

# Facing Mars Rationally

Certain topics in science are deemed "unsuitable". A form of scientific censorship arises to prevent these ideas getting out into wider circulation and challenging the current orthodoxy's accepted status quo. Yet the history of science is littered with ideas which were initially frowned upon, only to be accepted later, sometimes long after the death of their proponents.

WITHIN the next 18 months or so, NASA's Mars Global Surveyor will hopefully lay to rest what to some has been the exciting possibility that extra-terrestrial activity has been discovered on a nearby planet within our Solar System, whilst to others it is only an irritating Lowellian distraction.

The 20 year debate surrounding the so-called "Face" on Mars and attendant anomalies, has been one in which the scientific community - and the media generally - has not distinguished itself [1]. The seeming inability to confront the issue rationally without resorting to prosaic or ad hominem arguments, rather than independently evaluating the work of the many scientists [2,3,4,5] who have studied the available data, appears at best bizarre, at worst irresponsible.

This may in part be due to the associated "fringe" following which seems to have sprung up amongst the general public [6,7]. Lumping the "Face" in with "the paranormal" seems to have contributed to scientific disinterest, although the activities of some advocates of artificial origin have also been less than distinguished at times, not helping espouse an (admittedly) extremely controversial viewpoint. However one wonders what form of possible evidence of extraterrestrial activity would warrant a "sober, serious" treatment by the media. Radio signals - as favoured by the majority of the SETI community - presumably? Certainly many members of the public seemed less than gripped by the now hotly-disputed Martian microbes revealed in August 1996. Hardly surprising given the sensational way this "news" was presented in the media.

The late Professor Carl Sagan - one of the most sceptical of scientists when evaluating unorthodox claims - hoped the next generation of Mars probes "will make a special effort... to look much more closely at the pyramids and what some people call the Face and the city" [8]. Indeed Sagan had proposed a search for artificial objects in the early-1960s, as the planetary probe programme was gearing up to explore the Solar System. Yet somewhere along the line the idea of "alien artifacts" was quietly forgotten, following (apparently) fruitless examination of Mariner and Viking images.

Extraordinary claims do require ex-

traordinary evidence - to which should be added that extraordinary implications also require extraordinary efforts.

There are signs in the last few years that attitudes are becoming more open-minded. Professor Stanley V. McDaniel's meticulous research [9] has done much to show up the charade that NASA had used to attempt to discourage any serious examination of the "Face" data. McDaniel is organiser of the Society for Planetary SETI Research (SPSR), a group which exists solely to look at the possibility of artifacts on nearby planets. After all, can we be absolutely sure that extra-terrestrial visitation to Solar System bodies has not occurred in the past [10], especially when several major planets - Mercury and Pluto - have not yet been fully mapped by spacecraft? And if this visitation has occurred in the distant past, who is best qualified to examine and interpret the potential evidence today? Geologists, astronomers and image processing experts - or architects, engineers and anthropologists?

The crux of the arguments - on both sides - appears to come down to an issue of scientific methodology. Planetary scientists consider "geomorphology" to be their patch, and are thus prepared to engage in a "turf battle" in which science becomes the loser, rather than allowing others from disciplines other than geology and astronomy to trespass on their planets. Conventional radio SETI advocates, already reeling financially from funding cuts, perhaps genuinely fear that hard evidence of extraterrestrial activity discovered within our own Solar System would pose a direct threat to their *raison d'être*.

Such fears - to me at least - seem groundless. SETI methodology should be both multidisciplinary and complementary. If archaeologists monopolised archaeological digs for example, then our understanding of past history would be all the poorer! As Dr David Webb, now Vice President of SPSR, noted in 1986 "just as war is too important to be left to the generals, so science is too important to be left only to the scientists!" [11]. Intellectual

## About the Author



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Malcolm Smith was recently awarded "Highly Commended" in the Daily Telegraph's 1997 Young Science Writer of the Year competition. His entry concerned the University of Kent's Surface Science Package (SSP) on ESA's Huygens probe to Saturn's largest moon, Titan. He has been interested in space exploration for as long as he can remember and has a particular interest in Mars. He is a BIS and UKSEDS member.

cross-fertilisation benefits many disciplinary boundaries; if only we were brave enough to consider crossing them, one wonders what new discoveries could be made.

*Addendum:* On 7 December SPSR announced they had had a meeting with NASA officials and were told that photographing the entire anomaly area at high-resolution is now an "official NASA policy".

### References

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