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Remembering the future: obituaries of Erich von Däniken

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ABSTRACT

The remembrance of controversial figures in academic and religious contexts is shaped by the classificatory frameworks through which they are interpreted and contested. Erich von Däniken illustrates this process. He gained international prominence with *Chariots of the Gods?*, arguing for the influence of aliens on human history, and became the subject of polarized debate. This article examines how the competing labels that emerged during the six decades of controversy shaped his posthumous memory. It reconstructs von Däniken's self-positioning and tense relations to adjacent intellectual fields before outlining major strands of academic criticism. Drawing on 181 German- and English-language obituaries, supplemented by a few French and Dutch examples, the study identifies dominant interpretive patterns. It shows the consolidation of controversial themes, such as the 'conspiracy theorist' label, and highlights tensions between entertainment value and perceived epistemic risk.

KEYWORDS

Obituaries; memory; religion; conspiracy theory; pseudoscience; Erich von Däniken

Introduction

The way controversial personalities in academic and religious contexts are remembered is shaped by multiple factors, above all by the categories that are used – and contested – in the debates surrounding them. The world-famous Swiss author Erich von Däniken offers a telling example. He rose to international prominence with *Chariots of the Gods?* (1969), the English translation of *Erinnerungen an die Zukunft: Ungelöste Rätsel der Vergangenheit* (1968), arguing that aliens had visited Earth. Throughout his career, he occupied a contested space marked by labels such as 'pseudoscience,' 'conspiracy theory,' 'esotericism,' 'religion,' and even 'fraud,' while supporters described him more favorably as a maverick, a free thinker, or a *Grenzwissenschaftler*. After six decades – and 49 bestselling books – in which he advanced the claim that archaeological artifacts and mythological narratives preserve 'memories of the future,' meaning traces of technologically advanced extraterrestrial intervention, his death represents a crucial moment in shaping the narrative of *how* he will ultimately be remembered – and by *whom*.

On the morning of Sunday, January 11, 2026, I woke up seeing a WhatsApp message from Ramon Zürcher, Erich von Däniken's long-time assistant, announcing the death of

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his employer and close friend. I spent the first weeks of my new research project in conversation with (former) employees of von Däniken, and the intensity of their emotions was palpable: They had lost a mentor and a source of inspiration. After von Däniken's six decades of writing on and public engagement with alternative histories, the responsibility for articulating critical and alternative approaches to reconstructions of the human past now rested with them.

The following days were filled with messages from people who knew about my research project, with newspaper articles about von Däniken, and opinions from colleagues in archaeology, history, and the study of religion\'. One remembered von Däniken as 'a virulent racist and bigot and a convicted felon, and his alien archaeology "theories" did incalculable harm to the field of archaeology. Those are his legacies.'¹ Other scholars pointed to the racist assumptions behind ancient astronaut theories and emphasized that modern scholarship does not accept his ideas in the slightest. Interestingly, some of these negative evaluations were combined with more positive memories, as one archaeologist for example credited von Däniken for 'sparking curiosity' in archaeology when he was young.² At the same time, many people expressed their surprise at his departure on social media. Was he still alive? Was 'EvD' (as he is commonly called by fans and critics) not a figure of the 1970s and 1980s? These responses were mostly humorous, with people creating memes and cartoons expressing the idea that 'conspiracy thinker' von Däniken was finally 'picked up by the aliens' that once characterized his alternative histories.³ All three kinds of responses reveal the tension experienced in remembering the person and work of Erich von Däniken. They also illustrate his controversial status in Swiss society and his impact on popular and academic conversations far beyond his native Switzerland.

Von Däniken's work has been criticized by theologians, historians, and archaeologists (genre overview can be found in Hammer and Swartz 2021; critical responses include Keel-Leu 1970; Thiering 1973; Story 1976; Feder 2020, 196–218; Rafferty 2023, 112–34). This has led to a dynamic on two levels: First, knowledge claims regarding the past are contested by various spokespersons of mainstream and alternative positions, leading to widely diverse perspectives on themes such as the age of the pyramids and the interpretation of a Maya tombstone (on the age of the pyramids, see von Däniken 1989 and, from another perspective, Jordan 1998; on the tombstone of Pakal, see von Däniken 1973, 90–96 and, from another perspective, Richter 2017, 86–101). Second, von Däniken's position within this field of alternative histories has been understood differently, as the abovementioned social media responses show. Some regard him a 'pseudoscientist,' and others see him as a 'conspiracy theorist' or a 'fraud' associated with new religious movements (NRMs) (Brand forthcoming). In marked contrast, sympathizers remember him as a maverick standing up against dogmatic scientific traditions.⁴

¹Dr. Sarah Parcak on Bluesky, a social media alternative to what used to be Twitter (nowadays called X), <https://bsky.app/profile/indyfromspace.bsky.social/post/3mc65yvtvukk25>, January 11, 2026, accessed January 19, 2026.

²Jens Notroff on Bluesky <https://bsky.app/profile/jensnotroff.com/post/3mc5peamyik2a>, January 11, 2026, accessed January 19, 2026.

³Guardian of the Hängematte on Bluesky, <https://bsky.app/profile/guardian.eurosky.social/post/3mc7rsn4ias2b>, January 12, 2026; Sebastian Wilken on Bluesky, <https://bsky.app/profile/sebwilken.net/post/3mc5jn6gmls27>, January 11, 2026, etc.

⁴This occurs most explicitly in the official Ancient Astronaut Society obituary, republished in *Sagenhafte Zeiten* 28, no. 1 (2026), 2–3 and 4–11.

This article broadens the question of how von Däniken is remembered in the context of religious, scientific, and social tensions to include official newspaper obituaries. Obituaries, as literary phenomena associated with the rise of newspapers in the 18th and mostly 19th centuries, serve as carriers of collective memory. Bridget Fowler has argued that the democratization of the obituary in the 1980s has opened up the genre beyond the ‘bare bones of Who’s Who’ to a reflection of an individual’s ‘concrete, indeed unpredictable life’ through the ‘memories of the subject’s unique experience, gathered from those in his or her group networks,’ thereby ‘also revalorising a certain view of the past’ (Fowler 2007, 11; cf. Miller, McKillop, and Ganguly 2024). As such, they play a key role in transmitting socially-shaped memories. Since different ideas on whom and what should be remembered exist, obituaries shed light on societal patterns of dominant memory-making, like established gender roles and class relationships (Bourdieu 1984, 210–25). Large datasets based on obituaries have, for example, been used to analyze the changing characterization of male and female (religious) leaders (Alfano, Higgins, and Levernier 2018; Rodler, Kirchler, and Hölzl 2001; Zehnter et al. 2025), as well as on the usage of polite, neutral, and concealing language (Gawel 2021). Fowler (2007, 16) notes that the authors of obituaries are often journalists, ‘who sieve memories from very divergent sources through a single mesh,’ giving them a crucial role in establishing how certain individuals are remembered. Will they, for example, reflect on von Däniken’s time in prison (between 1968 and 1971, after a controversial court case; the sentence was repealed in 1982) or mention the early plagiarism accusations (Roth 2025, 79–83 and 185–87; accusations in Gadow 1971, 7–25)? These questions are not innocent, as the answers contribute to ‘national myths or collective memories of contemporary heroes’ (Adams 2022, 1029).

To break through binary perspectives, this article aims to highlight how multiple actors narrate Erich von Däniken’s legacy, showing a broader field of perspectives beyond labels such as science/pseudoscience, conspiracy theory/fact. By examining 181 German- and English-language newspaper obituaries reporting von Däniken’s death, I bring to light trends in how he is remembered. This journalistic memory-making, I argue, navigates between von Däniken’s self-understanding as expressed in books and interviews, particularly his tense relationship with other scientific and religious positionalities (section 2), and the fierce academic criticism and boundary-work through associated labels, such as ‘conspiracy theory,’ applied to his historical narratives (section 3). I will compare the mixed-method content analysis (Mayring 2022) of the German and English obituaries (sections 4 and 5) to a small number of French and Dutch obituaries to identify trends in the wider context of remembering Erich von Däniken. This analysis will not only show *where* and *when* the interpretative framework has accepted labels such as ‘conspiracy theorist’ and ‘pseudoscience’ but also illustrate the tension between claims about entertainment value and the purported danger of (pseudo)scientific reasoning. I argue that most academic criticism on historical methods has not stuck, while contemporary sensitivities associated with conspiracy theories have a more prominent position. Finally, in section 6, I juxtapose the outcome of this analysis with the official obituary as published by the A.A.S. (the Ancient Astronaut Society – Forschungsgesellschaft für Archäologie, Astronautik und SETI) on January 11, 2026, to show the difference between mainstream and alternative memory-making.

Von Däniken's self-understanding

Erich von Däniken's (1935–2026) self-understanding was never fully fixed, as he performed a range of overlapping roles during the last 60 years. In his books and interviews, three related roles can be identified: He was the maverick asking difficult questions, the open-minded explorer revealing little-known facts, and the courageous and persecuted innovator who stood up against established academic and religious powers.

From his earliest publications onward, von Däniken presented himself as a maverick willing to ask difficult questions. In the original introduction to *Chariots of the Gods? (Erinnerungen an die Zukunft)*, (1968), he presents his work as an act of intellectual courage undertaken in anticipation of rejection. 'It took courage to write this book, and it will take courage to read it,' he writes, predicting that scholars would label his theories nonsense and consign them to silence because they do not fit the 'mosaic of traditional archaeology' (von Däniken 2018 [1969], xxiii). Many scholars later critiqued his thesis, sometimes with strong arguments contesting the correctness of his observations. Von Däniken defended himself by emphasizing the open-ended nature of his inquiry. Instead of stating facts, he says, his first books mainly contain questions: 'I do not provide evidence for my theory, but rather list circumstantial evidence and ask questions (a total of 323 questions in Volume I!)' (von Däniken 1970, 249; 1985, 9–10; cf. Richter 2017, 111). This framing casts him less as a historian reconstructing the past than as a reporter or investigator drawing attention to anomalies and unresolved questions.

'Only asking the difficult questions' is another central aspect of von Däniken's approach, one that he often contrasts with the close-mindedness of archaeologists. Archaeologists, in his opinion, are not willing to explore high-technological and extraterrestrial options, as this would get them in trouble. Instead, they offer so-called 'killer-phrases' to 'cover up and bury' unbearably bold ideas and hypotheses. The phrases he claims to have encountered often as academic answers blocking his questions include the following (with his response in brackets):

That contradicts the statutes (always good!) ...

That is too radical (in its deterrent effect, without comparison!) ...

The universities won't go along with that (convincing!) ...

Others have already tried that (no question! But with success?) ...

That has yet to be proven (quod erat demonstrandum).

(von Däniken 1968, 36; repeated in von Däniken 1977, 14–15; 2024, 52; etc.)

Throughout his work, von Däniken offers various explanations for why archaeologists hide behind these 'killerphrases.' Some are afraid of being laughed at or to lose their jobs. Others fear (scientific) persecution, or they are lazy and narrow-minded (*Borniertheit*, von Däniken 1968, 25, 27, 31, 36 etc.; 2018, 200). While in his later years, accusations of intentional conspiracies began to play a larger role, his criticism of historical and archaeological research remained primarily focused on the lack of curiosity and the inherent laziness of our society:

as if there were no secrets. So why the blockades? The cards are stacked against us. Has our society become lazy? Has our innate urge to be curious died out? Are we simply

oversaturated with information and prefer to sit in front of the screen instead of crawling around in the field? (von Däniken 2014, 45, note the frequent use of question marks)

Within this framework, von Däniken himself is the open-minded explorer. The open-minded aspect is often described as an act of ‘fantasy’ and ‘speculation,’ which are necessary tools for thinking outside the box, as it was Jules Verne’s fantasy that led the way to the space age’s discoveries and Wernher von Braun’s inventions (von Däniken 2015, 27).

Criticism and accusations leveled at von Däniken led him to self-identify as a courageous and persecuted innovator. He situates himself within a lineage of great innovators whose ideas initially clashed with dominant worldviews, frequently invoking figures such as Galileo. One of his longest books, *Beweise*, is styled rhetorically as if bringing proof to a court of law. The type of proof, however, is *Indizienbeweis* (circumstantial evidence), not the firm facts that von Däniken (1977, 10) associates with the natural sciences. As a first statement, von Däniken argues that ‘Justitia does not see the future’ (Justitia sieht die Zukunft nicht), meaning that history shows that what was once taken as foolishness and error became known as fact and truth later. He cites Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, and others as examples of scientific innovators who disturbed the establishment with their ideas (von Däniken 1977, 12–13, 15–25; cf. Gieryn 1983, 789). As all these examples, von Däniken stands up to the mainstream of science and offers another possibility. This alternative is often portrayed as being in conflict with science but also as a better kind of science (compare similar strategies in González 2016). Von Däniken describes himself as a ‘research writer’ (forschenden Schriftsteller, von Däniken 1978, 51), ‘part-time researcher’ (Sonntagsforscher, von Däniken 1969, 60), ‘science enthusiast’ (Wissenschaftsfan, von Däniken 1991, 165), and ‘tramp between the sciences’ (Tramp zwischen den Wissenschaften, von Däniken 1977, 88; cf. Richter 2017, 108–10). He offers a ‘new scientific perspective’ (eines neuen Wissenschaftszweiges, eine neue Betrachtungsweise) rather than a new belief system (Schmitt 1988, 48).

This positive vision of science (Wissenschaft) continues in his Ancient Astronaut Society, which aims to ‘provide recognized evidence of visits by extraterrestrials to our Earth that took place in the distant past. In doing so, we want to follow the basic rules of scientific knowledge acquisition, but not allow ourselves to be limited by existing dogmas or paradigms’ (A.A.S. – Forschungsgesellschaft für Archäologie 2025).⁵ In my personal conversations, the preferred term turned out to be *Grenzwissenschaft*, indicating a claim on science combined with science skepticism.

One designator that von Däniken consistently rejected was the label of religious leader or prophet. Despite the frequent religious resonances of his material, he insists that pre-astronautics has ‘nothing to do with religion,’ emphasizing that he neither promises salvation nor claims spiritual authority: ‘I am neither a guru nor a prophet ... I represent and defend a hypothesis that I am convinced is correct’ (von Däniken 1990, 158). The appeal of his work, in his own telling, lies precisely in its controversial character and its challenge to the anthropocentric assumptions of both religion and science. As he stated in a 2023 interview, his goal is not to be right but to question prevailing theories

⁵Other indications of their scientific and academic aspirations can be found in their institutional isomorphism with legitimate science: conferences, research institutes, journals, encyclopedias, even methodological manuals. Von Däniken’s ‘ancient astronaut’ paradigm has given rise to several research foundations, television programs structured as investigative documentaries, and an entire publishing industry that mirrors the infrastructure of academic communication (Pössel 2000, 311–12).

and undermine the notion of human exceptionalism. This self-image aligns with what Jonas Richter (2017, 41) describes as a broader pattern among alternative history proponents: They see themselves as discoverers of a lost truth of profound significance for humanity – one that is denied or suppressed by defenders of an established worldview. Through this lens, critique and resistance are not signs of failure but integral components of a narrative in which intellectual provocation, marginalization, and future recognition are closely intertwined.

Academic ‘othering’ and polemical criticism

Since the publication of *Chariots of the Gods?*, von Däniken has occupied an ambivalent position in scholarly discourse and is frequently described through categories that sit at the margins of academic legitimacy. This type of boundary-work (Gieryn 1983) has developed various perspectives on his alternative histories. One prominent line of interpretation situates his work in relation to religion and modern forms of myth-making. Scholars of religion have variously interpreted von Däniken’s ancient astronaut hypothesis as a form of secularized mythology, a reconfiguration of biblical and ancient narratives through technological imaginaries, or part of a broader landscape of alternative and esoteric religiosity (Turner and Turner 2021, 18). In this reading, his work is less concerned with empirical reconstruction of the past than with offering meaning-making narratives that reinterpret traditional religious symbols – gods, angels, miracles – through the idiom of extraterrestrial intervention into a narrative of scientificity for the new space age (Jüdt 2003, 184–86; Grünschloß 2007, 218; on Graham Hancock, see Hammer and Swartz 2024, 90–92). This has led to his work frequently being classified into the same categories as NRMs, esoteric currents, or ‘invented religions,’ such as the NRM of Raël, even though von Däniken himself repeatedly distanced his work from faith-based belief and emphasized its allegedly corrective function vis-à-vis religious interpretation.⁶ Rather than labeling his work as ‘religious,’ my approach places it within a field of tensions that include religious themes and institutions as well as mainstream academic actors.

A second and more dominant scholarly reception frames von Däniken primarily as a pseudoscientist, positioning his work in opposition to established academic archaeology, history, and the natural sciences. From this perspective, his writings exemplify a genre of popular knowledge production that adopts the rhetoric, aesthetics, and selective citation practices of science while rejecting its methodological constraints (Pössel 2000, 311–12; Hammer 2001, 201–330). Critics have pointed to his speculative reasoning, reliance on anomalous evidence, and rhetorical appeals to the imagination as markers of epistemic deviance rather than innovation. Within this framework, von Däniken is often treated as emblematic of a broader problem: the popularization of ‘rejected knowledge’ that challenges academic authority while remaining highly successful in the mass media.⁷

⁶My interlocutors struggled with this interpretation, especially after reading Jonas Richter’s (2017) work. Note, however, that academic definitions of religion are often much wider than the implicit notions of (institutionalized) religion my interlocutors use.

⁷Wouter Hanegraaff (2013, 221) speaks of a repertoire of rejected knowledge, including so-called ‘occult’ practices, as a point of differentiation and demarcation for mainstream academic practice. Michael Barkun (2003, 23) built upon this notion to discuss a broader intellectual universe into which conspiratory and esoteric ideas and practices were classed together. Few academic discussions of stigmatized and rejected knowledge, however, discuss in-depth the more popular alternative histories from the 1970 to 1990s.

Scholarship adopting this view tends to emphasize boundary work (i.e., demarcating the limits of proper science, Gieryn 1983; 1999; González 2016), using von Däniken as a foil against which scientific norms of evidence, peer review, and methodological rigor are reaffirmed, in a manner resembling the Velikovsky controversy in the 1950s (Heermann 1983; Fritze 2009, 201–10; on Velikovsky's *Worlds in Collision*, see Godin 2012). Some scholars take this a step further and denounce him as a 'fraud' who spreads racist ideas about the past (Bond 2018; Feder 2020; Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2014).

More recently, von Däniken has increasingly been discussed in relation to conspiracy thinking, though this categorization remains contested and historically uneven (Robertson 2022). Early assessments generally note his skepticism of academic institutions, without framing it as conspiratorial in a strict sense. Over time, however – particularly in later publications and interviews – his growing emphasis on deliberate suppression, media silence, and governmental secrecy has prompted scholars to situate his work closer to conspiracy discourse. In this interpretation, von Däniken's narratives are read as part of a wider cultural shift toward distrust in institutions and elite knowledge producers, especially in relation to UFOs and extraterrestrial life (von Däniken 2015, 131; 2020, 35). Importantly, scholarship has stressed that this conspiratorial framing does not uniformly characterize his entire oeuvre but emerges gradually, shaped by changing media environments and public debates.

These differentiated perspectives based on boundary-demarcation and academic othering complicate retrospective classifications and raise questions about how von Däniken is remembered in journalistic accounts: whether as a religious myth-maker, a pseudoscientific provocateur, a conspiracy thinker, or – as is often the case – a fluid combination of all three.

Corpus collection and methodology

In the weeks after von Däniken's departure, I continued to follow the media to find out how he was remembered. For this article, I collected all obituaries in German and English newspapers via the Lexis Nexis database, Swissdox, Factiva, and Europresse (searching for Erich von Däniken in articles published in the last week[s]) and via additional Google searches. Although this selection is not exhaustive, it includes almost all obituaries and related articles from the main newspapers published in the weeks after his death (see Appendix 1 online for the corpus of newspapers and online news portals). Additional results from individual websites and YouTube videos were stored but not analyzed in depth. A first selection of sources took place in the week of January 12, 2026. A second selection round took place in the week of January 19. Although some articles appeared later – most notably a French report from an International Raëlian Movement conference, noting the tribute paid to von Däniken⁸ – these were excluded from my analysis.

Following the contours of a mixed-method qualitative content analysis (Badzinski, Woods, and Nelson 2022; Mayring 2022), I analyzed the corpus with the software

⁸Ange Hourade, 'Religion – Les raéliens appellent à l'union des religions à l'arrivée des Élohim,' Fratmat.info, February 6, 2026, <https://www.fratmat.info/article/2639862/societe/religions/religion-les-raeliens-appellent-a-lunion-des-religions-a-larrivee-des-elohim>.

MAXQDA. This provided both statistical indications (e.g., a frequency analysis of keywords) and hermeneutical content analysis, because I am interested in the labeling and cultural boundary work occurring in the obituaries, especially in light of the – often harsh – academic criticism (Perreault, Tandoc, and Caberlon 2025). The analysis followed four basic steps: (1) a pre-defined keyword frequency analysis; (2) a keyword frequency analysis with in-context analysis; (3) an interpretative analysis; (4) a brief comparative analysis with French and Dutch obituaries. Apart from these steps in textual analysis, I contacted 10 journalists responsible for German- and English-language obituaries, asking them informally about their process of writing the obituary. Their answers and background information are included – where necessary explicitly – in anonymized form.

First, I ran a focused analysis on selected keywords in the various language groups to approach the core themes found in von Däniken's self-presentation and the academic criticism and representation. The first set of keywords focused on the content of his theories (Egypt, pyramids, Nasca, Mayas, Incas, Easter Island, Stonehenge, and Ezechiel as examples of his biblical reasoning). The second set of keywords highlighted polemical labels (pseudoscience, conspiracy theories, esotericism, and variations on the label 'religion'). Here, I also looked for references to his time in prison, using a variety of keywords related to 'doing jail time.' The third set of keywords aimed at von Däniken's self-perception (highlighting his journeys, Mystery Park, the role of the A.A.S. and the 'EvD Stiftung' as his institutional legacy). These keywords were quantified in terms of the number of documents including these phrases, which were subsequently cross-checked with related spellings and words.

I used this three-part, keyword-based statistical analysis as a pragmatic tool to provide an initial overview of the 181 newspaper obituaries. This methodology is very well suited for a broad analysis, for example showing topic clusters (e.g., 'Easter Island' appears in 15% of English obits but in only 1% of German ones), detecting duplicated news agency obituaries (the *Bild* items), and pointing to outliers worthy of a close reading (the Roth obituaries). The main risk of this keyword-focused methodology, however, is that it can easily miss indirect wording or rhetorical framing (e.g., the *New York Times*'s obituary implies appropriation without using the word 'plagiarism'), fails to incorporate implicit meaning, such as understatements and sarcasm, and removes individual observations from the larger journalistic argument (cf. drawbacks described in Mayring 2022, 14–15). To mitigate these risks, I ran a MAXQDA keyword-in-context analysis, showing how the words were used within the specific obituaries.

Through a close reading of selected articles, moreover, I aimed for limited triangulation, removing false positives or negatives from the statistical analysis. This was relevant for detecting where and how the obituaries spoke about von Däniken's own faith, as these observations were phrased very differently throughout the corpus. A controlled analysis of the co-location of words and a weighted evaluation of phrases taken from news agency obituaries might have increased statistical evaluation, but I deemed this inappropriate for a corpus of this size (Elwert 2022). To reduce the risk of reproducing pre-established expectations, I ran a second, open analysis to identify the most frequently used words in the obituaries, showing the baseline of common themes outside the set frameworks of expectation. Third, I read the articles for context and tone to add a more qualitative layer of interpretation (Brummett 2018). In this stage, I could

also distinguish between obituaries using particular phrases as adjectives and those using the keywords in more elaborate narratives. Fourth, I analyzed a small number of Dutch- and French-language obituaries according to the same procedure to contrast and contextualize findings in the German and English newspaper articles.⁹ Such cross-linguistic comparison is necessarily limited, as linguistic and cultural specificities have to be taken into account. The keyword *Grenzwissenschaftler* was included in the analysis of the German obituaries, even though it has no common English, Dutch, or French equivalent. Likewise, the German term *Parawissenschaft* is not equivalent to the more specific English ‘pseudoscience.’ Where relevant, I will provide the original-language phrases in parentheses and footnotes.

The corpus of German-language newspaper articles and obituaries comprised 142 items (31 Swiss, 101 German, 8 Austrian, and 2 Luxembourgish). These articles also included those from 25 newspapers that published multiple contributions, often following a similar pattern: short notices or front-page mentions were released initially, followed by longer articles at a later stage, or brief reports appeared, supplemented by more extensive coverage the next day. The corpus also included 14 identical short articles distributed by the Bild Deutschland group across various regional newspapers. This repetition slightly distorts the quantitative analysis, as these articles uniformly employ labels such as *Alien-Jäger* and *UFO-Forscher*. A comparable effect is observable in the nine identical articles authored by Hans Peter Roth, which adopt a more positive tone by calling von Däniken ‘a driven one’ (Getriebene). To increase variation within the corpus, the analysis additionally incorporated an online article published by the Reformed Churches in Zürich (www.ref.ch) and the sole contribution from a local Catholic media outlet (at www.kath.ch).

The selection of English-language articles and obituaries included 39 items from large British, American, and Australian newspapers and news outlets such as *The Times* (UK), *Los Angeles Times* (USA), *Canberra Times* (Australia), ABC News (USA), *The New York Times* (USA), and *The Washington Times* (USA), but also from sources from other regions of the world, including *Hürriyet Daily News* (Turkey), *Japan Today*, and *The Hindu*. Not only did my search turn up fewer results than the German-language corpus, but it also did not find obituaries in some of the other well-known newspapers (like the *Washington Post*). Moreover, the selection did not display the same pattern as the German-language newspapers, which reported about von Däniken in several articles in the same week.

The small selection of Dutch (8 items) and French (7 items) obituaries comprised the totality of formalized engagement in newspapers and online news portals in the two weeks after Erich von Däniken’s departure, as far as I could see. This small number of obituaries, however, suffices for comparing and contextualizing the German- and English-language corpus.

Newspaper obituaries of Erich von Däniken

(Inter)national news agencies

Since most newspapers work with obituaries from language-specific newspaper agencies, many obituaries resemble each other word-for-word. I identified five news agencies

⁹Interestingly, I know of no research into pseudo-archaeology or alternative histories that takes cultural and linguistic differences into account in its explanations.

publishing obituaries: the German DPA, its international equivalent, the Swiss (German-language) SDA Keystone, Associated Press International, and Reuters (see Table 1; on the role of news agencies and their journalists and procedures, see Adams 2022). Except for the abbreviated English DPA International obituary, all obituaries are about the same length (640–727 words). Despite this similarity, they have major differences in tone and focus. Reuters and AP present many more ‘negative’ aspects of von Däniken’s legacy, while DPA (to a certain extent) and DPA International leave controversial moments unaddressed – presumably because the controversies about von Däniken’s career are best known in the German-speaking world.

In DPA’s obituary, von Däniken is described as a bestselling author (einer der erfolgreichsten Autoren der Welt) who received massive critique (als hoffnungsloser Spinner verhöhnt), without detailing who uttered this criticism and why. In fact, the prominence of religious themes and sexuality creates the impression that the criticism came from religious institutions. DPA’s emphasis on artificial insemination by aliens and von Däniken’s speculation about aliens’ reproductive organs is a remarkable choice that immediately distinguishes all other newspaper articles drawing on it.¹⁰ From a comparative perspective, moreover, it is noteworthy that only SDA and Reuters mention UFOs, as the theme appears more prominently in von Däniken’s work. A focus on controversy is also apparent, for example in the short accounts of von Däniken’s Mystery Park, an entertainment park in Interlaken (Switzerland) established in 2003 and focused on the extraterrestrial influence on world history. It is brought up only to mention its quick demise (in 2006;

Table 1. Short overview of themes addressed in the news agency obituaries in German and English.

Category Language	DPA German	DPA International English	SDA Keystone German	Reuters English	AP English
Words	653	248	678	640	727
Overall tone positive/negative +/- ^a	+/-	+	-	-	-
Bestseller status	x	x	x	x	x
First book	x	x	x	x	x
Egypt and pyramids	x	x		x	x
Sexuality of aliens	x	x			
Bible (Ezechiel passage)	x	x			
Belief in God	x				
Exploration journeys		x			x
UFOs			x	x	
Prediction of return aliens	x			x	x
Financial trouble			x	x	x
Prison sentence				x	x
Youth and upbringing			x		x
Former jobs	x	x	x	x	x
Criticism (pseudoscience)	x		x	x	x
Mystery Park			x	x	x
Archive	x				
A.A.S. and the EvD foundation	x		x		x

^aDefined through a rough comparison of terminology (phrases such as ‘pseudoscience,’ ‘fraud,’ or ‘conspiracy thinker’) and adjectives (no negative adjectives in DPA International, while AP employs phrases such as ‘troubled’ relationship with money, ‘paranormal’ passion, ‘damning’ accolade, and ‘fabricated’ evidence). A MAXQDA Sentiment analysis did not yield useful results.

¹⁰One reason for this choice may have been the journalistic strategy to engage with his work online, rather than with his book-length material.

AP: ‘its man-made pyramids and otherworldly domes rotting as tourists prefer ...’), instead of – for example – to describe its immense fundraising success.

The Swiss SDA Keystone obituary includes several features that are not mentioned by the other new agencies. Keystone reports about von Däniken’s success by mentioning his honorary doctorate and citizenship. They contextualize him as the best-known spokesperson of the Paleo-Astronautic (*Prä-Astronautik*), describe the very recent sale of Mystery Park, and mention his Twitter activity (thereby placing him in a politically right/conspiracy corner). The AP obituary contextualizes von Däniken’s work in the space age of the 1960s and 1970s and refers to his impact on 1990s television shows such as *The X Files*. It strongly emphasizes scientific criticism on his work and accounts of his early financial fraud and prison sentence(s). In this contextualization, it also describes his work as ‘pioneering the use of video and multimedia to reach out to an ever-larger audience hungry for a different account of history.’ Reuters shares many of AP’s critical – almost negative – characterizations but stresses that von Däniken distanced himself from religious and esoteric ambitions, citing his desire to debunk religious and scientific ‘humbugs.’ This obituary most explicitly describes his work’s tension with academic knowledge claims, as it explicitly states that scholars dismissed von Däniken’s theories as ‘pseudoscience,’ a phrase that does not occur in the other news agency obituaries. SDA Keystone connects him to *Parawissenschaft* (a slightly broader category than the English ‘pseudoscience,’ also including esoteric knowledge-making) and calls him a ‘hobbyforscher,’ and AP speaks of the ‘scorn from the scientific community.’ DPA, on the other hand, does not explicitly mention academic or scientific criticism – apart from the more general rejection.

German-language newspapers

A focused keyword analysis of the German-language obituaries shows that von Däniken is primarily remembered through – and because of – his books, with only occasional references to his lectures, videos, and Mystery Park but frequent mentions of his institutional activities (see Table 2; the keywords are listed in the online appendix). All obituaries mention his status as a bestselling author. In terms of thematic content, they summarize his ideas about the influence of extraterrestrials on the humans past, although they do not consistently provide more detailed explanations of his arguments for such interactions. More than half of the obituaries and articles mention the pyramids and/or Egypt as illustrative examples, while around 44% refer to von Däniken’s UFO-based interpretation of the biblical passage describing Ezekiel’s vision of God (Ezech. 1:1–28; von Däniken 1968, 54–56; 1972 [1969], 143; 1977, 312–13; etc.). By contrast, very few obituaries refer to other sites or objects that feature prominently in his alternative histories, such as the Nasca lines. Apart from the function of the genre, which limits the memory-making to basic facts, the obituary journalists presumed a certain general knowledge of von Däniken’s theses within a Swiss and German context.

What is recurring, however, is the theme of religion and faith, particularly von Däniken’s relationship with the Catholicism of his youth: About 29% of obituaries address his belief in God. In the *Luxemburger Wort*, for example, an earlier interview is cited in which he describes himself as a ‘deeply religious man,’ ‘believes in God, but not in a God who reveals himself “with thunder and stench”’ (tiefgläubigen Menschen ... der

Table 2. Overview of articles mentioning a particular topic in percentage of the total German-language-based corpus (absolute numbers are included in the appendix).

Selected keywords and topics	German
Pyramids	63%
Egypt	62%
A.A.S. and foundation	48%
Ezechiel	44%
His own faith in God (various keywords)	29%
Journeys	27%
Mystery Park	19%
Prison sentence (various keywords)	13%
Nasca	11%
Pseudoscience	8%
Conspiracy theories (various keywords)	7%
Esotericism (various keywords)	6%
Incas	4%
Mayas	3%
Stonehenge	1%
Easter Island	1%
Plagiarism	1%
Grenzwissenschaft	0%

zwar an Gott glaube, nicht aber an einen Gott, der sich ‘mit Getöse und Gestank’ offenbare). Mostly, however, the German obituaries repeat DPA’s framing, in which von Däniken places God in his own worldview: ‘I believe in God ... even though I don’t know what God is. I call him the Great Spirit of the Universe’ (Auch Gott hatte in seinem Weltbild Platz: ‘Ich glaube an Gott,’ sagte er 2021 auf seinem YouTube-Kanal. ‘Auch wenn ich nicht weiß, was Gott ist. Ich nenne ihn den großen Geist des Universums.’). The only German-language newspaper that adopted von Däniken’s strong emphasis on not having founded a religion or esoteric sect was *Blick* (on January 12). It states that von Däniken could have started a ‘lucrative New-Age-Religion,’ like the founder of the Raël community, but did not do so.¹¹ None of the obituaries addressed his early visionary experiences (referred to as ‘Espen’ in early biographies, see Richter 2017, 249–58), or any other practices that academics would include in their definitions of religion (see the critical discussion in Schilbrack 2024).

Although it is difficult to assess the overall tone of the obituaries – which, due to their genre conventions, are rarely overtly negative – it is nevertheless noteworthy that only some of the German-language obituaries mention von Däniken’s prison sentence explicitly, whereas many more refer to his international travels. In fact, no fewer than 19 articles use the phrase ‘adventurous journeys,’ reproducing wording from the DPA international obituary. In doing so, these obituaries implicitly adopt elements of von Däniken’s self-representation as an explorer and leave aside a contested episode of his life.

Among the most common accusations and negative labels employed in academic reflections, terms such as ‘pseudoscience’ and ‘Parawissenschaft’ appear only occasionally in the newspaper corpus, each occurring in 11 obituaries.¹² While many obituaries

¹¹Obituary references to religion have been traced via keywords like ‘religion’ and ‘faith’ as these provide the main journalistic perspective on contemporary Swiss religiosity. Individual reading of the obituaries, moreover, has led to the inclusion of obituaries addressing religious practices like prayer. I have excluded explicit references to esotericism from this category.

¹²*Der Bund* (January 12), *Basler Zeitung*, and *Tages Anzeiger* (January 12) all published the same overview of what other media stated about von Däniken’s departure. They mention how Carl Sagan criticized von Däniken ‘without denouncing [this line of scholarship] as pseudoscience.’

acknowledge a general tension between von Däniken's alternative histories and mainstream science, only a small number examine this tension in greater detail. *Der Standard* (Austria) stands out as the sole outlet to publish an extensive academic critique of von Däniken's theses, including brief responses from a professor of Egyptology, an archaeologist, a geophysicist, and scholar of religion Jonas Richter, each addressing different aspects of his ideas and public statements.¹³ Such detailed attention for the content of the controversies surrounding von Däniken's work is otherwise absent in the newspaper obituaries.

A critical trend is also visible in the Swiss public broadcaster *SRF*, which published a full follow-up article on 'Pseudowissenschaft' on January 13, explicitly linking scientists' designation of von Däniken as a 'pseudo-researcher' to the broader question of the societal appeal of science skepticism. Other outlets adopt more evaluative framings without including elaborate academic responses. The online portal *Blue News* (republished by *Persönlich.com*) characterizes von Däniken's work as a 'mixture of pseudoscience and entertainment' (*Mischung aus Pseudowissenschaft und Unterhaltung*), while *WOZ* emphasizes that his theses were not merely 'contested' but 'outrageous' (*hanebüchen*), citing another newspaper's description of his books as 'fairy tales for adults.' The opposite opinion is expressed in the *Bild* obituary, which frames the relationship between von Däniken and science as experiencing declining tension over time and portrays him as a 'controversial pioneer of modern science' (*umstrittener Vordenker heutiger Wissenschaft*) before listing several academics who study aliens and UFOs as serious research topics.¹⁴

In my conversations with former co-workers of von Däniken, they repeatedly described accusations related to racism and conspiracy theories as the most hurtful and, in their view, most 'false.' Against this background, it is noteworthy that only a single German obituary or related article refers explicitly to race or racism, while just 10 of the 142 obituaries and articles mention conspiracy theories. These latter references largely draw on an earlier article by Daniel Ryser (2021) in *Die Zeit*, in which von Däniken is described as the 'father of conspiracy narratives' and an 'old master' who paved the way for contemporary conspiracy culture. *Der Standard* adopts this framework, writing that 'Däniken's outsider attitude toward "conventional wisdom" has survived for decades as a set piece for conspiracy theories.'¹⁵

The Reformed and Catholic news coverage following Erich von Däniken's death differs markedly in tone and emphasis. The Catholic online news article includes an interview with a local church representative who is (distantly) related to von Däniken. This contribution centers on an earlier conversation between the two, in which they explored perceived similarities between the Catholic faith and von Däniken's views (who is referred to as 'Zukunftsforscher'). The article explicitly raises the question, 'But weren't his aliens indirectly just another form of God?,' and concludes that 'neither of the Dänikens could or can objectively prove their theories of

¹³Lukas Kapeller, 'Aliens im Altertum: Was steckte hinter den Thesen des verstorbenen Erich von Däniken?,' *Der Standard*, January 14, 2026.

¹⁴It mentions prof. dr. Hakan Kayal, who was in the news just weeks ago, and prof. dr. Avi Loeb, who is listed by name in the official A.A.S. obituary on the website.

¹⁵'Dänikens Außenseiter-Attitüde gegen die "Schulweisheit" hat als Versatzstück für Verschwörungstheorien hingegen die Jahrzehnte überdauert.' *Der Standard*, January 14.

belief.¹⁶ Notably, the article avoids any critical assessment, apart from a brief and matter-of-fact reference to the closure of Mystery Park due to financial difficulties. By contrast, the Reformed online news item closely follows the SDA news agency obituary, adding little original framing beyond the designation ‘controversial god researcher’ (umstrittener Götterforscher), a term that appears to echo the Swiss *Tages-Anzeiger* coverage from the previous day.

A wholly other representation of von Däniken is found in a set of nine identical articles by journalist and biographer Hans Peter Roth entitled ‘The Driven One Has Set Off on His Next Journey’ (Getriebener ist zur nächsten Reise aufgebrochen).¹⁷ He describes von Däniken as the ‘most widely read non-fiction author on Earth’ (meistgelesener irdischer Sachbuchautor), the ‘most successful Swiss author and the best-selling non-fiction writer worldwide’ (der erfolgreichste Schweizer Buchautor und der meistverkaufte Sachbuchautor der Welt), and a ‘driven figure’ (der Getriebene). He also highlights his narrative skills, referring to von Däniken as ‘a gifted storyteller and entertainer with a vivid imagination’ (ein begnadeter Erzähler und Entertainer mit blühender Fantasie), simply calling him a ‘researcher of extraterrestrials’ (Außerirdischenforscher). Roth, himself a sympathizer who wrote the 2025 ‘authorized biography’ published in Ancient Mail Verlag,¹⁸ does not shy away from difficult themes, starting with von Däniken receiving an Austrian negative award (‘Goldenes Brett vorm Kopf’) and his humorous response to it. He only briefly addresses financial difficulties – including the failure of Mystery Park – and accusations of fraud and plagiarism, which he frames as examples of ‘personal and professional setbacks’ that were endured and ultimately overcome. He mentions critical reactions in the media on two occasions, describing critics as individuals who ‘laughed’ at him, allegedly motivated in part by ‘envy and resentment.’ He acknowledges scientific criticism but largely deflects it by referring to von Däniken’s ‘restless scholarly zeal and meticulous attention to detail’ (rastlosem Forscherfeuer und mit Akribie Puzzleteile für seine Thesen zusammen). Moreover, he characterizes such criticism as having frequently targeted von Däniken personally and ‘not infrequently resorted to below-the-belt tactics’ (zielten aber oft auch auf die Person Erich von Däniken und nicht selten unter die Gürtellinie). He also mentions von Däniken’s prison sentence, yet with the important contextualization – largely absent from other obituaries – that it was widely regarded as a scandal and revoked in 1982.¹⁹ Taken together, Roth appears to construct an image of von Däniken as an authentic researcher who persevered in the face of considerable adversity. Significantly, the obituary concludes

¹⁶‘Doch waren seine Aliens nicht indirekt nur einfach eine andere Form von Gott?’ ‘Beide von Dänikens können und konnten also ihre Glaubenstheorien nicht objektiv beweisen.’ Wolfgang Holz, ‘Erich von Däniken: Ein bibelfester, gottesgläubiger Technologe,’ Kath.ch, January 12, 2026, <https://www.kath.ch/newsd/erich-von-daeniken-ich-habe-meinen-gott-nie-verloren/> (accessed February 2026).

¹⁷*Basler Zeitung, Zürcher Unterländer, Der Bund (2x), Der Landbote, Berner Zeitung, Berner Oberländer, Tages-Anzeiger, Thuner Tagblatt.*

¹⁸This printing house is focused on publishing books on the ‘mysteries of archaeology and the human past’ as well as ‘unexplained phenomena.’ The tone and focus of the biography position it closer to traditional hagiographical accounts focused on saints overcoming major obstacles.

¹⁹This detail appears otherwise only in the SRF obituary of January 12, which includes an interview with Roth, who added that ‘such incidents never deterred him from his research’ (Solche Vorkommnisse haben ihn nie von seiner Forschung abgebracht.). Matthias Strasser, ‘Zum Tod von Erich von Däniken: Die Ausserirdischen liessen ihn nicht mehr los,’ SRF, January 12, 2026, <https://www.srf.ch/news/schweiz/zum-tod-von-erich-von-daeniken-die-ausserirdischen-liessen-ihn-nicht-mehr-los> (accessed February 2026).

with a quotation from von Däniken himself, in which he articulates his ambition to change the prevailing ‘Zeitgeist.’

A general analysis of frequently used words conveys an overall unremarkable impression. In 96% of the articles, von Däniken is referred to as the Swiss author of books, and this is connected with riddles (Rätsel, 56%), God (63%), extraterrestrials (68%), the past (67%), and astronauts (57%; also, min. 28% mention the term ‘Astronautengöttern’). Central themes of his works that are mentioned include pyramids (63%; Cheops Pyramid 36%), Egypt (62%), stars (43%), reproductive organs of aliens (see DPA obituary above, 45%), and cave paintings (25%). An interesting outlier is found in the *Bild* articles, which include an image of Japanese statuettes. There are remarkably few references to UFOs (5%), although ‘space ship’ is mentioned in 42% of the articles, albeit in the context of a biblical story. Biblical themes include Sinai (45%), Ezechiel (43%), and Moses and the Ark of the Covenant (33%). This emphasis on Christian themes is also visible in the frequent references to ‘church,’ in 33% of the articles, while science is mentioned in only about 20%. In 34 articles, von Däniken’s is placed along other ‘world explainers’ (Welterklärer, going back to the DPA news agency), while a handful of obituaries use designators such as ‘UFO-Spinner’ or ‘Alien-Theoretiker.’ Clearly negative, also, is the frequently repeated remark that people saw von Däniken as a crazy person (‘spinner,’ following a sentence in the DPA news message, in 35% of the obituaries), while 45% brings him into connection with entertainment. *Tages-Anzeiger*, for example, states that ‘although Erich von Däniken’s views were rejected by the scientific community, he shaped decades of popular culture’.²⁰

English-language newspapers

The pattern of the English-language obituaries differs from that of the German-language obituaries and articles. Von Däniken’s time in prison, for example, is almost always mentioned, while his own religious convictions and connection to the church and biblical themes (such as the vision of Ezechiel) are less frequently discussed (see Table 3). Esotericism is mentioned in five articles and three times in the Reuters news agency piece, which stresses that von Däniken did not see himself as ‘esoteric’ but rather hoped to debunk religious and scientific ‘humbugs.’ The exception is found in *The Times* (January 16), which describes the context of von Däniken’s first books as ‘the first moon landing was only a year away and the hippy counterculture of the time was in thrall to esoteric and mystical theories of all kinds, from UFOs to ley lines.’²¹ The few references to God, moreover, do not deal with von Däniken’s own Catholic convictions but with von Däniken’s predicted ‘god shock, a total catastrophe in religion and science,’ which would occur when the extraterrestrials return (also derived from Reuters).²²

²⁰Olivier Leu, ‘Prophet der Aliengötter’: So berichtet die Welt über von Dänikens Tod.» *Tagesanzeiger*, January 12, 2026, <https://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/erich-von-daeniken-pionier-der-prae-astronautik-verstorben-941811288247> (accessed June 2026).

²¹‘Erich von Däniken Obituary: Author Who Argued Aliens Visited Ancient Earth,’ *The Times*, January 16, 2026, <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/obituaries/article/erich-von-daniken-obituary-death-author-aliens-earth-fpqfjrx29> (accessed February 2026).

²²Religion related themes have been identified through a search for keywords like ‘God,’ ‘faith,’ ‘church,’ and ‘religion’. Reading through the corpus in a second stage, has let to the inclusion of some other obituaries, but journalistic perspectives on religion remain less inclusive as more profound academic reflections on the concept (see Platvoet and

Table 3. Overview of articles mentioning a particular topic in percentages of the total English-language corpus (absolute numbers are included in the online appendix).

Selected keywords and topics	English
Pseudoscience (various keywords)	23%
Prison sentence (various keywords)	82%
Journeys (incl. travel)	67%
Mystery Park (incl. theme park, World of Mysteries)	69%
Esotericism (various keywords)	13%
His own faith in God (various keywords)	0%
Conspiracy theories (various keywords)	13%
Nasca (various spellings)	15%
Ezechiel	10%
Pyramids	82%
Egypt	92%
Incas	15%
Stonehenge	10%
Mayas	85%
Easter Island	15%
A.A.S. and EvD foundation	3%
Plagiarism (various keywords, incl. fraud)	0%
Grenzwissenschaft	0%

Von Däniken’s theories are labeled ‘pseudoscience’ in nine English-language obituaries, interestingly mostly those in newspapers located outside Europe and the US. *The Hindu*, *Channel Asia*, and *Strait Times* echo Reuters by stressing that academics ‘wrote books refuting his theories, criticizing him as a purveyor of some of the more fantastical notions of pseudoscience.’ *CE Noticias Financieras English* (January 12) stresses that some ‘saw him as a carnival charlatan, a pseudoscientist, a man who tailored his findings or encounters to fit into a narrative that undoubtedly helped him gain recognition and money.’ They add that his books are considered ‘examples of pseudoscience and pseudohistory.’ Such awareness of conflicting knowledge claims may be explained in part by the prominence of alternative historical narratives in, for example, Indian politics (Robertson 2024, 106–11), while *Noticias Financieras* is well read in the Latin American countries that feature prominently in von Däniken’s books. *The Daily Telegraph* (January 14) took a similar critical approach, stating in the title: ‘How One Man’s Belief in Ancient Aliens Shaped Our Nasty, Post-Truth World.’ It describes his books as a ‘cocktail of occultism and alien talk’ and von Däniken as ‘a novelist, or a spiritualist, dressed in archaeologist’s clothes.’ Without mentioning the term ‘conspiracy theories,’ it connects him to contemporary narratives of pedophiles or satanists running the world, stating that ‘Däniken showed the shape of media to come.’²³ The same author wrote a focused article in *The Critic*, arguing that von Däniken’s ‘archeological esoterica fueled the development of modern conspiracy theory’ and should thus be credited for being the ‘pioneer, a popularizer’ whose work has shaped current ‘media figures.’²⁴

Molendijk 1999, Juschka 2023 for an exciting comparison between belief in aliens and in gods). Under ‘esotericism,’ I have only included explicit references to the label.

²³James Snell, ‘How One Man’s Belief in Ancient Aliens Shaped Our Nasty, Post-Truth World,’ *The Daily Telegraph* (London), January 14, 2026, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2026/01/13/weird-swiss-archaeologist-shaped-aliens-nasty-post-truth/> (accessed February 2026).

²⁴James Snell, ‘Erich von Däniken and the Modern Paranoid Style,’ *The Critic*, January 18, 2026, <https://thecritic.co.uk/erich-von-daniken-and-the-modern-paranoid-style/> (accessed February 2026).

A general frequency analysis of all 39 English-language obituaries shows an unremarkable first layer of description, as one would expect in this genre. Von Däniken is a Swiss book author (100%, only 16 articles mention the ‘bestseller’ status) known for ancient aliens (100%), alternative interpretations of ‘archaeology’ (77%), and being in tension with science (95%, sometimes phrased neutrally as ‘critics,’ 62%) on themes like space (85%), history (80%), and astronaut(s) (69%). About 51% of the items employ the language of the AP news agency and speak of his ‘paranormal passion.’ They differ from the German-language articles in their frequent reference to his documentaries (87%) and television series (80%), as well as his theme park Mystery Park (69%), presumably because these attracted a more international audience. Financial trouble is mentioned frequently (46%) in the context of Mystery Park. The earlier accusations of fraud (70%), moreover, are brought up in the context of his prison sentence (82%). *The Times*, for example, states: ‘von Däniken was a convicted thief, fraudster and embezzler who served two prison sentences but his greatest deception was to argue in his books that the gods of the ancient world were extraterrestrial astronauts.’²⁵

French and Dutch obituaries

The Dutch newspaper obituaries are very negative, at times even polemical against von Däniken. *Brabants Dagblad* calls him a ‘eccentric dreamer and a con artist’ (rare fantast en een oplichter) and places him in the context of ‘fake news.’ The Dutch-language magazine *Knack* goes even further and describes him as a ‘crank [morosoof] or practitioner of pseudoscience’ and a ‘global guru,’ while designating Mystery Park as ‘a pseudoscientific Bobbejaanland [MB: Belgian entertainment park, used pejoratively in a Dutch-speaking context] or a “cultural Chernobyl.”’ *NRC* says, ‘Von Däniken was a kind of New Age prophet, but he had no desire to be a cult leader; he much preferred to be part of the scientific community,’ adding that science does not work this way. *NOS* describes his ideas as ‘half-baked hypotheses and insane speculations’ that memes made fun of, while experts call his work ‘pseudoscientific nonsense’ with a ‘tunnel vision.’ *De Limburger* explains the scientific method, including a section on the use of ‘Ockham’s razor,’ used to distinguish science from ‘fabrications’ and ‘lies’ (verzinsels, lulverhaal, leugens). Remarkably, none of these articles places von Däniken in the context of conspiracy theories (albeit *Brabants Dagblad* speaks of ‘fake news’). Only *De Volkskrant* was able to return to a 2017 interview that includes different aspects, for example stressing von Däniken’s own faith in relation to his alternative historical ideas (Figure 1).

The few French-language obituaries are mostly very close to the French ASD news agency obituary, including rather unspecific references to ‘mysteries’ of the Incas, Mayas, and the Old Testament and subsequently designating von Däniken as a ‘controversial gods-specialist’ (spécialiste controversé des dieux) or ‘explorer of the gods’ (explorateur des dieux).²⁶ Even though most obituaries offer very little information about the content of his theories – some do not even mention aliens and the pyramids (RTS) – one article at Pomona.ch includes details that are otherwise excluded, like a reference to the tombstone of the Mayan king Pakal of Palenque, to Stonehenge, and to the

²⁵ ‘Erich von Däniken obituary: author who argued aliens visited ancient Earth,’ *The Times*, January 16, 2026.

²⁶ I assume that they adapted the German notion *Götterforscher*.

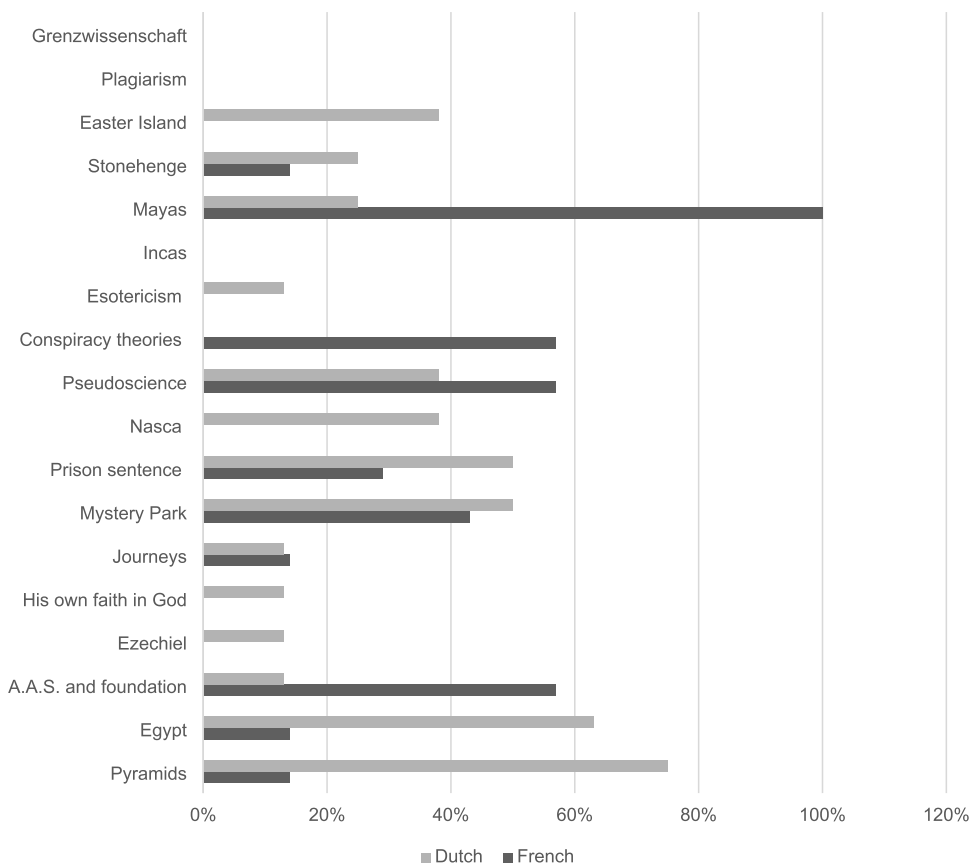


Figure 1. Themes mentioned explicitly in French and Dutch obituaries (note, however, the small corpus size).

Egyptian sphinx. This article is also specific about why people considered von Däniken a fraud: Instead of following official measurements of size and weight, ‘he simply multiplied the dimensions and weight of all kinds of monuments by 2 or 3.’²⁷ This article stands out for another reason, as it is one of the few obituaries that addresses the looming religious questions of meaning-making that interested von Däniken. It briefly addresses the question, ‘Are we really the product of chance?’ (Sommes-nous vraiment le fruit du hasard?), opening up the possibility of extraterrestrial life and thereby negating its previous negative comments about von Däniken.

Almost all French obituaries place von Däniken between ‘conspiracy theory and recognized science’ (entre théorie du complot et science reconnue), while *Watson* calls him a ‘provocative personality’ who is little known in the French-speaking part of Switzerland (presumably because he published in German). *Le Soir*, on the other hand, calls him a ‘dreamer’ and places him in the literary context of the 1960s in France, including authors such as Pauwels and Bergiers (who are often mentioned in academic

²⁷Christoph Bopp, «Nécrologie : Aliens, sexe et sens sans Dieu : pourquoi Erich von Däniken a fasciné tant de gens » *Pomona.ch*, January 11, 2026. <https://pomona.ch/fr/story/689784/aliens-sexe-et-sens-sans-dieu-pourquoi-erich-von-d%C3%A4niken-a-fascin-tant-de-gens> (accessed June 2026).

classifications of von Däniken's work), but they also mention the various plagiarism accusations (as the only newspaper obligatory in the entire corpus).

Discussion and conclusion

The official obituary of von Däniken by the A.A.S. and the editorial board of the *Sagenhafte Zeiten* is extensive and was published immediately after announcing his death.²⁸ Despite their quick communication, no single newspaper obituary used their framework to remember and commemorate von Däniken. While this might have had to do with the relatively low status of the A.A.S. – always in the shadow of its inspirator – my impression is that many newspapers and news agencies already had draft obituaries prepared. Moreover, the A.A.S.'s obituary reads very differently from all other obituaries – with the exception of Roth's personal reflections. This difference is most apparent when looking at the controversial aspects of von Däniken's life. The A.A.S. does not mention his time in prison, the accusations of fraud, and associated financial problems. Presumably, these problems are summarized in the early references to his family's support during 'personal tragedies' and 'professional setbacks and hostility.'²⁹ Its almost hagiographical tone, however, does touch on social tension. Despite the genre's positive focus, it stresses von Däniken's difficult relationship with science, explaining, for example, that he 'documented facts that can be interpreted in different ways, but which were and are real and verifiable by everyone' (dokumentierte Fakten, die man zwar unterschiedlich interpretieren kann, die jedoch real und für jeden überprüfbar waren und sind). On a more personal level, it emphasizes that von Däniken was a 'man who spoke his mind' (war ein Freund des offenen Wortes und sagte, was er dachte),³⁰ who did not shy away from correcting mistakes in the media, such as being framed as a 'UFO researcher.'

However, my analysis of German, English, French, and Dutch obituaries shows that von Däniken was – at times – remembered within a framework far from the A.A.S.'s understanding, with labels such as 'pseudoscience,' 'conspiracy theory,' and, indeed, 'UFO researcher.' Since not all of these labels derive from academic criticism, we see that cultural boundary work extends to obituaries, at times even breaking away from the saying 'de mortuis nil nisi bonum.'³¹

Comparing obituaries in different languages indicates the enormous popularity of von Däniken in the German-speaking world (Figure 2). Even in his own country, his passing is primarily memorized in German-language newspapers, with very few French-language

²⁸The seven-page obituary is structured into seven sections: It opens with a brief introduction to his childhood, followed by an account of his career as a world bestselling author, an overview of the content of his hypotheses, and a section on his private life. These are followed by a selection of characteristic quotations, excerpts from statements by others about von Däniken and his work, and, finally, a list of web links for further information; see <https://www.sagenhaftezeiten.com> and <https://evd.ch/rip/index2.html>, accessed January 2026.

²⁹'privaten Schicksalsschlägen' and 'beruflichen Rückschlägen und Anfeindungen.' Most frequently used words include God (10x), the world (8x), archaeology (6x), questions and asking questions (12x), but also, more general, myth (5x), mystery (Rätsel, 5x), time (5x), and future (5x). Amongst the less frequently mentioned words is the A.A.S. as a research foundation (Forschungsgesellschaft, 4x).

³⁰This was, for example, visible in his activity on Twitter (currently called X). Some of his tweets were reprinted in von Däniken (2024).

³¹One of the journalists who wrote an obituary of George H.W. Bush described the tension between good journalism and fairness as navigating "two types of fairness": to the subjects as well as to the reader who deserves a fuller sense of perspective[s]. Cited in Adams 2022, 1038.

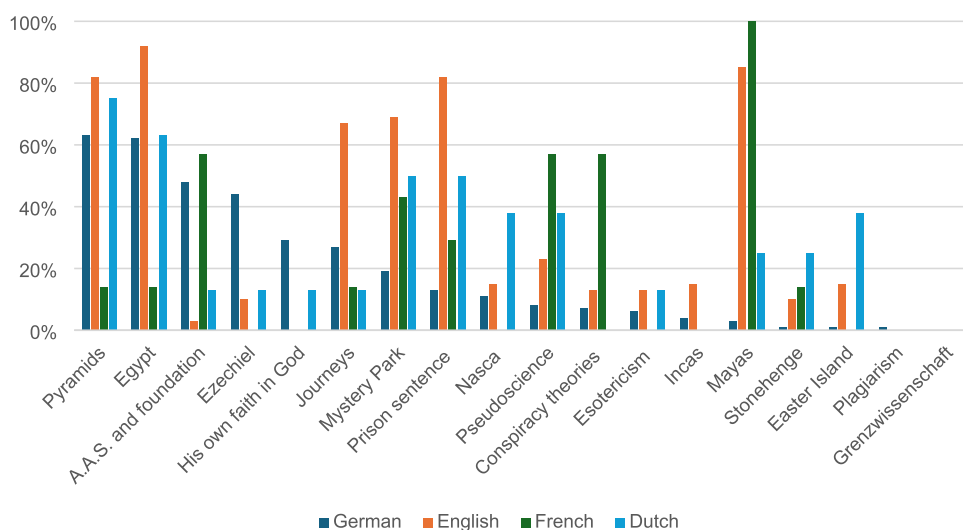


Figure 2. Visualization of main themes in German, English, French, and Dutch obituaries.

obituaries. Although von Däniken was popular in the United States during the 1980s, few American newspapers, apart from *The New York Times*, published obituaries. This difference can be explained by his cultural context and fame in the German-speaking world, but also by the context of his passing, namely the era after the Covid-19 pandemic, when concerns about perceived ‘misinformation’ and other pseudoscientific and conspiratory ideas shifted toward themes other than ancient aliens (Anton and Schink 2021).

The German-language newspaper corpus reveals a field that is both extensive in quantity and limited in interpretative breadth. The absolute number of obituaries published in local and national newspapers is (more than) 142, indicating von Däniken’s continued prominence and fame. While his death prompted a large number of obituaries and articles, a significant proportion consists of near-identical reproductions of news agency obituaries, resulting in a strong homogenization of perspectives. Overall, von Däniken is remembered as a successful author and a cultural curiosity, whose personal faith in relation to his alternative histories is discussed. Relatively few obituaries use negative labels, presumably because of the long history of alternative health practices in Switzerland, the widespread cultural familiarity with von Däniken’s work in the larger German-speaking world, and the choices made by DPA obituary journalist Christiane Oelrich. Within this corpus, however, variation does exist, ranging from markedly positive portrayals – most notably in the texts by Roth – to more critical framings that associate von Däniken with contemporary conspiracy cultures, as exemplified by the page-length article in *WOZ*. Nevertheless, explicit labeling of his work as conspiracy theories remains surprisingly infrequent. When the label does appear, it is often invoked briefly and without sustained analysis, suggesting that the association is normalized without the need to argue for it in detail. In this way, obituaries shed light on cultural blueprints that reflect society’s ‘collective values,’ without spelling them out (Albert, Anthony, and Lateef 2016, 455).

English-language obituaries take the gloves off. Without any problem, they associate von Däniken in discussions with pseudoscience and a cultural affinity for the

‘paranormal.’ The *Los Angeles Times* (January 16), for example, describes his theories as bringing him ‘fame among paranormal enthusiasts and scorn from the scientific community,’ while continuing to cite a mainstream anthropologist calling his work ‘a grotesque parody of scientific inquiry devoid of any intellectual credibility.’ The *New York Times* (January 11) cites an anonymous anthropologist who calls his work ‘a warped parody of reasoning.’ Von Däniken’s prison sentence, moreover, is almost always mentioned. This tendency – also visible in Dutch obituaries – may be explained in light of the cultural distance from von Däniken’s Swiss and German audience and by the growing negative perception of ‘alternative facts’ after the Covid-19 pandemic (for example seen in the prominent alarmist tone used in anti-conspiracy organizations and research, see Butter 2025). Influential academic boundary-work demarcating science from the paranormal and other ‘alternative’ historical approaches may also have affected this framing (Feder 2020; Rafferty 2023; but also YouTube Channels like ‘Archaeology with Flint Dibble’).

One narrative theme related to conspiracy theories as an interpretative framework stands out, albeit not statistically. Six of 181 obituaries explicitly frame von Däniken as the ‘predecessor of’ or ‘pave the way for’ contemporary conspiracy theories. In *Kurier* (January 11), he is described as the man who inspired pop culture and conspiracy theorists equally. *WOZ* more explicitly states that conspiracy theories in the 1990s ‘were still enjoyable’ (als diese noch Spass machten) and sketches the tension between the memory of von Däniken as a happy storyteller and the current conspiracy theorists who followed his lead. *ND* describes him as the ‘father of conspiracy theories,’ while *Der Standard* (January 11) portrays him as the one who paved the way for conspiracy theories (Wegbereiter von Verschwörungstheorien), offering a template for modern conspiracy theories (Vorlage für moderne Verschwörungstheorien). *Der Spiegel* (January 11) is more explicit and refers to current US conspiracy theorists, such as the health secretary Robert F. Kennedy, stating that reality has overtaken von Däniken (Ganz am Ende scheint der Zeitgeist Däniken nicht nur ein-, sondern sogar überholt zu haben). Likewise, *The Critic* stresses that he shaped a worldwide new ‘paranoid style,’ stating, ‘His archaeological esoterica fuelled the development of modern conspiracy theory.’ From this perspective, von Däniken is responsible for the dangers of contemporary conspiracy theories, since he inspired them, while he is simultaneously distanced from these contemporary evils, as he is marked as relatively innocent in comparison. More importantly, these obituaries make his legacy explicit, while most other obituaries do not fulfill this expectation of the genre, leaving his impact on the contemporary world undiscussed.

Across the corpus, several absences are particularly striking. Religious belief is mentioned only occasionally and primarily as a point of perceived contradiction – how von Däniken could hold Christian beliefs while advancing extraterrestrial interpretations of biblical narratives – rather than as a substantive analytical category. References to pseudoscience appear somewhat more frequently in French and Dutch obituaries (4 and 11 times, even though the corpus is very small), with some German obituaries mentioning it (11 times) or labeling his approach a parascience (11 times). Eight obituaries refer to conspiracy theories and pseudoscience as interpretative categories, albeit mostly just in passing. The exceptions include *The Critic* in English and *Der Standard*, *Persönlich.com*, and *Blue News* (all from January 11). Yet, in most cases, the criticism remains vague and unspecific, gesturing toward a general tension with ‘science’ rather

than addressing concrete methodological issues. Likewise, aspects that might complicate a positive appraisal narrative – such as von Däniken’s prison sentence, the fraud accusations, or his financial difficulties – are marginal in German obituaries but prominent in English and Dutch obituaries. Remarkably infrequent – especially when compared to the amount of specific academic criticism and ‘debunking’ – are references to the concrete sites and motifs central to von Däniken’s alternative histories, such as vimanas, Easter Island, Stonehenge, or Mesoamerican cultures, and a sustained discussion of racism, which appears only once in the entire newspaper corpus. The circle of voices narrating their experiences with von Däniken is also narrow: Apart from Roth and, to a lesser extent, Claude Cueni, individuals who worked closely with von Däniken – particularly Ramon Zürcher, his designated successor at the A.A.S. – are notably missing.³²

These patterns point to the decisive influence of news agencies on posthumous memory, not only in German-speaking Switzerland but also across national and linguistic contexts. The resulting portrayal oscillates between entertainment and epistemic risk: Von Däniken is remembered as a gifted storyteller and cultural phenomenon, while concerns about pseudoscientific reasoning are acknowledged but rarely elaborated. In this sense, academic criticism of his historical methods appears not to have ‘stuck’ in public memory, whereas controversies and contemporary sensitivities – particularly those related to the label ‘conspiracy thinking’ – resonate more clearly, even if they are not systematically explored. Like many academic theologians, historians, archaeologists, and other scholars, the obituary writers explicitly mark von Däniken’s work as outside the cultural boundaries of the mainstream. Read alongside each other, these obituaries illustrate how von Däniken’s legacy is negotiated between admiration, unease, and routinized media narratives – less through detailed critique than through processes of selective emphasis and omission. In this way, newspaper obituaries convey a culturally demarcated memory of von Däniken and his work, even though they sometimes explicitly place him within the categories of his self-understanding or the labels of his critics.

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³²Fourteen German obituaries mention Zürcher as assistant and manager, but obituaries in other languages never do. His words, as communicated in the A.A.S. obituary, do not feature anywhere. In contrast, Carl Sagan’s rejection of von Däniken’s thesis returns in 14 English obituaries (following Reuters), 2 Dutch obituaries, and 5 German obituaries.

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