Twitter Thread by Sacha Coward

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I LOVE a good alien movie!
Strange and eerie otherworldly beings from distant worlds.

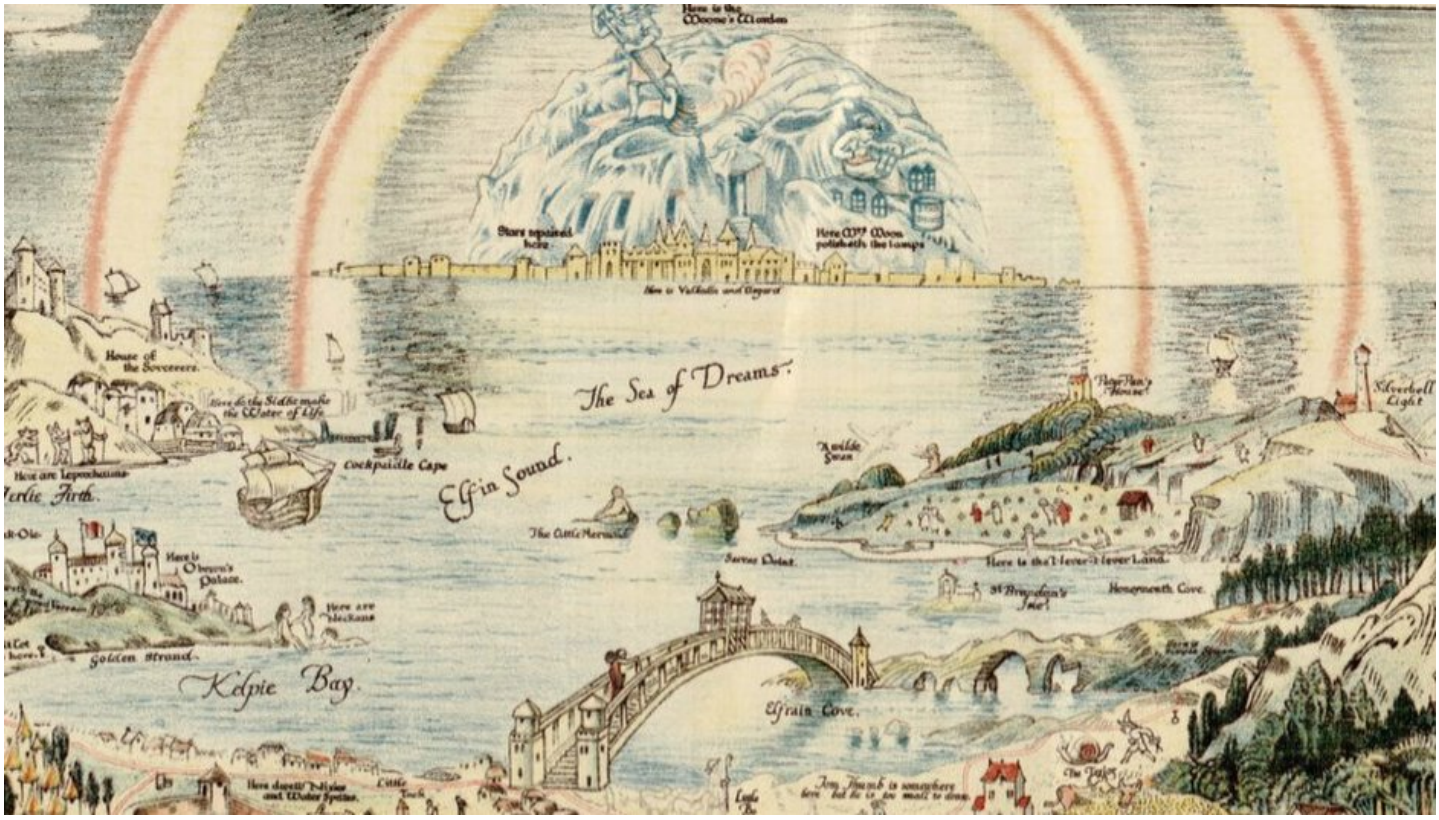
But where does this come from and how has the way we depict ‘Extraterrestrials’ changed throughout history?

So join me for tour, all the way from Angels to Xenomorph queens!

(A THREAD)



Aliens are beings, that come from a world other than our own. Whilst spirit worlds, other realms and mythical lands have been popular in all human cultures, beings didn’t come from ‘space’ as the very concept of other planets and solar systems did not yet exist.



Still, in many ways the first aliens were the monsters at the edge of maps; The sea's horizon in the 15th Century would be very much like the dark night sky to us. Both were impossible to navigate and full of strange life. Mermaids and ‘Here Be Dragons’ are the original ETs.



That being said the sun, moon and stars have long been the source of stories, as these are celestial bodies that are easily visible to all cultures.

Examples include the moon rabbit of Chinese mythology, or the moon god Khonsu in egyptian theology. Both lived in or on the moon.



As early as 200CE we see the sun and moon as homes for people.

The work ‘A True Story’ by Lucien of Samosata, arguably the oldest science fiction, has the protagonist travel to the moon, where moon people and sun people are at war over the morning star (Venus).



Here it is important here to acknowledge angels and their counterparts as part of this story. Most cultures talk of mysterious beings that descend from the sky, with powers and knowledge beyond human comprehension.



Take this description of an Angel from Ezekiel 10:12 ‘their entire bodies, including their backs, their hands and their wings, were completely full of eyes, as were their four wheels.’ This is not a Steven Spielberg creation but an angel!



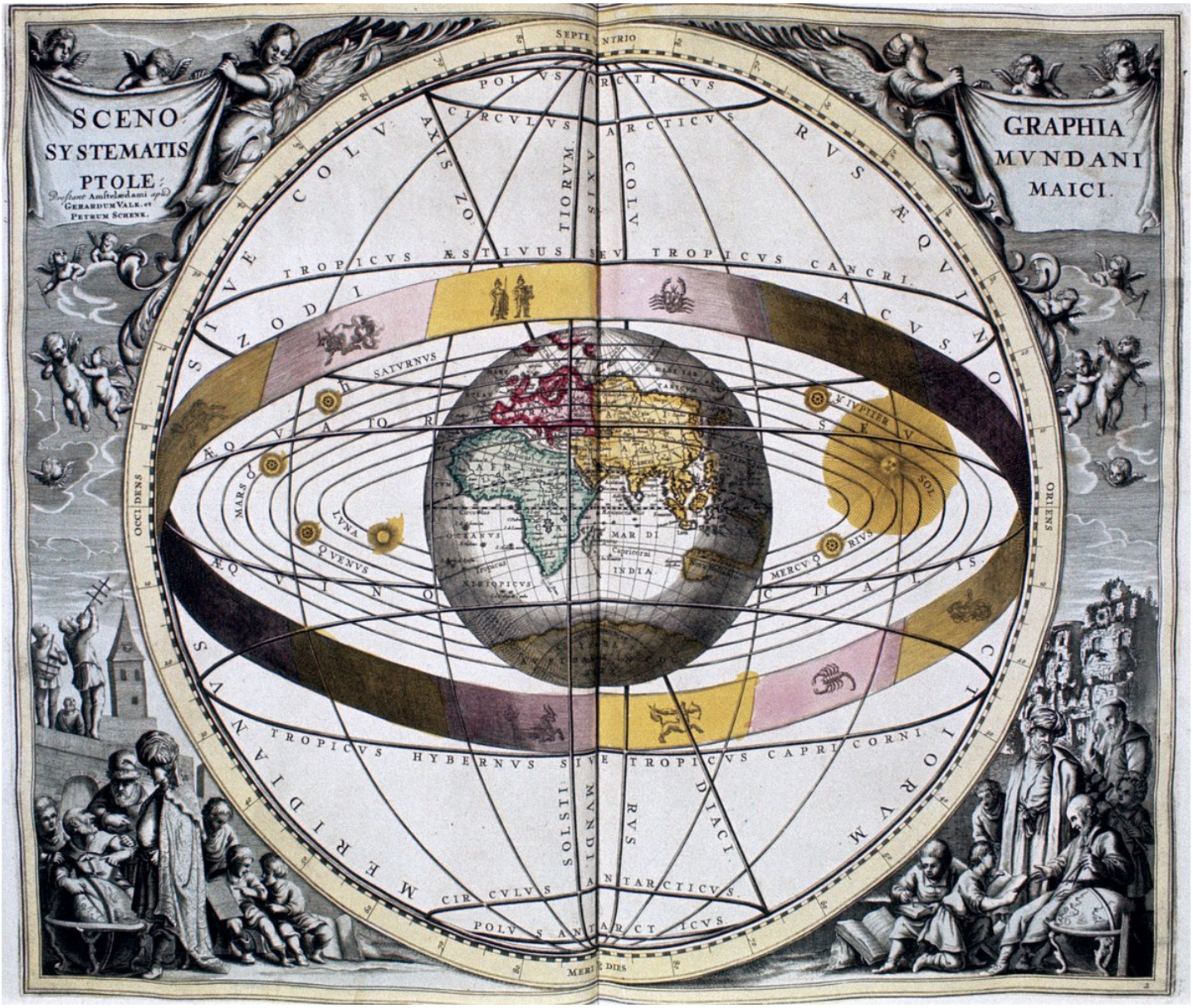
So the first aliens, or the closest we have to modern day aliens, were angels, dragons and spirits. But before we get all ‘Ancient Aliens’ let me be clear that these are powerful shared mythical tropes not literal extraterrestrials.
If you want that kind of thing watch Stargate!



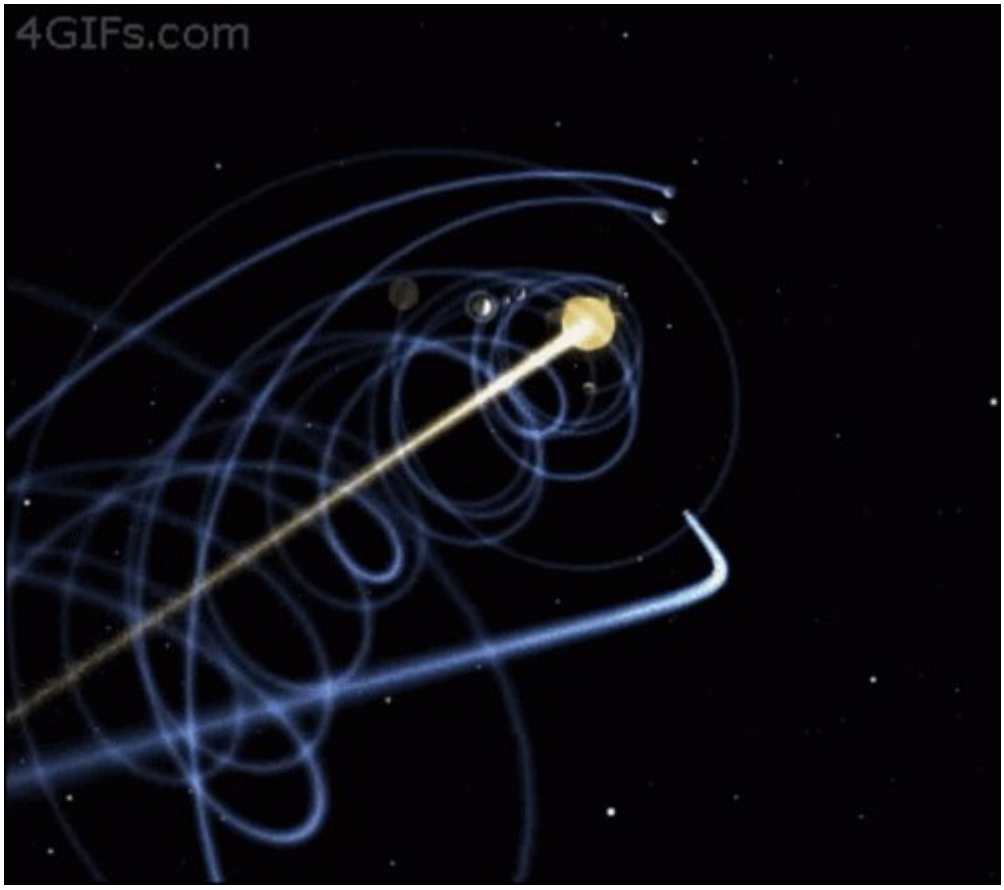
Now I’m afraid for the next step we have to explain some basic astronomy and cosmology. There was a HUGE shift in how we understand the universe and our place in it, which is vital for understanding how aliens fit in.



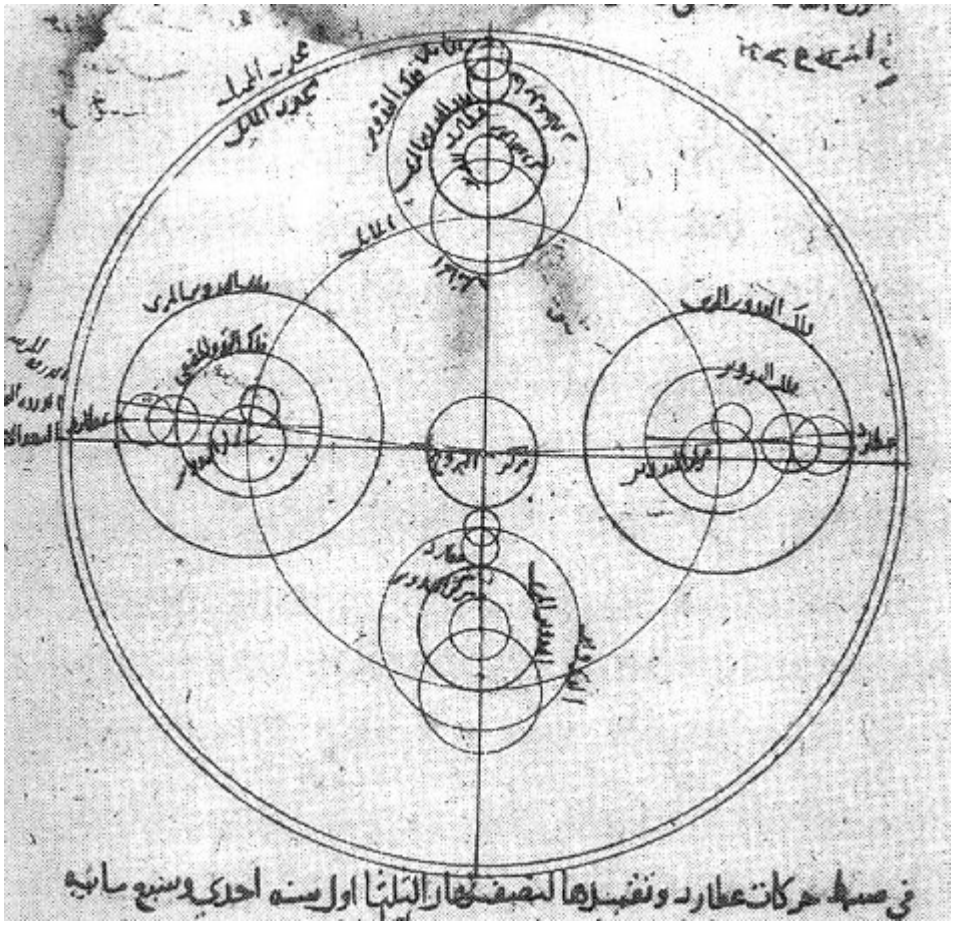
In a world where earth was the centre of the universe and everything else, including the sun, was simply there to service us, there weren’t all that many places where aliens could be. But shift this perspective and it would change everything!



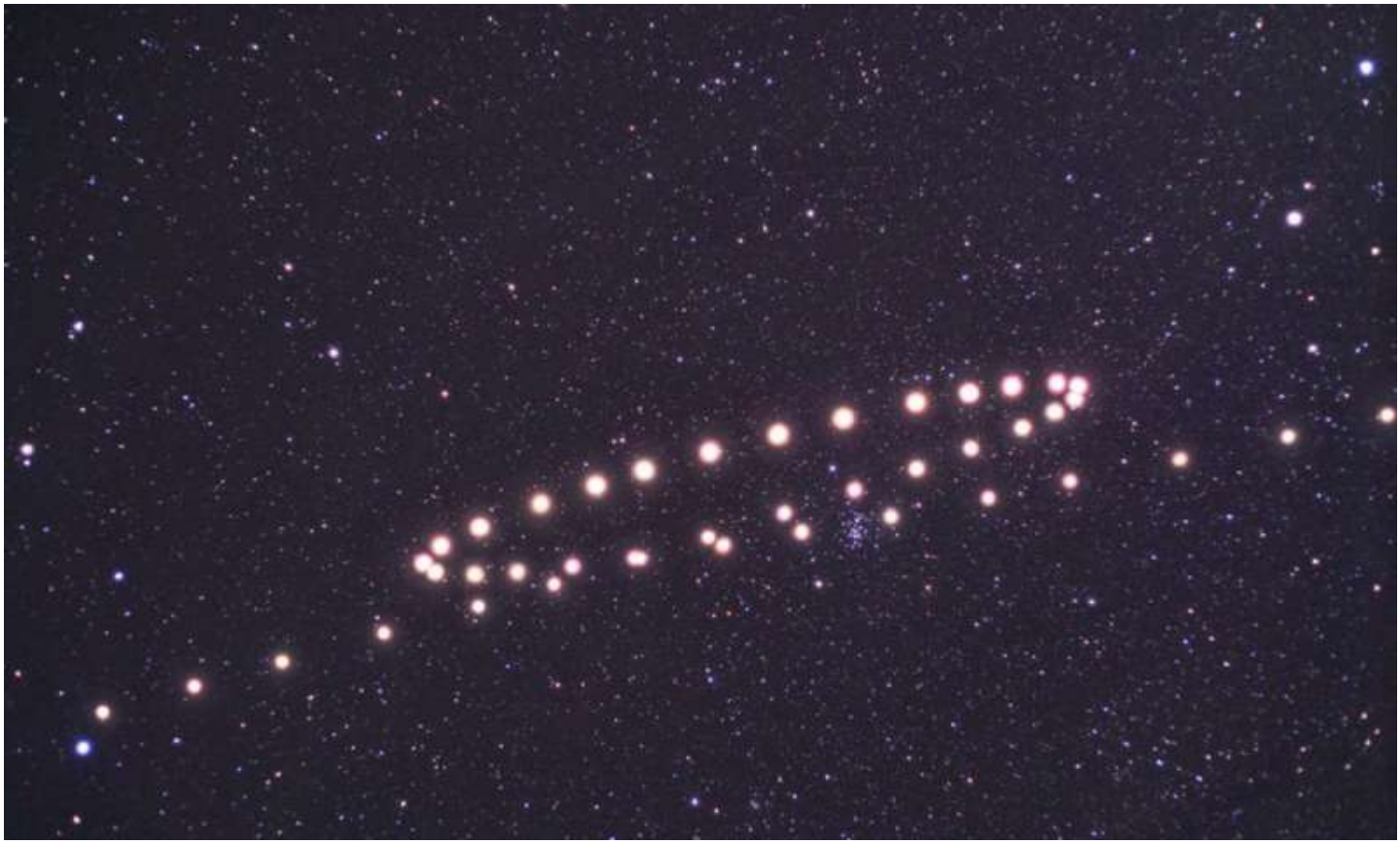
It wasn’t until heliocentrism, the idea that the earth rotates around the sun amongst other planets, that we could start to truly picture aliens coming from other worlds like (or unlike) our own.



NOTE: this wasn't simply a Greek or 'Western' (whatever that means) discovery. The Islamic world was for a long time home to the most learned astronomers. They had observed how the distance between the Earth and the Sun seemed to change, something that fits with heliocentrism.



Prior to heliocentrism, planets were thought of as stars that moved, the name planet comes from the Greek πλαν■ται (plan■tai) meaning ‘wanderer’.



Whilst planets themselves could be seen as gods or beings (For example the ancient Sumerians believed that Mars was the god of war and plague, Nergal) they were rarely worlds that beings could live on.

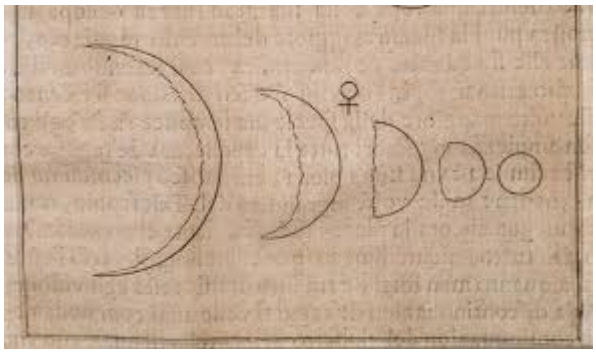


In the 15th Century astronomer Giordano Bruno theorised that each star might itself be a sun, and that these suns would have worlds like Earth orbiting them. All existing within an infinite universe.

He, of course, was put to death for such heretical beliefs… Yay Catholicism…

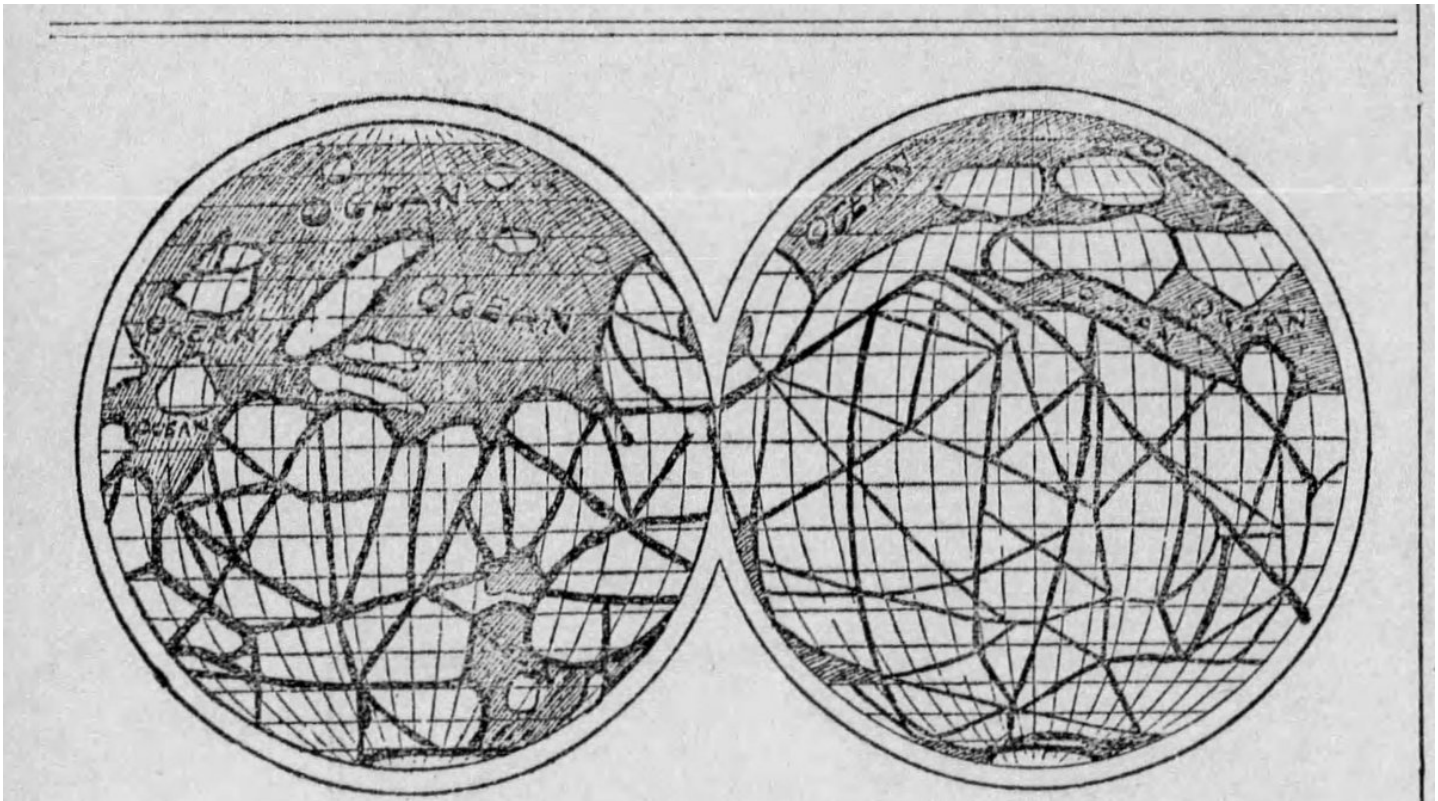


Still, despite violent religious suppression this would make waves, and once the technology came about to actually look at planets, it was clear that these weren't stars. Galileo for example viewing Mars through a telescope was seeing not a star, but a red globe.



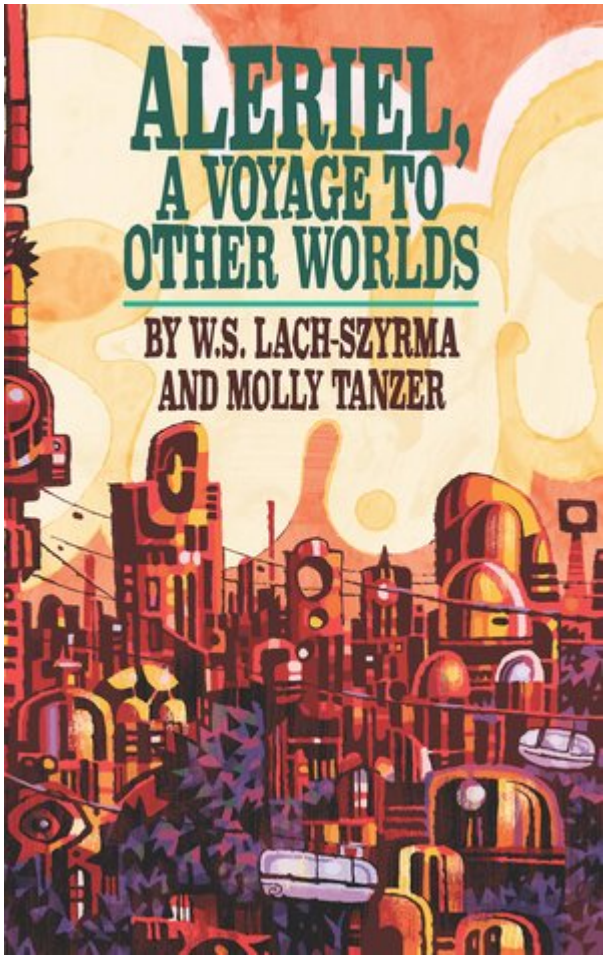
Once the religious dogma was pushed to the side and ancient and contemporary cosmologists were allowed to be listened to, and astronomers could apply science to the sky, this opened up a literal universe for life to exist in!

And it is here, from the 1700's where you get some wonderful wacky imaginings of alien life and civilisations on the likes of Venus, Mars and Mercury! William Whewell in 1854 believed that the shapes seen on Mars were canals and seas.



MAP OF MARS, SHOWING THE CANALS.
(Drawn from Photo.)

W. S. Lach-Szyrma's novel 'Aleriel, or A Voyage to Other Worlds' in 1883 is one of the earliest realised examples. The main character Aleriel, lands on Mars in a spacecraft. He buries the car in snow ‘so that it might not be disturbed by any Martian who might come across it.’

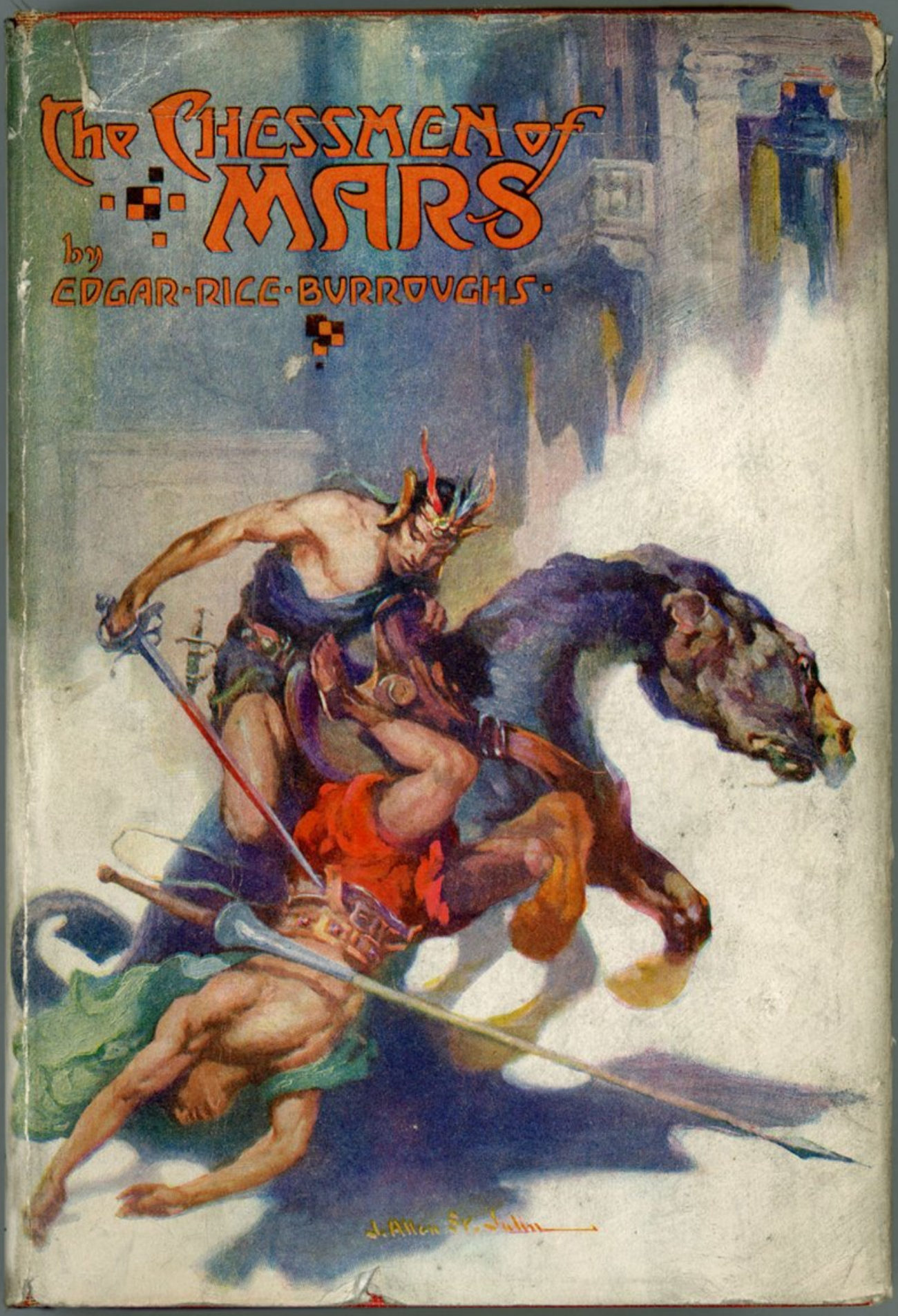


Some of the earliest images of ‘true’ aliens are therefore illustrations for science fiction from the late 19th early 20th century, including HG Well’s ‘War Of The Worlds’ by illustrator Henrique Alvim Corrêa in 1903 and the covers of the books by Edgar Rice Burroughs.

The Chessmen of Mars

by

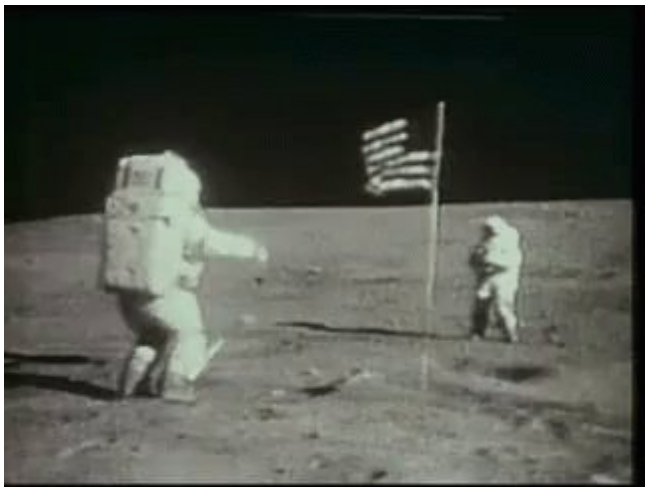
Edgar Rice Burroughs



The 20th century was a spawning ground for aliens! Reacting to fears around advances in technology, atomic warfare, biological and scientific breakthroughs we see the resulting fears around these momentous developments anthropomorphised as monsters from space!



The first manned trips into space pushed this into the next gear, now mankind had been on the moon it didn't seem such a flight of fancy that other intelligences might exist in the great beyond.



Aliens during this time were stand-ins for nazis, communists, radioactivity, women's reproductive rights, you name it! In the 20th century aliens became an easy way to depict real world human fears and paranoias, particularly around societal change.

In a world of media, where corruption was much more visible, people began to fear their own and foreign governments. We see developing conspiracy theories around people in power also being 'in the know', leading to films of alien cover-ups, reptilian overlords and Men In Black.



The depictions of aliens start off as shambling humanoid monstrosities from the 1920’s, but as science, biology and even legitimate exploration of space expands, we see much more diverse body types.

