

Erich von Däniken

Erich Anton Paul von Däniken (/ˈɛrɪk fɒn ˈdɛnɪkɪn/; German: [ˈeːrɪç fɔ̃n ˈdɛːnɪkən]; born 14 April 1935) is a Swiss author of several books which make claims about extraterrestrial influences on early human culture, including the best-selling *Chariots of the Gods?*, published in 1968. Von Däniken is one of the main figures responsible for popularizing the "paleo-contact" and ancient astronauts hypotheses.

The ideas put forth in his books are rejected by a majority of scientists and academics, who categorize his work as pseudohistory, pseudoarchaeology, and pseudoscience.^{[1][2][3]} Early in his career, he was convicted and served time for several counts of fraud or embezzlement,^[4] and wrote one of his books in prison.

Von Däniken later became a co-founder of the Archaeology, Astronautics and SETI Research Association (AAS RA). He designed Mystery Park (now known as Jungfrau Park), a theme park located in Interlaken, Switzerland, that opened in May 2003.^[5]

Erich von Däniken



Erich von Däniken in 2009

Born	Erich Anton Paul von Däniken
	14 April 1935
	Zofingen, Aargau, Switzerland

Occupation	Author
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Early life

Von Däniken was born in Zofingen, Aargau. Brought up as a Roman Catholic, he attended the Saint-Michel International Catholic School in Fribourg, Switzerland. During his time at the school he rejected the church's interpretations of the Bible and developed an interest in astronomy and the phenomenon of flying saucers.^[6] At the age of 19, he was given a four-month suspended sentence for theft.^[6] He left the school and was apprenticed to a Swiss hotelier for a time,^[7] before moving to Egypt. In December 1964, von Däniken wrote *Hatten unsere Vorfahren Besuch aus dem Weltraum?* ("Did our Ancestors have a Visit from Space?") for the German-Canadian periodical *Der Nordwesten*.^[8] While in Egypt, he was involved in a jewelry deal which resulted in a nine-month conviction for fraud and embezzlement upon his return to Switzerland.^[6]

Following his release, von Däniken became a manager of the Hotel Rosenhügel in Davos, Switzerland, during which time he wrote *Chariots of the Gods?* (German *Erinnerungen an die Zukunft*, which literally translated is "Memories of the Future"), working on the manuscript late at night after the hotel's guests had retired.^[9] The draft of the book was turned down by several publishers. Econ Verlag (now part of Ullstein Verlag) was willing to publish the book after a complete reworking by a professional author, Utz Utermann, who used the pseudonym of Wilhelm Roggersdorf. Utermann was a former *Schriftleiter* of *Völkischer Beobachter* and had been a Nazi bestselling author.^[10] The re-write of *Chariots of the Gods?* was accepted for publication early in 1967, but not printed until March 1968.^[9] Against all expectations, the book gained widespread interest and became a bestseller. Von Däniken was paid 7 percent of the book's turnover, while 3 percent went to Utermann.^[11] In 1970, *Der Spiegel* referred to the hype over Däniken as *Dänikitis*.^[12]

In November 1968 von Däniken was arrested for fraud, after falsifying hotel records and credit references in order to take out loans^[9] for \$130,000 over a period of twelve years. He used the money for foreign travel to research his book.^[6] Two years later,^[9] von Däniken was convicted for "repeated and sustained" embezzlement, fraud, and forgery, with the court ruling that the writer had been living a "playboy" lifestyle.^[13] He unsuccessfully entered a plea of nullity, on the grounds that his intentions were not malicious and that the credit institutions were at fault for failing adequately to research his references,^{[6][9][13]} and on 13 February 1970 he was sentenced to three and a half years imprisonment and was also fined 3,000 francs.^{[9][14]} He served one year of this sentence before being released.^{[6][15]}

His first book, *Chariots of the Gods?*, had been published by the time of his trial, and its sales allowed him to repay his debts and leave the hotel business. Von Däniken wrote his second book, *Gods from Outer Space*, while in prison.^{[6][13]}

Claims of alien influence on Earth

The general claim of von Däniken over several published books, starting with *Chariots of the Gods?* in 1968, is that extraterrestrials or "ancient astronauts" visited Earth and influenced early human culture. Von Däniken writes about his belief that structures such as the Egyptian pyramids, Stonehenge, and the Moai of Easter Island and artifacts from that period represent higher technological knowledge than is presumed to have existed at the times they were manufactured. He also describes ancient artwork throughout the world as containing depictions of astronauts, air and space vehicles, extraterrestrials, and complex technology. Von Däniken explains the origins of religions as reactions to contact with an alien race, and offers interpretations of sections of the Old Testament of the Bible.

Criticism

In 1966, when von Däniken was writing his first book, scientists Carl Sagan and I. S. Shklovskii wrote about the possibility of paleocontact and extraterrestrial visitation claims in one chapter of their book *Intelligent Life in the Universe*, leading author Ronald Story to speculate in his book *The Space-gods Revealed* that this may have been the genesis of von Däniken's ideas.^[16]

Many ideas from this book appeared in different form in Däniken's books.

Prior to von Däniken's work, other authors had presented ideas of extraterrestrial contacts. He has failed to credit these authors properly or at all, even when making the same claims using similar or identical evidence.^[17] The first edition of von Däniken's *Erinnerungen an die Zukunft* failed to cite Robert Charroux's *One Hundred Thousand Years of Man's Unknown History* despite making very similar claims, and publisher Econ-Verlag was forced to add Charroux in the bibliography in later editions, to avoid a possible lawsuit for plagiarism.^[18]

Logical and factual errors

That writing as careless as von Däniken's, whose principal thesis is that our ancestors were dummies, should be so popular is a sober commentary on the credulousness and despair of our times. I also hope for the continuing popularity of books like *Chariots of the Gods?* in high school and college logic courses, as object lessons in sloppy thinking. I know of no recent books so riddled with logical and factual errors as the works of von Däniken.^[19]

— Carl Sagan, Foreword to *The Space Gods Revealed*

Iron pillar of Delhi

In *Chariots of the Gods?*, von Däniken cited the Iron pillar of Delhi in India, erected approximately 402 CE, as a prime example of extraterrestrial influence due to its "unknown origins" and a complete absence of rust despite its estimated 1500 years of continuous exposure to the elements.^[20] When informed by an interviewer, in 1974, that the pillar was not in fact rust-free, and that its origin, method of construction, and relative resistance to corrosion were all well understood, von Däniken responded that he no longer believed extraterrestrials had been involved in its creation.^{[21][22]}



The iron pillar of Delhi, erected by Chandragupta II the Great

Cueva de los Tayos

In *The Gold of the Gods*, von Däniken describes an expedition that he undertook through man-made tunnels within Cueva de los Tayos, a natural cave system in Ecuador, guided by a local man named Juan Moricz. He reported seeing mounds of gold, strange statues, and a library containing metal tablets, all of which he considered to be evidence of ancient extraterrestrial visitation. A local priest, Father Crespi, stewarded a collection of the gold extraterrestrial relics, he said, with special permission from the Vatican. Moricz told *Der Spiegel* that there had been no expedition; von Däniken's descriptions came from "a long conversation", and the photos in the book had been "fiddled".^[23] During the 1974 interview, von Däniken asserted that he had indeed seen the library and the artifacts in the tunnels, but he had embellished some aspects of the story to make it more interesting. "In German we say a writer, if he is not writing pure science, is allowed to use some *dramaturgische Effekte* – some theatrical effects," he said. "And that's what I have done."^{[13][24][25]} Four years later, he admitted that he had never been inside Cueva de los Tayos, and had fabricated the entire cave adventure.^[25] A geologist found no evidence of artificial tunnels in the area.^[23] Father Crespi's gold artifacts, according to an archeologist consulted by *Der Spiegel*, were mostly brass imitations sold locally as tourist souvenirs.^[23]

"Book of Dzyan" and "Tulli Papyrus"

Samuel Rosenberg said that the Book of Dzyan, referred to by von Däniken,^[26] was "a fabrication superimposed on a gigantic hoax concocted by Madame Blavatsky." He also says that the "Tulli Papyrus", cited by von Däniken in one of his books,^[26] is probably cribbed from the Book of Ezekiel, and quoted Nolli (through Walter Ramberg, Scientific Attache at the U.S. Embassy in

Rome), then current Director of the Egyptian Section of the Vatican Museum, as "suspect[ing] that Tulli was taken in and that the papyrus is a fake."^[27] According to Richard R. Lingeman of *The New York Times*, it is likely that von Däniken obtained these references from UFO books that mentioned them as real documents.^[26]

Nazca Lines

Von Däniken brought the Nazca Lines to public prominence in *Chariots of the Gods?*^[28] with his proposal that the lines were built on instructions from extraterrestrial beings as airfields for their spaceships.^[29] In his 1998 book *Arrival of The Gods*, he added that some of the pictures depicted extraterrestrials.^[29] The idea did not originate with von Däniken; it began after people who first saw the lines from the air made joking comparisons to Martian "canals",^[28] and had already been published by others.^[30]



Some of the Nazca lines.

Descriptions of some Nazca line photos in *Chariots of the Gods?* contain significant inaccuracies. One, for example, purporting to demonstrate markings of a modern airport, was actually the knee joint of one of the bird figures, and was quite small in size. Von Däniken said that this was an "error" in the first edition, but it has not been corrected in later editions.^{[28][31]}

Consensus among archeologists is that the Nazca lines were created by pre-Columbian civilizations for cultural purposes. Efforts by archeologists to refute fringe theories such as Däniken's have been minimal, however.^[29] Silverman and Proulx have said that this silence from archaeologists has harmed the profession, as well as the Peruvian nation.^[29] Von Däniken's books attracted so many tourists to the Nazca region that researcher Maria Reiche had to spend much of her own time and money preserving the lines.^[32]

Piri Reis map

Von Däniken wrote in *Chariots of the Gods?* that a version of the Piri Reis map depicted some Antarctic mountains that were and still are buried in ice, and could only be mapped with modern equipment. His theory relies on the book of *Maps of the Ancient Sea Kings* by Charles Hapgood. A.D. Crown, in *Some Trust in Chariots*, explains how this is simply wrong. The map in von Däniken's book only extends five degrees south of the equator, ending in Cape São Roque, which means that it doesn't extend to Antarctica. Von Däniken also said that the map showed some distortions that would only happen if it was an aerial view taken from a spaceship flying above El Cairo, but in fact it doesn't extend far enough to the south to cause visible distortions in an aerial view. Von Däniken also asserts the existence of a legend saying that a god gave the map to a priest, the god being an extraterrestrial being. But Piri Reis said that he had drawn that map himself using older maps, and the map is consistent with the cartographic knowledge of that time.^[33] Also, the map is not "absolutely accurate" as claimed by von Däniken, since it contains many errors and omissions;^[34] a fact that von Däniken did not correct when he covered the map again in his 1998 book *Odyssey of the Gods*.^[35] Other authors had already published this same idea, a fact that von Däniken did not recognize until 1974 in an interview with *Playboy* magazine.^[36]



The Piri Reis map.

Pyramid of Cheops

Erich von Däniken puts forward many beliefs about the Great Pyramid of Giza in his 1968 book *Chariots of the Gods?*, saying that the ancient Egyptians did not have the most advanced tools to actually build the pyramid, there is no evidence of workers, and there is too much 'intimate' knowledge about the Earth and its geography for the Egyptians to build the pyramid in that exact location. However, the technique of construction is well understood, the tools the Egyptians used are known, marks left in the quarries by those tools are still visible, and many examples of the tools are preserved in museums.



The Bent Pyramid.

Von Däniken claims that it would have taken the Egyptians too long to cut all the blocks necessary and drag them to the construction site in time to build the Great Pyramid in only 20 years; but a Nova documentary demonstrates how quickly a block of stone can be cut with the available tools and shows examples of the rollers used in their transportation.

Von Däniken also said that there were too many problems with their tools, and, according to him, the Egyptians had no prehistory so they could not have possibly built these large pyramids, even though there are pyramids in Egypt that were built before the Great Pyramid. Because he believed that there was no prehistory, von Däniken put forward that there is nothing known about how, when, or why these pyramids were built.^[37]

Von Däniken also claims that Egyptians built perfect pyramids from the beginning, but numerous pyramid precursors survive, showing the errors made, and corrected, by Egyptian architects while they were perfecting the technique. These include simple mastabas, the Step Pyramid of Djoser, and the so-called Bent Pyramid.

In his book, he says that there is no evidence of Egyptian workers at the pyramid site;^[37] however, archaeologists have found evidence of buildings where workers would have lived,^[38] with bakeries and sewer systems.^[39] There are also tombs of workers, with some of the skeletons showing evidence of having received medical care. This may indicate the workers were well taken care of, which suggests they were Egyptian.^[40]

Von Däniken claims that the height of the Cheops pyramid multiplied by one million is the distance to the Sun. In fact the calculation produces a figure of only 91,000 miles. Not only that, but he notes that the Great Pyramid is located on the Median line, divides the continents,^[37] and that the Egyptians could not align the edges so perfectly to true north without advanced technology that only aliens could give them. Egyptian builders, however, knew of simple methods to find north via star observation.^[41] The ancient Egyptian astronomers and, possibly, farmers spent a lot of their time studying the stars because that helped them to know how much time had passed, which they needed to know so they knew when to begin planting their crops in order to have food.^[42] Modern day Egyptologists have found artifacts and drawings of an object called a merkhet,^[43] which enabled the ancient Egyptians to determine which way was north. They figured this out just based upon the North Star and also locate other stars when they came into alignment with the merkhet.^[44] Von Däniken did note in his book that the Egyptians did have plenty of time to study the stars.^[37] The ancient Egyptians were incredibly aware of the passage of time because they knew how to study the stars, so they would not have needed outside forces such as von Däniken's ancient astronauts to help them understand the relationship between stars and time.

Sarcophagus of Palenque

Von Däniken claimed that the Sarcophagus of Palenque depicted a spaceman sitting on a rocket-powered spaceship, wearing a spacesuit. However, archaeologists see nothing special about the figure, a dead Maya monarch (K'inich Janaab' Pakal) wearing traditional Maya hairstyle and jewellery, surrounded by Maya symbols that can be observed in other Maya drawings. The right hand is not handling any rocket controls, but simply making a traditional Maya gesture that other figures in the sides of the lid also make, and is not holding anything. The rocket shape is actually two serpents joining their heads at the bottom, with the

rocket "flames" being the beards of the serpents. The rocket motor under the figure is the face of a monster, symbol of the underworld.^[45] (In "Chariots of the Gods?" Von Däniken also incorrectly states the sculpture to be from Copan, rather than Palenque.)



The lid of the sarcophagus.

Peruvian stones

Von Däniken put forward photographs of ancient stones in Peru, with carvings of men using telescopes, detailed world maps, and advanced medical operations, all beyond the knowledge of ancient Peruvians. But the PBS television series Nova determined that the stones were modern, and located the potter who made them. This potter makes stones daily and sells them to tourists. Von Däniken had visited the potter and examined the stones himself, but he didn't mention this in his book. He says that he didn't believe the potter when he said that he had made the stones. Von Däniken says that he asked Doctor Cabrera, a local surgeon who owns the museum, and Cabrera had told him that the potter's claims were a lie and that the stones were ancient. But the potter had proof that Cabrera had thanked him for providing the stones for the museum. Von Däniken claimed that the stones at the museum were very different from those made by the potter, but the Nova reporters oversaw the manufacturing of one stone and confirmed that it was very similar to those in the museum.^[46]

European ethnocentrism

Kenneth Feder accused von Däniken of European ethnocentrism,^[47] while John Flenley and Paul Bahn suggested that views such as his interpretation of the Easter Island statues "ignore the real achievements of our ancestors and constitute the ultimate in racism: they belittle the abilities and ingenuity of the human species as a whole."^[48]

Other criticisms

Ronald Story published *The Space Gods Revealed: A Close Look At The Theories of Erich Von Däniken* in 1976, written in response to the evidence presented in von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods?* It was reviewed as "a coherent and much-needed refutation of von Däniken's theories".^[49] Archeologist Clifford Wilson wrote two books similarly debunking von Däniken: *Crash Go the Chariots* in 1972 and *The Chariots Still Crash* in 1975.

A 2004 article in *Skeptical Magazine* states that von Däniken took many of the book's concepts from *The Morning of the Magicians*, that this book in turn was heavily influenced by the Cthulhu Mythos, and that the core of the ancient astronaut theory originates in H. P. Lovecraft's stories "The Call of Cthulhu" written in 1926, and *At the Mountains of Madness* written in 1931.^[50]

Response to criticism

Speaking in a 2001 documentary, von Däniken said that although he could not conclusively prove to the scientific community that any of the items in his archive were of alien origin, he felt that "today's science" would not accept such evidence, as "the time is simply not right". He argued that it was first necessary to "prepare" mankind for a "wonderful new world".^[51]

Popularity

According to von Däniken, subsequent books in his series have been translated into 32 languages and together have sold more than 63 million copies.^[52]

Jungfrau Park located near Interlaken, Switzerland, was opened as the Mystery Park in 2003. Designed by von Däniken, it explored several great "mysteries" of the world.^[53]

Ridley Scott said that his film Prometheus is related to some of von Däniken's ideas regarding early human civilization.^[54]

Reviewing the two-disc DVD release of Roland Emmerich's film Stargate, Dean Devlin referred to the "Is There a Stargate?" feature where "author Erich von Däniken discusses evidence he has found of alien visitations to Earth."^[55]

Von Däniken is an occasional presenter on the History Channel and H2 show Ancient Aliens, where he talks about aspects of his theories as they pertain to each episode.

Von Däniken is a member of the Swiss Writers Association, the German Writers Association and the International PEN Club. He was awarded with an honorary doctorate by the La Universidad Boliviana. He received the Huesped Illustre award from the cities of Ica and Nazca in Peru. In Brazil, he received the Lourenco Filho award in Gold and Platinum. In 2004, he was awarded the Explorers Festival prize.

Books

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- *Return to the Stars* (Souvenir Press Ltd, 1970) ISBN 0-285-50298-0
- *Gods from Outer Space* (Bantam,1972; reprint of *Return to the Stars*)
- Erich von Däniken (1973) [1972]. *The Gold of the Gods*. Translated by Michael Heron (1 ed.). London: Souvenir Press. ISBN 0285620878. Published simultaneously in Canada by J. M. Dent & Sons, Ontario (Canada).
- *Miracles of the Gods: A Hard Look at the Supernatural* (Souvenir Press Ltd, 1975) ISBN 0-285-62174-2
- *In Search of Ancient Gods: My Pictorial Evidence for the Impossible* (Corgi books, 1976) ISBN 0-552-10073-0
- *According to the Evidence* (Souvenir Press, 1977) ISBN 0-285-62301-X
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- *The Eyes of the Sphinx: The Newest Evidence of Extraterrestrial Contact* (Berkley Publishing Corporation, 1996) ISBN 978-0-425-15130-3
- *The Return of the Gods: Evidence of Extraterrestrial Visitations* (Element, 1998) ISBN 1-86204-253-5
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- *The Gods Were Astronauts: Evidence of the True Identities of the Old "Gods"* (Vega books, 2001) ISBN 1-84333-625-1
- *Odyssey of the Gods: An Alien History of Ancient Greece* (Vega books, 2002) ISBN 978-1-84333-558-0
- *History Is Wrong* (New Page books, 2009) ISBN 978-1-60163-086-5
- *Evidence of the Gods* (New Page books, 2010) ISBN 978-1-60163-247-0
- *Twilight of the Gods: The Mayan Calendar and the Return of the Extraterrestrials* (New Page books, 2010) ISBN 978-1-60163-141-1
- *Tomy and the Planet of Lies* (Tantor eBooks, 2012) ISBN 0988349434
- *Remnants of the Gods: A Visual Tour of Alien Influence in Egypt, Spain, France, Turkey, and Italy* (New Page Books, 2013) ISBN 1601632835
- *The Gods Never Left Us* (New Page Books, 2018) ISBN 163265119X

German language

- *Erinnerungen an die Zukunft* (1968)
- *Zurück zu den Sternen: Argumente für das Unmögliche* (1969) ISBN 978-3404602759

- Erich von Däniken (1972). *Aussaat und Kosmos. Spuren und Pläne außerirdischer Intelligenzen* (in German) (1 ed.). Düsseldorf: Econ-Verlag.
- *Strategie der Götter: Das Achte Weltwunder* (1982) ISBN 3-430-11979-0
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- *Habe ich mich geirrt?* (1985) ISBN 3-570-03059-8
- *Wir alle sind Kinder der Götter* (1987) C. Bertelsmann, ISBN 3-570-03060-1
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- *Götterdämmerung* (2009) KOPP Verlag ISBN 978-3942016049
- *Grüße aus der Steinzeit: Wer nicht glauben will, soll sehen!* (2010)
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Films

- Ferry Radax: Mit Erich von Däniken in Peru (With Erich von Däniken in Peru, 1982). A documentary.
- Daniken: a video song directed by Samik Roy Choudhury, sung by Rupam Islam of West Bengal, India

See also

- Robert Charroux
- Paleo-SETI / Ancient Astronauts
- *Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries: Science and Pseudoscience in Archaeology* (book)
- Pseudoarchaeology
- Oolon Colluphid/Professor Eric von Contrick, fictional characters based on Erich von Däniken.
- Cueva de los Tayos
- David Icke
- Zecharia Sitchin, another individual who has made similar claims of ancient humans being visited by advanced extraterrestrial intelligence.
- Carl Sagan

Further reading

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- Mauz, Gerhard von (July 1970), "Wie es unser Explorand sehr schön zeigt" (<http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-45202660.html>), *Der Spiegel* (in German)

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7. Story(1976), p1
8. Peter Krassa, *Disciple of the Gods: A Biography of Erich von Däniken* (W.H. Allen & Co., Ltd, 1976, ISBN 0-352-30262-3), p. 74
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12. Der Spiegel 44418148 Gläubige Gemeinde, 1970, Nr. 40, 1970-09-28, p. 214
13. Lingeman, Richard R. (31 March 1974). "Erich von Daniken's Genesis" (<http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F20710FF3B5F107A93C3AA1788D85F408785F9>). *The New York Times*. p. 6.
14. von Däniken's side of the story is given in Krassa, pp. 96–107.
15. Transcripts of Däniken's letters to his wife Elizabeth (whom he married in 1959), during this period are provided in Krassa, pp. 130–135.
16. Story 1980, pp. 3–5
17. Story 1980, pp. 5–6
18. Story 1980, p. 5
19. Story 1980, pp. xi–xiii foreword written by Carl Sagan
20. Däniken, Erich von: *Chariots of the Gods?*, p. 94.
21. *Playboy magazine*, p. 64, Volume 21 Number 8, 1974
22. Story 1980, pp. 88–89
23. Story 1980, pp. 78–82
24. von Däniken continued to maintain that he had been inside the caves, " ... but not at the place where the photographs in the book were taken, not at the main entrance. I was at a side entrance." He said Moricz's expedition crew had been forced by some unknown entity to sign a "pledge of silence", which explained Moricz's refusal to corroborate his account. Later, he said, a "leading German archaeologist", dispatched to Ecuador to verify his claims, could not locate Moricz. (*Playboy*, p. 58)
25. "The Case of the Ancient Astronauts". *Horizon*. 3 August 1978. Event occurs at 41:15–42:20. BBC.
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External links

- [Erich von Däniken's official homepage](http://www.daniken.com/) (<http://www.daniken.com/>)
- [Publications by and about Erich von Däniken](https://nb-helvetica.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/search?query=any,contains,%22Erich+von+D%C3%A4niken%22&tab=LibraryCatalog&search_scope=MyInstitution&vid=41SNL_51_INST:helvetica&lang=de&offset=0) (https://nb-helvetica.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/search?query=any,contains,%22Erich+von+D%C3%A4niken%22&tab=LibraryCatalog&search_scope=MyInstitution&vid=41SNL_51_INST:helvetica&lang=de&offset=0) in the catalogue Helveticat of the [Swiss National Library](#)
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