Caucasian-like element in aboriginal America,”³⁶ Heyerdahl writes at one point in his 1952 volume. It is tempting to read this passage as a backward glance at what he might have hypothesized at an earlier stage in the development of his theory. Yet again we see the poor workmanship of Engevold’s research.

However, Engevold still has an ace up his sleeve. He reveals that Heyerdahl had a rendezvous – admittedly by chance, but still presented as a problematic one – with the Norwegian ethnologist, Christian Leden in Chile in 1955. The evidence is an interview the following year in the Norwegian

newspaper *Aftenposten*, in which the former NS and SS Ahnenerbe member speaks of being in agreement with most of Heyerdahl's theories. It seems that the two "immediately got along well," Engevoll elaborates, also making use of the opportunity to repeat the mantra about "a mutual acquaintance"³⁷ in Günther. However, what is intended to be the conclusive argument establishing Heyerdahl as a member of the German race guru's circle of friends, ends up as the best example of the failings in Engevoll's research methods, and superficial command of his own source material. In the *Aftenposten* interview, which the author quotes uncritically, Leden reports that Heyerdahl encountered problems when applying for a permit to carry out excavations on Easter Island. "I'm sure you'll get to Easter Island before me,"³⁸ Heyerdahl apparently said. The problem though, is that Leden was already returning from Easter Island when he allegedly met Heyerdahl,³⁹ an unfortunate fact of which Engevoll, ironically enough, seems to have been aware of just a couple of paragraphs *before* the *Aftenposten* quote: "When Thor Heyerdahl met Christian Leden in 1955, Leden had just returned to Chile after being on Easter Island."⁴⁰ But already in the following paragraph, Engevoll seems to have forgotten this fact: "After a good deal of toing and froing, Thor Heyerdahl got permission to visit Easter Island, so he set off in Christian Leden's footsteps."⁴¹ The expedition leader had, however, been granted permission well before his departure from Oslo, almost three months prior to his arrival in Chile.⁴² Few researchers have ever had less problems obtaining such permission. If Engevoll has not already done so previously, in this instance, in the case of Leden, he slides from guilt by association to guilt by *accusation*.

Donnelly, Braghine and the myth of Atlantis

Engevoll continues to speculate about possible sources for Heyerdahl's ideas, and believes he has identified one in the father of Atlantology, Ignatius Donnelly, who believed that all ancient high culture had its origins in Atlantis. "There is no doubt that Heyerdahl had allowed himself to be inspired by the early Atlantis proponents, Donnelly in particular,"⁴³ Engevoll claims, having just introduced the reader to the out-of-Atlantis theories of the amateur Nazi archaeologist Edmund Kiss. It should surprise no one that Kiss fits into the list of what the author describes in the book as white-gods-from-Atlantis theorists. What is surprising, however, is that Engevoll does not appear to be aware of the fact that neither of the other two on the list of Heyerdahl's supposed sources operated with any white master races in their theoretical constructs. Nor does he inform his readers of this fact. Although during his book launch in Oslo, on October 16th 2019, Engevoll described Donnelly as "very racist",⁴⁴ it is difficult to see how this can be accurate when, for instance, one reads Donnelly's own description of the Atlanteans:

The people represented at least two different races: a dark brown reddish race, akin to the Central Americans, the Berbers and the Egyptians; and a white race, like the Greeks, Goths, Celts, and Scandinavians. Various battles and struggles followed between the different peoples for supremacy. The darker race seems to have been, physically, a smaller race, with small hands; the lighter-colored race was much larger – hence the legends of the Titans

and Giants. The Guanches of the Canary Islands were men of very great stature. As the works of the Bronze Age represent a small-handed race, and as the races who possessed the ships and gunpowder joined in the war against the Giants, we might conclude that the dark races were the more civilized, that they were the metal-workers and navigators.⁴⁵

In short, a light-haired white race is not said to represent high culture in Donnelly's theories. The above paragraph is from a book to which Engevoid himself refers. Yet again, one is left amazed at the author's apparent lack of knowledge of, or professional interest in, the nuances of his reference material. It is also an untenable proposition that Heyerdahl should have found inspiration for a meta-theory about a white-skinned ancient people that had a monopoly on developing high-culture, in the atlantologist Alexander Braghine. Like Donnelly, Braghine, in the book which Engevoid cites, suggests that Atlantis was a diverse community in terms of skin color. Accordingly, it was, for instance, dark-skinned Ethiopians, from a tropical region of Atlantis called Ethiopia, that supposedly lay the foundations for civilization in ancient Egypt.⁴⁶ It is difficult to see how Heyerdahl could have constructed a racist white-gods-from-Atlantis theory on the basis of these two books.

In some instances, it may appear as though Heyerdahl believed in the myth of Atlantis. As with the biblical flood narrative, he believed there was a kernel of truth to Plato's account. However, the historicity lay primarily in ancient folk memories of a huge cataclysm that had destroyed earlier civilizations. Heyerdahl postulated a violent natural catastrophe of global proportions occurring roughly during the same period as the cultural boom in the Mediterranean area, in Mesopotamia, and the Indus Valley, some five thousand years ago. A tree embedded in lava on Iceland, carbon dated to this period, made him believe that enormous flood waves, caused by plate tectonics, had reached the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts, forcing maritime cultures to relocate. As he writes in *Early Man and the Ocean* (1978):

Since a geological catastrophe took place in the Atlantic in the centuries around 3000 BC great enough to split Iceland, it is perhaps not entirely out of place to speculate that tidal waves could have caused far-reaching disasters, forcing population groups to search for new land.⁴⁷

A similar scenario took place in the bay outside the delta of the Tigris and Euphrates, burying ancient settlements in lower Mesopotamia under a three-meter-thick layer of mud. But since Heyerdahl was assuming a world-wide natural catastrophe, he believed that the tsunami must have originated in the ocean somewhere outside the Persian Gulf. Consequently, Heyerdahl must have assumed that the catastrophe affected cultures all along the coastlines and bays throughout the antediluvian world. There is thus no reason to assume that the peoples of the Bronze Age cultures in Heyerdahl's theories all set off from a single cultural center.

This, however, does not stop Engevoid from speculating. The white culture-bearers cannot have come from America because the civilizations there weren't old enough. Nor could they have come from Europe, Asia, nor Africa, because it was to these areas the peoples arrived, bringing the arts of civilization with them. Ergo, Heyerdahl's white culture-bearers must have come sailing "from the Atlantic,"⁴⁸ as though they had just flung themselves on to reed boats as Atlantis slid below the waves. Such reasoning only reveals the author's meagre understanding of the theoretical construct he claims to have examined closely.

We might well wonder from where Engevoid himself derived his ideas. He admits that Heyerdahl never wrote that he believed in the Atlantis legend as such.⁴⁹ None of the book's endnotes refer to anything supporting the author's claims that the white culture-bearers in Heyerdahl's theory came across the Atlantic before establishing civilizations in the Mediterranean area, in Mesopotamia, and the Indus Valley. Again, it seems that Engevoid used ideas from other researchers without referencing his sources. In the aforementioned book by Edvin Dahl and Tron Øgrim (written for children), which actually contains many speculations regarding Atlantis, we find the following passage:

Heyerdahl speaks [...] of an age when reed boats sailed all the seas some five to ten thousand years ago. And he envisages a red-haired people with long ears who inhabited islands out in a great ocean. He believes that these islands sank and that these people emigrated to places including India, Sumer and Egypt. Some headed half-way round the world, ending up on Easter Island.⁵⁰

However, anyone with any knowledge of Heyerdahl's theories will identify the obvious misunderstandings in this text. The red-haired people with the long ears who live on islands out in a great ocean must be the Redins, of whom Heyerdahl found traces on the Maldives. But these scattered atolls are still to be found – out in the Indian Ocean. True enough, he envisaged that the ancient seafaring Maldivians traded with, but were not the masterminds behind the ancient civilizations in the Indus Valley, Sumer and ancient Egypt.

Concealed racism?

Even though Heyerdahl believed that high culture was spread and perhaps in some cases even initiated by white people, this fact does not automatically lead to the conclusion that he believed that *all* high culture was spread and initiated by such people. The cornerstone of Heyerdahl's theoretical constructs was perhaps based on sensational ethnographic legends of light-skinned culture heroes and ancient mariners, but not on an underlying racist idea that *only* white people had the ability to develop high culture. In his eagerness to establish Heyerdahl's excessive fascination for white disseminators-of-culture, it seems Engevoid has himself indulged in some excesses.

The many cultural parallels that Heyerdahl points to between the three ancient civilizations are much better explained in terms of the role he attributes to ancient seafaring and maritime connections, rather than in terms of him proposing a common center of cultural dispersion. Heyerdahl never tired of speaking about how the rivers and seas formed trading routes and contact networks long before ancient peoples began to construct the first great civilizations. As Heyerdahl himself asks at one point, where did the ancient Egyptians, Sumerians and Indus Valley peoples come from? He continues:

I've been convinced for quite some time that the clues to this mystery, no doubt, lie in the prehistoric boat petroglyphs which are found on widely scattered continental shores and islands all over the world and even near dried-out waterways deep inside the Sahara Desert. Petroglyphs and rock paintings of watercraft represent the earliest known illustrations of human architecture and even predate pictures of dwellings or temples. I've seen such sketches from below the equator in Polynesia to above the Arctic Circle in Northern Norway. Everywhere they testify to the fact that boats were of extreme importance to early man as they provided security and transportation millennia before there were roads through the wilderness.⁵¹

On a rock face in the Tassili Mountains in the heart of Algeria's landlocked Sahara Desert, Heyerdahl had seen with his own eyes the famous rock paintings of reed boats, hippopotami, fish and other wildlife, which prove that at one time the place had been a verdant river valley and flourishing cultural center. The river had dried up, he believed, due to climate changes in the wake of the great natural catastrophe. Who had left behind those prehistoric rock drawings? It could have been none other than the ancestors of the Berbers. Several of the rock paintings depicted light-skinned people. But here and there were also people with clear "Negroid" features.

[Black and white North-Africans must have fled together in search of new homelands; some on foot, others taking their boats down the shrinking rivers to the narrow stretch of green land along the seashore.] It is understandable that fleeing Berbers, black and white, had ended up in the Canary Current and the Canary Islands. With North African Berbers afloat in the current that runs like a vast river to the Gulf of Mexico, the bearded men of Maya, Aztec and Inca traditions have a legitimate place in aboriginal American tales about the Atlantic – but more as fact than as fiction.⁵²

This extract is taken from a book chapter from which Engevoold himself quotes. The reason that this passage in particular is not used is presumably because it matches poorly with the hypothesis of a white master race from Atlantis, and of an underlying racism in Heyerdahl's theories. The quote shows, in fact, that Heyerdahl did not postulate any mythological Kingdom of Atlantis as the original home of the Berbers and Guanches, but rather a dried-out Saharan river bed. It is also worth noting that Heyerdahl, not unlike the atlantologists Donnelly and Braghine, presents the

place of origin as a multi-racial community. Black and white lived side by side as neighbors. And what is more, the quote illustrates that the transatlantic crews of Heyerdahl's theoretical construct were multi-ethnic cultural attachés. The Phoenicians, who he suspected of playing a key role in the spread of Megalithic high culture across the Atlantic, were themselves not necessarily white, as he points out. But, as the foremost maritime nation of the ancient past, they had "passengers and crew from all over the Mediterranean world."⁵³ As he states in *American Indians in the Pacific*: "Caucasian-like traits were shared by *some* of the peoples who brought high-culture into [...] America and Polynesia."⁵⁴

As Ragnar Kvam Jr. wrote in *Mannen og verden* (2008): "In order to demonstrate that it was possible to create collaboration and understanding across national borders in an already unstable world he wished to throw together seven men with differing national, political, ethnic and religious backgrounds on *Ra*."⁵⁵ This, in sharp contrast to Engevoid, who believes that Heyerdahl's international expedition crew was a more or less conscious attempt to come across as a multiculturalist in order to cover up the underlying racism of his theories.⁵⁶ The international crew was, however, instead a conscious reflection of the theory of multi-ethnic transatlantic sailors in ancient times. As Heyerdahl himself describes his crew in *The Ra Expeditions* (1970): "Black hands and white pulled on the same ropes. It had been so in ancient times as well."⁵⁷

Engevoid further alleges (incidentally without referring to his predecessor Graham E. L. Holton's 2004 article *Thor Heyerdahl's Kon Tiki Theory and the Denial of the Indigenous Past*⁵⁸) that Heyerdahl's theories of white-skinned megalith builders deprives indigenous populations of the honor of building their own historic monuments.⁵⁹ The problem with this argument, quite apart from the misconception that Heyerdahl proposed only white culture-bearers, is that it fails to take into account that this type of issue is potentially present in *all* diffusion theory. There is, for instance, no substantive difference in principle between Heyerdahl's idea of the external origins of the Mesoamerican Olmec culture through civilization being brought across the Atlantic, and the Normanist idea that the Eastern European Kingdom of Kiev was founded by Scandinavian Vikings. And similarly, as post-war western researchers attribute a greater role to the Russians' Slavic forbears in the processes that shaped the state, we can actually see something of the same contemporary perspective in Heyerdahl. In a paragraph dealing with the cultural indebtedness of the Inca, Maya and Aztec nations to the Olmec civilization he writes:

Traditional history, supported by archaeology, clearly shows that these great historic and proto-historic nations of the Andean area and Mexico were purely local products – amalgamations of indigenous peoples. These, however, owed their inspiration to more obscure predecessors.⁶⁰

White researchers

Throughout his life, Thor Heyerdahl was subject of intense critical attacks. Many of the more outrageous claims have come from young researchers using his fame for self-promotion. Engevoid's book aligns itself with a tendency in Heyerdahl criticism that attempts to marginalize his life's work by "uncovering" some underlying racism in, and pseudo-scientific approaches behind, his theories. Heyerdahl had his "conclusion in place well before beginning with the actual research,"⁶¹ Engevoid points out. In addition, it is claimed that he did not follow the rules of research ethics and only drew upon a selective range of sources.

In his attempt to censure his childhood hero, Engevoid falls foul of his own criticisms when he deploys the same methods that he believes are at the heart of Heyerdahl's theoretical construct. He begins with his conclusion about a meta-theory of white culture-bearers, which he has purloined from other writers, before beginning to search for evidence in source materials that appear to serve this purpose. His travels through Heyerdahl's books become purely a series of stop-off points to pick out quotes that support his conclusion. Nuances and details that point in other directions are overlooked or interpreted in the author's favor.

Like all such attacks, this becomes a kind of ritual patricide in which the white, enlightened, angry and now disappointed young researcher slaughters his primitive childhood hero.

When a historian analyzes the academic work of a lifetime, covering almost seven decades, it is expected that he understands the epoch he is describing. But the historical context in which Heyerdahl's theories were created – in academic as well as cultural terms – is virtually absent from Engevoid's account. At the same time, he shows no understanding of any contextual development in the formation of the theories. Instead, quite undocumented allegations are tossed around concerning one source of inspiration or another. The author fantasizes, for instance, that the alleged idea of Atlantis, which Engevoid dates back to Heyerdahl's 1979 book, *The Tigris Expedition*, is the result of "racist" Atlantis concepts. If Ockham's famous razor were to be put to use here, one can find a far more plausible explanation for why Heyerdahl began talking about Atlantis around this time. As Heyerdahl himself points out in his 1978 book, *Early Man and the Ocean*, archaeological excavations of the old Minoan culture on Santorini had just caused serious researchers to talk about Atlantis again. Could the volcanic eruption on Thera, which over 3000 years ago buried the island civilization under a massive layer of ash, be coupled to Plato's legendary narrative? Heyerdahl, however, was less enthusiastic:

Until better reasons to revive the Atlantis legend emerge, it would seem best to let Plato's records rest in the realm of mythology and traditional history.⁶²

This alone should reveal for all the world the embarrassingly poor research underlying *Thor Heyerdahl og jakten på Atlantis*. But the quote simultaneously illustrates a further problem with Engevd's book. The nuances in Heyerdahl's theoretical constructs are lost because the author frequently attributes equal authority to primary and secondary sources, and does not distinguish critically between Heyerdahl's academic and popular-science texts. It is symptomatic of the book that the chapter about Atlantis contains disproportionately many references to second-hand sources and popular-science texts, while only a couple of the endnotes refer to an academic text. Ironically enough, it is none other than *Early Man and the Ocean* that is used as the academic source in the Atlantis chapter. While the author may be blamed for overlooking the above quote, he can nevertheless be excused for his lack of references to academic material in this particular case. As far as we could establish, the 1978 book is the only instance in which Heyerdahl deals with Atlantis in an academic text, which simply reinforces the point: to the extent that Heyerdahl allowed his thoughts freer rein in his popular-science texts, it is a perfectly normal feature of the genre, but even more importantly, not necessarily an appropriate description of his academic theories.

Like all people, Thor Heyerdahl was a child of his time. But what makes him still relevant today is that he grew *out* of the framework of understanding that enclosed many others of his generation. He received his academic training at a time when the active use of racial classification was normal in research into cultural history. Some of Heyerdahl's books and texts may contain expressions that we would today regard as racist, but this does not mean that he consciously promoted implicit racism. As early as 1944, he wrote to his then wife Liv that, as soon as the war was over, he intended to find his way back to the core of life and attempt to "make the connection back through the ages, across racial divides. For this core is the same today as it was in the days of the Pharaohs; it is the same in a Congo negro as in a Norwegian; it is the same in Alaska as in the Sahara."⁶³ This attitude, that all the races are of equal value, was something he maintained throughout his life. It was at the very heart of why he worked in cultural history. His studies were rooted in his view of humanity.

Humanist Forlag has for many years published books on the topic of pseudo-science. In general, these publications have maintained a high academic and literary level. Unfortunately, *Thor Heyerdahl og jakten på Atlantis* is at the opposite end of the scale. Unlike the publisher's other books *about* pseudo-scientific issues, Engevd's book comes across *as* pseudo-scientific. The lasting impression after reading the book is that the author has not examined his research material as carefully as the information on the back cover suggests. Also, there are strong indications that key parts of Engevd's reflections have been borrowed from other authors and researchers.⁶⁴ Suspicions of plagiarism arise where these sources have not been acknowledged. In addition, the book suffers from an endless succession of factual errors. The log raft *Kon-Tiki* is sometimes described as a "reed raft" and sometimes as a "ship." The confusion becomes complete when the boats *Ra*, *Ra II*, and *Tigris* are also described as "reed rafts," while there are repeated references

to Heyerdahl's "raft journeys." At one point, Engevoid the historian writes that Neoplatonism arose in the Renaissance!⁶⁵

Finally, it should be mentioned that the The Kon-Tiki Museum offered the publishers a free, scholarly quality control of the book before publication.⁶⁶

Notes

¹ This review was originally published in Norwegian on December 6th, 2019. The present paper is an English translation published on April 22nd 2020.

² Per Ivar Hjeltdbakken Engevoid. Thor Heyerdahl og de hvite kulturbærerne: om sivflåter, ariere og Atlantis. *Humanist* 2, (2013).

³ Id. *Thor Heyerdahl og jakten på Atlantis*. Oslo: Humanist Forlag (2019), p. 9.

⁴ Engevoid (2013), passim. The term meta-theory is not found in the book, but the author has used it in conjunction with the book release.

⁵ Redins are a people referred to in Maldives' legends and myths.

⁶ Thor Heyerdahl saw a connection between the mythological *Aesir* and different historical groups of people with phonetically similar names in the Caucasus region. His preferred term for both of these peoples and the *Aesir* was *Ases* (plural of *As*).

⁷ *NRK Dagsnytt 18*, 7 Nov. 2019.

⁸ Cf. e.g. – Det jeg har funnet er sjokkerende [What I have found is shocking]. *Oppland Arbeiderblad* 3 Oct. 2019.

⁹ Christopher Ralling. *The Kon-Tiki Man*. London: BBC Books (1990), p. 290.

¹⁰ The Norwegian edition of the book, issued in 1989 as *Eventyret og livsverket*, has a slightly different setup than the English 1990 edition. Engevoid references the Norwegian edition. "Gathering the threads" is a literal translation of the Norwegian chapter title.

¹¹ Tor Edvin Dahl & Tron Øgrim. *Thor Heyerdahl og verdenshavens mysterier*. Oslo: J.W. Cappelens Forlag (1995), p. 71.

¹² Axel Andersson. *A Hero for the Atomic Age: Thor Heyerdahl and the Kon-Tiki Expedition*. Oxford: Peter Lang (2010), passim.

¹³ Id. Resan ut, resan in: den unge Thor Heyerdahl och det mystiska folket. *Fortid* 3 (2011), p. 74.

¹⁴ Personal communication; e-mail from Axel Andersson 13 Nov. 2019.

¹⁵ Andersson (2011), p. 74.

¹⁶ Engevoid (2019), p. 237. Thor Heyerdahl co-authored these two books with the Swedish amateur historian Per Lilliestöm.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 225-226.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

¹⁹ Thor Heyerdahl. *Fatu-Hiva: Back to Nature*. London: George Allen & Unwin (1974), p. 119.

²⁰ Ragnar Kvam Jr. *Thor Heyerdahl: mannen og havet*. Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag (2005), p. 137.

²¹ Engevoid (2019), p. 23.

²² Hans F. K. Günther used the term *Aryan* as a purely linguistic denominator. See Alan E. Steinweis. *Studying the Jew: Scholarly Antisemitism in Nazi Germany*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press (2006), p. 27.

²³ Thor Heyerdahl. *På jakt etter paradiset: et år på en sydhavsø*. Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag (1938), pp. 69-70.

²⁴ Andersson (2011), p. 73. It should be pointed out that Axel Andersson makes extensive use of archive material and that his research in general is more thorough.

²⁵ Thor Heyerdahl. Did Polynesian Culture Originate in America? *International Science* 1 (1941), passim.

²⁶ Id. *American Indians in the Pacific: The Theory Behind the Kon-Tiki Expedition*. Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag (1952), p. 186.

²⁷ Engevoid (2019), p. 70.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

³⁰ Heyerdahl (1952), s. 17.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

³² Arne Martin Klausen. *Antropologiens historie: en oversikt over fagets utvikling: fra de eldste tider frem til i dag*. Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag (1981), p. 147.

³³ Werner Werenskiöld. Raser og folk. *Samtiden* 33 (1922), pp. 386-387.

³⁴ Halfdan Bryn. *Menneskerasene og deres utviklingshistorie*. Oslo: Olaf Norlis Forlag (1925), passim.

³⁵ Cf. Arnold Jacoby. *Señor Kon-Tiki: boken om Thor Heyerdahl*. Oslo: J.W. Cappelens Forlag (1965), p. 93; Snorre Evensberget. *Thor Heyerdahl: oppdageren*. Oslo: J.M. Stenersens Forlag (1994), p. 51; Ragnar Kvam Jr. *Thor Heyerdahl: mannen og havet*. Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag (2005), pp. 220-221.

³⁶ Heyerdahl (1952), p. 345. Our italics.

³⁷ Engevoid (2019), pp. 88-89.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

³⁹ Leden was likely on Easter Island in January-February 1955, but by the beginning of July at the latest. Cf. Christian Leden: Kort besøk på Påske-øya. *Aftenposten* 16 July 1955. Heyerdahl arrived on Easter Island at the end of October 1955.

⁴⁰ Engevoid (2019), p. 88.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁴² Telegram from the Norwegian legation in Santiago to the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, dated 4 July 1955. Norwegian State Archives, *Thor Heyerdahls arkeologiske ekspedisjon til det østlige Stillehav*. Vol I: May 55–31/12 59.

⁴³ Engevoid (2019), p. 211.

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- ⁴⁴ Sound recording from the book launch at Oslo's "House of Literature" 16 Oct. 2019. Received from Even Gran, news editor, *Fri Tanke*, 14 Nov. 2019.
- ⁴⁵ Ignatius Donnelly. *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*. New York: Harper & Brothers (1882), p. 473.
- ⁴⁶ Alexander Braghine. *The Shadow of Atlantis*. New York: E.P. Dutton (1940), pp. 215-216.
- ⁴⁷ Thor Heyerdahl. *Early Man and the Ocean*. London: George Allen & Unwin (1978), p. 335.
- ⁴⁸ Engevoid (2019), p. 196.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 203.
- ⁵⁰ Dahl & Øgrim (1995), p. 85.
- ⁵¹ Thor Heyerdahl. Azerbaijan Connection: Challenging Euro-Centric Theories of Migration. *Azerbaijan International* 1 (1995), p. 60.
- ⁵² Ralling (1990), p. 309. The text in brackets is a direct translation from the Norwegian 1989 book, which diverges somewhat from the English edition.
- ⁵³ Heyerdahl (1978), p. 77.
- ⁵⁴ *Id.* (1952), p. 623. Our italics.
- ⁵⁵ Ragnar Kvam Jr. *Thor Heyerdahl: mannen og verden*. Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag (2008), s. 311.
- ⁵⁶ Engevoid (2019), pp. 253-254.
- ⁵⁷ Thor Heyerdahl. *The Ra Expeditions*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd. (1971), p. 243.
- ⁵⁸ Graham E.L. Holton. Thor Heyerdahl's Kon Tiki Theory and the Denial of the Indigenous Past. *Anthropological Forum* 2 (2004), passim.
- ⁵⁹ Engevoid (2019), p. 251.
- ⁶⁰ Heyerdahl (1978), p. 74.
- ⁶¹ Engevoid (2019), p. 85.
- ⁶² Heyerdahl (1978), p. 326.
- ⁶³ Thor Heyerdahl in a letter to Liv, 3 June 1944. Category: 13.3 Correspondence family, 1940-49, Folder 2. Thor Heyerdahl Archives, Kon-Tiki Museum.
- ⁶⁴ This is also the case with Engevoid's (2019, pp. 135-137) assertion that Thor Heyerdahl's theories are hyper-diffusionism, inspired by Grafton Elliot Smith, at the same time as they are comparable with Erich von Däniken's theory about visitors from outer space. We can find the same perspective in the article Prehistory as propaganda by K. MacDonald, F. Y. C. Hung and H. Crawford, *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology, UCL* 6 (1995), pp. 3-4 and 7.
- ⁶⁵ Engevoid (2019), p. 205. Neoplatonism, of course, emerged in Late Antiquity.
- ⁶⁶ Cf. Kon-Tiki-museet kritiske til ny Heyerdahl-bok. *Fri Tanke* 31 Oct. 2019.

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