

# EXO - ARCHAEOLOGY



Yesterday Bill (Rathje) commented on space junk. [Link]

I asked him to say more about garbage and archaeology in space.

He reminded me of something that was in a recent article of ours (Michael Shanks, William Rathje and David Platt, “[The perfume of garbage: modernity and the archaeological](#)” – last issue of the journal *Modernism/Modernity*, June 2004).



Exo-archaeology. Mars Landform or lost city? The alternate view: true believers find alien architecture everywhere on the Red Planet. The five-sided “D&M pyramid”

at 40.7 degrees N, 10 degrees W is said to be the heart of a buried Martian metropolis. The “explanation” for its irregular shape: an ancient nuclear war.

Image – James Porter. Caption from Wired August 2004

Two articles published in 2002 by archaeologists about “exo-archaeology” – the archaeology of outer space. What they addressed said a great deal about the way archaeologists and most fellow humans view garbage here on Earth.

It was something of a shock to find out that in an article entitled “The Case for Exo-Archaeology”, Vicky A. Walsh wrote that the mission of exo-archaeology was to “evaluate distant worlds for signs of intelligent life” (was this taken from a Star Trek script – Jen-Luc Picard is a keen amateur archaeologist). The author never mentioned the issue of how to identify alien garbage or, for that matter, our garbage, which is the most prolific sign of our “intelligent” life in space . . . and on Earth!

Even more unexpected was the paper by Greg Fewer, called “Towards an LSMR and MSMR (Lunar and Martian Sites & Monuments Records): Recording the Planetary Spacecraft, Landing Sites as Archaeological Monuments

of the Future” – in fact, the title says it all.

Yes, of course, let’s record landing sites for posterity. But what about the myriad threats to our future spacecraft from the voluminous hurtling junk discarded from our past ventures? And it is not just us and the Russians anymore. At the end of September 2003, Europeans launched their first unmanned spacecraft to the moon. China’s program is not far behind, and more space cowboys – and space tourists, like U.S. businessman Dennis Tito who reportedly paid the Russians \$20 million for a ride to the international space station and back in 2001 – are sure to follow.

To complicate matters further, ask yourself: What kinds of garbage have other space travelers in other parts of our galaxy and beyond discarded that are now hazards to our space travelers? If we are dedicated to continuing the exploration of space, can we continue to ignore such questions? The report from the committee that investigated the tragic Discovery burnup called for a complete revamping of the safety culture at NASA. Perhaps it is also time to look at NASA’s “garbage culture”, or lack of it.