
Interpreting Archaeology

Finding meaning in the past

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'Trojan forebears', 'peerless relics'

The rhetoric of heritage claims

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Those who treasure memories and artefacts of the past, whatever their motives, characteristically assert impassioned claims. Archaeologists, archivists, genealogists, conservators, patriots of all kinds champion the viewpoints and husband the relics of the epochs they explore. This essay documents the role of rhetorical hyperbole in delineating the past and in staking claims to its heritage.

Rhetoric today is often decried as empty bombast. But in classical and medieval times rhetoric pervaded and enriched learning. The truth or falsehood of an argument mattered less than the eloquence and elegance with which it was presented; the art of persuasion took precedence over pedantic concern with accuracy.

In writings about the past, the topic deemed most worth attention, rhetoric was emphasised to the detriment of other scholarship (Levine 1987, pp. 102, 135–6). History, in Cicero's classic expression (*De oratore* 1979, 2.9.36), was 'the witness to the passing of the ages, the light of truth, the life of memory, the mistress of life, and the ambassador of the past'. History and biography delineated particular events and lives chiefly to exemplify moral principles and eternal verities, in order to promote public virtue. Chroniclers' functions were panegyric and hortatory, not critical. Anecdotes and speeches, conversations and contexts were concocted to heighten interest and to stress the virtues or vices of past notables, themselves often anachronistically displaced or purely mythical. Death-bed scenes (men of fame seem never to have died in their sleep or in a coma) were choice occasions for rhetorical prophecies.

In describing themselves as disinterested purveyors of unvarnished truth, chroniclers were being doubly rhetorical; they knew they were expected to exaggerate and invent. After dismissing predecessors' fictional additions, historians then took them over and went on to devise their own. The distant past was rhetorically more manageable than that within living memory, when the historian's embroidery might be challenged by eyewitness memory (Morse 1991, pp. 16, 87–94).

The law courts were rhetoric's prime locale; here advocates deployed their skills on causes remote from their own interests. It was rhetorically persuasive to start with a *chria*, a gloss on some well-known wise saying; assenting to this memory inclined auditors to agree with the argument that followed (*ibid.*, pp. 53–65). More honour attached to pleading a brilliant losing case than to winning it, though clients may have felt otherwise.

Rhetoric infused famous quarrels over the relative worth of ancient and modern achievements. Humanists often took stances in order to flaunt their virtuosity in the face of common faith, defending moderns not to undermine ancient authority but to parade unusual rhetorical skills. The fifteenth-century Florentine chancellor Accolti thus upheld pro-modern positions seen as notoriously absurd. He contended ancient rhetoric had been made obsolete by the decline of Roman oratory; praised

the mercenary system and arts of trickery and deceit as military innovations; defended the luxury of the modern Church and its paucity of martyrs on the ground that 'if there were more martyrs in antiquity, that was because there was more persecution' (Black 1982, pp. 17–19, 25; 1985, pp. 192–208).

Noble families had long advanced themselves by means of historical rhetoric. In late-medieval Europe an ancient lineage became a *bona fides* of rights to titles and landed estates. 'Written above all to exalt a line and legitimize its power, a medieval genealogy displays the noble family's intention to affirm and extend its place' (Spiegel 1990, p. 79).

Rising English and French aristocrats bolstered the antiquity of their lineages by contriving fabulous pedigrees. Fake modern versions of Homeric epics, the pseudo-Turpin chronicles of Charlemagne, the fantastic history of Geoffrey of Monmouth made available heroic Trojan and mythic ancestors. Working Hercules (not to mention Gideon) into the Duke of Burgundy's family tree enabled him to 'restore' his dukedom to the status of a principality (Morse 1991, p. 107).

Several rhetorical modes added weight to these family tales. Their vernacular style appropriated the authenticating authority of Latin texts. Prose (rather than verse) was used for *gravitas* and to heighten the appearance of truth. Conflating *vita* and chronology upgraded hereditary succession into historical narrative, stressing procreation and filiation as metaphors for historical continuity and change. Individual lives were celebrated in rhetorical tropes that affirmed the collective identity of the whole lineage, from mythical forebears to Merovingian monarchs. Tracing ancestries back to Troy not only earned feudal nobles awesome pedigrees, it at length glorified nascent national identity (Citron 1991, p. 149; McKendrick 1992; Spiegel 1983, 1986, 1990).

Rhetorical histories flourished well into the last century. In praising Boswell's biography of Johnson as a monument more lasting than any material remains, Carlyle (1832, p. 227) both salutes and exemplifies the power of rhetoric:

Rough Samuel and sleek wheedling James were, and are not. Their Life and whole personal Environment has melted into air. The Mitre Tavern still stands in Fleet Street: but where now is its scot-and-lot paying, beef-and-ale loving, cock-hatted, pot-bellied Landlord; its rose-faced assiduous Landlady, with all her shining brass-pans, waxed tables, well-filled larder-shelves; her cooks, and boot-jacks, and errand-boys, and watery-mouthed hangers-on? Gone! Gone! . . . The Bottles they drank out of are all broken, the Chairs they sat on all rotted and burnt; the very Knives and Forks they ate with have rusted to the heart, and become brown oxide of iron, and mingled with the indiscriminate clay. All, all has vanished. . . . Of the Mitre Tavern nothing but the bare walls remain there: of London, of England, of the World, nothing but the bare walls remain; and these also decaying (were they of adamant), only slower.

Chroniclers today profess to be as soberly unbiased as possible. But the most objective and dispassionate histories need eloquence to be readable. 'Rhetoric is ordinarily deemed icing on the cake of history', but in fact 'it is mixed right into the batter'. Historical knowledge depends on emotive language; if the historian fails to communicate what he believes, it never becomes publicly available. Hexter (1968, pp. 378–91) shows how quotations function as rhetoric. Confronted with a veritable slice of the past, we respond not simply, 'Yes,' but exclaim, 'Yes, indeed!' Historians constantly have to gauge when to be allusive rather than precise, when to sacrifice fact for evocative force. Rhetoric gives us not Frye's (1983, p. 227) 'familiar remembered things, but the glittering intensity of the summoned-up hallucination'.

Unlike earlier times, however, historians' rhetoric is now constrained by narrowly prescriptive and prospective standards of truth. Not so the rhetoric of heritage, which uses history to persuade, to kindle patriotism, to enlist chauvinist passion. Heritage concern normally reflects personal or national self-interest. Things are valued as my heritage or our heritage; rival claimants dispute peerless and indivisible relics. We may be modest about what we are, but not about what we were. Even a shameful past is lauded in unabashed self-admiration. In celebrating the symbols of their identities societies actually worship themselves (Durkheim 1915, pp. 206–14, 230–2).

Social self-admiration has sources in private ancestral pride. Every person's 'past life . . . presents itself through the beautifying glass of fancy', noted a pioneer Nordic scholar (Thorpe 1851, Vol. 1, p. 1–2):

Among nations the same feeling prevails; they also draw a picture of their infancy in glittering colours. The vain-glory of the people will continue to cherish, to ennoble and diffuse their traditions from generation to generation. Nations proclaim the peerless nature of their own past residues, historical memories along with material monuments. Antiquity and continuity, redemptive hardship and triumphal success are common leitmotifs of such claims.

National anthems graphically confirm the durability of militant rhetoric. The 'Marseillaise' urges French patriots to 'drench our fields with [Prussians'] tainted blood'. 'God Save the Queen' begs Him to 'Scatter her enemies and make them fall'. Danes extol King Christian 'hammering . . . through Gothic helm and brain'. Mozambicans foretell 'the tomb of capitalism and exploitation'. Gaddafi's Libyans repulse the enemy 'with truth and with my gun'. Even citizens of tiny Monaco vow to 'die in defence' of their Prince (Cathcart 1992).

A few British rhetorical flourishes typify the flavour: Mandell Creighton (1898, pp. 14–15, 18), historian and Bishop of London:

The most important point about English history is that the English were the first people who formed for themselves a national character at all. No nation has carried its whole past so completely into its present. Our long period of steady success [spares us] the centuries of oppression from barbarian conquerors, of long struggles to realize national unity [that make others] fantastic, unreasonable, fanatical.

C. H. K. Marten (1905, in Samuel 1989, Vol. 1, p. 12), Eton provost and Queen Elizabeth's tutor:

Our history has a continuity [lacking in] many other countries. We have preserved our national character throughout the ages. The medieval, the Elizabethan, and the modern Englishman all show the same individuality, the same initiative, the same independence, the same practical sagacity.

Bernard Levin (1989), contemporary columnist:

The most noticeable thing about our history is that we have more of it than any other country. Of course, Rome is older, but Italy is a 19th century upstart. The length of time, the depth and richness of our island story, gives us a claim to pre-eminence.

But the British have no monopoly on chauvinist rhetoric. This is a prefatory exhortation from a French school-history text (Chiappe 1989, p. 8):

Whether you are noble or bourgeois, of worker or peasant origin, you participate in the unrivalled glory of a monument of wisdom and grandeur: the French

monarchy. Thanks to her, you are what you are: superior in knowledge and imagination to all other men.

The seldom-read but oft-cited sacred Finnish epic, the *Kalevala*, is exalted by a historian as Scandinavia's 'richest, most genuine, and most independent [folk creation], a singing testimony of our people's immemorial heroic age and of that toughness and will to survive by which our nation and our culture have grown . . .' (Jalmari Jaakkola 1935 in Wilson 1975, p. 107).

The *Kalevala* is not only the unquenchable wellspring from which our writers, our artists, and our composers have drawn . . . inspiration; it is also the sounding board which has given power and strength to . . . political awakening [enabling] a nation whose heroes once freed the sun from the mountains . . . to cast off the bonds of slavery, to walk free and independent.

(Niilo Karki 1924, in Wilson 1975 p. 121)

And from an Andalucian spokesman (in Enzensberger 1990, p. 225):

Our culture survives by allowing itself to be over-whelmed. This strategy has defeated every conqueror: the Phoenicians and the Romans, the Vandals and the Visigoths, the Arabs and the kings of Castile. We corrupted the Napoleonic invaders, and we'll deal with tourism as well. Adaptation is our strongest weapon – it makes us unconquerable.

Along with boasts of superiority and uniqueness, rhetoric is crucial in conflicts over heritage that now suffuse politics and public consciousness. Such disputes are of two principal kinds: contested assertions of prior occupance and creation, or of a privileged divine covenant; and contested demands for relics and icons of identity.

Different heritage realms generate different conflicts. Endemic to archaeology are disputes over national or ethnic primacy, the validity of famed remains, preferred prehistoric and historic epochs, the repatriation of autochthonous skeletal remains, the primacy of scholarly versus sacred values of relics. Those who would restrict excavation rights to nationals are at loggerheads with international scholars. The allocation of finds among national, regional, local and *in situ* display sites is bitterly contested. Impassioned disputes attest the close linkage of heritage and habitat, the felt fusion of identity with locale.

National heritage crusades are couched in highly righteous polemic. To seize or demand land or resources is internationally reprehended; to seize or demand adjuncts of heritage may be condoned as essential to integrity, even if it infringes the integrity of others. A Mexican scholar's theft of an Aztec codex from France's Bibliothèque Nationale was acclaimed as an act of patriotic heroism because his purpose was repatriation (Stetie 1982, pp. 55–6).

The rhetoric of restitution is expressly anti-colonial. Newly independent nations dwell at length on imperial iniquities that deprive them of material relics and icons of identity. For tangible validations of ancestral antecedents, former colonies have to grub for their roots among relics held in Western collections. They term it imperative that 'the former mother country restores to the new State not only its sovereignty but also its heritage', as an Algerian (Tayeb 1979) expressed it. The chairman of the UNESCO committee charged with this issue saw 'the restitution and return of cultural property', embracing architectural structures along with other antiquities, works of art and archives, as 'one of the key problems of the Third World' (Stetie 1981).

UNESCO's then chief was no less dramatic. 'The vicissitudes of history have . . . robbed many peoples of a priceless portion of [their] inheritance in which their

enduring identity finds its embodiment. [To] enable a people to recover part of its memory and identity', other lands should relinquish these irreplaceable cultural treasures 'to the countries where they were created' (M'Bow 1979).

Though heritage claims ring with rhetorical bravado, their vehement assertion does not necessarily mean the claimant especially wants what is at issue – at least, not yet. In many disputes honour is satisfied, communal identity secured, simply by fervent reiteration of a heritage claim. It may better serve Greek pride to go on demanding the return of the Elgin Marbles than actually to get them back.

Nothing rouses popular feeling more than a grievance unrectified. To gain Quebecois sovereignty or Scottish home rule would at a stroke deprive separatists of their prime weapon. Identity is more zealously created and husbanded by the quest for a lost heritage than by its nurture when regained. Basque extremism dwindled to querulous impotence once Basques gained substantial autonomy. 'Before, we had answers to our problems,' says a Basque spokesman (in Heiberg 1989, p. 230). 'They were self-government, *conciertos economicos*, the restoration of our Basque culture. All that has been achieved. . . . Now our problems seem to have no answers at all and what we have achieved doesn't seem that important.'

Many conflicts fester unresolved because bereaved claimants are poor and powerless. It is no accident that ex-colonial Asian and African nations spearhead UNESCO's heritage restitution drive. Though now sovereign, these states often seek in vain to regain icons of their identity from European collections. Lacking armed clout, their heritage crusades are limited to moral exhortation, with predictably few victories.

Autochthonous and other beleaguered minorities often assert claims that are blatantly extreme. They do not expect them to be conceded; instead they aim to maintain a high profile, reminding the majority of past iniquities for which guilt can be turned to account. Passamaquoddy Indians in Maine challenged the validity of old treaties that ceded fully half the state; so huge a claim would never succeed, but while legal proceedings went on no land could be transferred; the resulting log-jam of property transactions ensured a substantial out-of-court award to the Indians (Brodeur 1985, pp. 69–141). The Woggle, an invisible Aboriginal spirit, can be found to have inhabited – and hence now inhibits – any locale facing a critical decision affecting conservation or development.

British amenity groups frankly admit they assail agricultural greed to generate public interest in open-space causes. Asked why his countryside pressure group adopted such an aggressive stance towards farmers and landowners, its secretary replied: 'Because it gets us publicity in the media, and that is how we attract new members' (in 'Access' 1991). Populist rhetoric pits heritage amateurs against professionals who invoke the claims of science to protect some legacy from the philistine public. Complaints by geologists about fossil-hunting despoliation along the Dorset coast are countered by accusations that this academic élite exaggerates the risks to palaeontology in order to deprive the public of time-honoured heritage participation (Lowenthal 1985, p. 44; Nicholson-Lord 1991). Accusations that the Council for British Archaeology is a hotbed of Marxist authoritarianism may strike archaeologists as absurd, but metal-detector cowboys get a lot of mileage out of portraying themselves as folk patriots against a haughty and (shades of Anthony Blunt) subversive scientific Establishment (Wright 1991, pp. 39–51).

The gulf between rhetoric and results is symptomatic of heritage issues generally. It is not only the poor and the weak whose aims exceed their grasp. British laments over the drain of national treasures overseas are a case in point. Current export restrictions were, to be sure, tailored to a more prosperous Britain and a stronger

pound. But National Heritage Memorial Fund and national museum resources fall woefully short of safety-net needs highlighted by SAVE Britain's Heritage.

The size of this gulf is less startling than the shortsightedness of despondent heritage guardians. Time and again Britain's museums have turned down some proffered private relic as too costly, retrospectively to regret a bargain missed – and sometimes later buying it at twice or more the initial price. To publicize potential loss with alarmist rhetoric – 'comparable to the damage that Cromwell and his Roundheads caused when they executed Charles I and dispersed the greatest private collection the world has ever known' (Leggatt 1978) – makes such heritage at once indispensable and ruinously expensive.

In short, competition encumbers heritage with a sad irony: when we realise we cannot do without some legacy, we find we can often no longer afford to keep or acquire it. Where access rights embroil rival claimants, as at Stonehenge, media reports of hippie intransigence, Druid determination, and custodial fears of criminal damage led to draconian protective measures that have negated most heritage functions for a decade.

I have shown that rhetoric suffuses public debate on heritage matters. Let me conclude by suggesting why this is so. One reason is given above: heritage is seen as intensely personal to individuals and to communities; its ownership and control arouse possessive anxieties. But the very uniqueness of heritage to each claimant means we cannot persuade others to adopt our perspective. Failing rational reasoning, we fall back on rhetorical hyperbole. Finally, rhetoric reinforces our own sense of attachment, shoring up our conviction that we care about heritage as much as we claim to, and reassuring our fellows that we are at one on vital matters of identity.