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0521558395 - Nationalism, Politics, and the Practice of Archaeology

Edited by Philip L. Kohl and Clare Fawcett

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Part I

Introduction

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1 Archaeology in the service of the state: theoretical considerations

Philip L. Kohl and Clare Fawcett

This book developed out of a symposium examining the relationship between nationalism and archaeological practice which was organized for the American Anthropological Association meetings, Chicago, November 1991. Several of the articles published here (Wailes and Zoll, Arnold and Hassmann, Anthony, Kaiser, Kohl and Tsetsckhladze, von Falkenhausen, and Fawcett) represent expanded versions of the papers presented in that symposium; the others (Diaz-Andreu, Lillios, Shnirelman, Tong, Chernykh, and Nelson) were later solicited by the editors for this publication, as were the general commentaries by B.G. Trigger and N.A. Silberman. Initially, we planned to obtain an essentially “global” coverage of issues relating to nationalism, politics, and the practice of archaeology, and more than two dozen archaeologists were contacted in hopes of obtaining such coverage. The articles that appear here deal exclusively with European and East Asian archaeology, an unintended focus representing the contributions of those scholars who responded affirmatively to our invitation.

It is unfortunate, of course, that certain areas are not covered. We particularly regret lack of coverage on the nationalist practices of archaeology in Israel, Turkey, and other Middle Eastern countries; in North and sub-Saharan Africa; in South Asia; in Mexico; and in Peru and neighboring countries (e.g., conflicting interpretations of Tiahuanaco), but it is also obvious that the issues associated with the relationship between archaeology and nationalist politics, whether considered historically or in terms of contemporary developments, are ubiquitous. The areas covered only illustrate the more general phenomenon of nationalist archaeology which one can find embedded within almost every regional tradition of archaeological research (see Trigger and Glover 1981).

It can be argued that there is an almost unavoidable or natural relationship between archaeology and nationalism (section II below) and that this relationship is not necessarily corrupt or intrinsically suspect. It is not surprising, however, that the blatantly political manipulation of archaeological data is particularly acute today in those areas, such as the Caucasus and Balkans, which are experiencing ethnic wars associated with

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the dissolution of old regimes and the emergence of new nation-states. The rise of ethnically based nationalist sentiments throughout eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union and the construction of various mythologies that accompany them make this collection of case studies timely. We hope that they will also serve to demystify dangerous nationalist myths and, in this way, help to defuse some of today's all too prevalent ethnic tensions.

Silberman (pp. 249–50) correctly observes that the nation-building use of archaeological data even occurs in countries, like the United States, that lack an ancient history or a direct link with the prehistoric past; the concept of “‘ancient-ness’” is relative and “‘may lie in the eye of the beholder,’” making eighteenth-century Monticello or Mount Vernon for US Americans of European descent or the nineteenth-century Little Bighorn Battlefield for both European and Native Americans as emotionally satisfying and time-honored as much older remains from Europe or Asia. More subtly, the borders of contemporary nation-states necessarily influence the tradition of archaeological research, and archaeologists who naturalize them may consciously or unconsciously appropriate another culture area's prehistoric past (as, perhaps, can be argued for the remains of the American Southwest in respect to Northwest Mexico or greater Mesoamerica; see Weigand n.d.).

This fact of the near universality of a relationship between nationalist politics and the practice of archaeology, of course, precludes the realization of our overly ambitious goal for considering it everywhere it occurs. We will be more than sufficiently pleased if this current study stimulates archaeologists working in different areas not treated here to consider how nationalism and other political concerns may affect the practice of archaeology in the areas in which they work. We welcome other collected volumes on this largely overlooked, if implicitly recognized, topic.

I Archaeologists in the service of the state

Trigger (this volume) reviews the long historical relationship between nationalism and archaeology, particularly in Europe during the latter half of the nineteenth century, and stresses many positive features, insisting that nationalism and its relation to archaeology is complex. Under the impetus of nationalism, archaeology abandoned a primary focus on evolution and concentrated on documenting and interpreting the archaeological record of specific peoples. This new focus often led to a much thicker description of material remains and “‘had a positive effect on archaeology inasmuch as it encouraged archaeologists to trace spatial variations . . . more systematically than they had done previously’” (p. 269). More significantly, particularly in colonized countries, the rise of nationalist archaeology –

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“when combined with an awareness of the dignity of all human beings” (p. 277) – helped provide resistance to colonialism and racism, both of which often wore an evolutionary disguise.

One can admire the positive role of an ethnically inspired archaeology that helps build justifiable pride in a specific cultural tradition and stimulates research into the past development of that tradition. The articles collected here, however, are principally concerned with the *abuses* of the relationship between nationalist politics and archaeology, with the *problems* that may emerge within distinctive regional traditions that are associated with concepts of cultural or racial superiority and, particularly, with the questionable agendas of certain political movements and nation-states. The case studies presented in this volume clearly show that archaeologists in the service of the state frequently have manipulated archaeological remains to justify the ownership of land claimed to have been held “from time immemorial” or to support policies of domination and control over neighboring peoples.

Problems, of course, emerge in determining the border between responsible and unacceptable research into a group’s remote past. As Silberman insists, archaeology may always be an unavoidably political enterprise. When, then, does one deem the use of the remote past as *overly* politicized or *excessively* nationalistic and on what grounds? Do we criticize Saddam Hussein’s deliberate manipulation of Mesopotamia’s glorious past to justify his attempted annexation of Kuwait, or condemn the late Shah of Iran’s triumphal celebration of 2500 years of Persian monarchical rule, held a few years before his own dynasty collapsed, simply because we dislike these figures and disagree with their unsuccessful policies? Are the constructions of our own pasts or national identities more acceptable because they are ours?

The cases reviewed here provide guidance and clarify, at least, two issues. First, although archaeological interpretation may constitute a form of narrative and may always be both a scientific and political/literary enterprise, most contributors would insist that there are evidentiary standards by which archaeological reconstructions can be evaluated and emphasize more Silberman’s qualification of the discipline’s “obligation to adhere to scholarly standards of logic and evidence” (p. 250). For example, Anthony’s deconstruction of the noble Aryan and the Great Mother ecofeminist myths in Indo-European archaeology is predicated on the ability to distinguish plausible from unbelievable reconstructions of archaeological data. He forcefully decries the fashionable relativism of post-processual archaeology and insists: “If we abandon our standards for choosing between alternate explanations, we abdicate any right to exclude explanations that promote bigotry, nationalism, and chicanery” (p. 88)

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and “Nationalist or racist agendas are only encouraged in an intellectual environment where the ‘real’ world is visualized as a web of competing ideologies, all of which are equally true and all of which are equally false” (p. 185). In other words, the historical and contemporary distortions of archaeological practice discussed here graphically illustrate the limits of the archaeology as storytelling metaphor: one story is not as convincing as another. Some archaeological tales are not innocuous, but dangerous in that they fan the passions of ethnic pride and fuel the conflicts that today pit peoples against each other.

Celebration of the inevitable political content of our discourse also is fraught with perils. Tong’s discussion of the politicization of archaeology in Communist China, particularly during the Cultural Revolution, is chilling, as is Shnirelman’s treatment of earlier, but eerily similar developments in Soviet archaeology during the thirties. Shnirelman emphasizes S.N. Bykovski’s political awareness of the changes he helped institute in Soviet archaeology during its short transition to an internationalist, anti-imperialist, and anti-racist archaeology. Bykovski’s position seems fashionably post-processual: “Consciously or unconsciously, a historian performs a political task expressing his political interests and inclinations in his choice of a particular topic, in his methodological tools, and in his representation of historical data” (cited in Shnirelman, p. 125). Why were the consequent developments in Soviet archaeology so problematic and the seemingly admirable goals Bykovski and others set for themselves so easily and quickly subverted? We suggest that one answer lies in these archaeologists’ willingness to act “in the service of the state”; their abandonment of evidentiary standards and adoption of the obviously incorrect – as seen retrospectively – linguistic theory of N.Ya. Marr made it all too easy to purge them when state policies changed and Soviet internationalist archaeology was replaced by Russian chauvinist archaeology (and a new cohort of archaeologists also acting, of course, in the service of the state). Behind “useful fools” like Bykovski lurk more astute and useful official “academic authorities,” such as Xia Nai in China (Tong, this volume).

A similar lesson can be drawn from nearly all the case studies presented here. Whether one looks at Stalin’s Soviet Union, Salazar’s Portugal, Franco’s Spain, Hitler’s Germany, Mao’s China, Gamsakhurdia’s Georgia, or Milosevic’s Yugoslavia, an archaeology closely identified with state policy all too readily becomes a distorted archaeology that bends and ignores rules of evidence to promote the glories of the ethnic group in command.

Sometimes the relationship between archaeology and state policy may be more covert than overt, more subtle than direct. Fawcett, for example, traces the changes in Japanese archaeology from a subsidiary discipline in

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the service of the divine imperial cult prior to 1945 to the massively state-financed salvage programs of today. In the course of this transformation the relationship between state demands and archaeological practice became less direct, less overtly manipulated by political authorities. Nevertheless, as archaeologists compromised their independence through their acceptance of state support, the discipline inexorably was invested with a new task: documenting the antiquity and homogeneity of the Japanese people. Archaeological information now has been incorporated into a broader public discourse which revolves around the definition of this new Japanese national identity.

As the chapter by Arnold and Hassmann particularly makes clear, the effects of political interference may continue, creating their own peculiar legacy (the “Faustian legacy” here) that characterizes and pervades the discipline for years. Post-war German archaeologists are reluctant to discuss either the past or present political implications of their discipline. As a consequence, they tend to concentrate on the description and typological classification of materials and to avoid theoretical discussions on broader topics of evolutionary and historical development which have occupied archaeologists in North America, Britain, and other parts of the world over the past several decades. This conservative tendency can be attributed to a caution born of the memories of the racial and nationalist deformation of theory by the National Socialists. Today, however, the overall effect of such conservatism is debilitating.

Ironically, as archaeology becomes less politicized, support for basic research may lessen. Díaz-Andreu’s chapter on Spanish archaeology shows how archaeology was subverted by the ethno-nationalist ideology of Franco’s regime to create an aura of homogeneity throughout the country during a period of strong central control. More recently, other ethno-nationalist ideologies have played an important role in creating senses of identities for people in the autonomies of Catalonia, the Basque country, and Galicia. In both cases, archaeological research, its publication, and the preservation of historical and archaeological sites were affected by the ethno-nationalist agendas of the government. Her chapter describes the generally salutary effects of the adoption of more objective standards of research and interpretation, termed here “modified positivism” and “pragmatic reformism” (not exactly a Spanish processualism, see also Ruiz Rodríguez (1993)), for combating different ethno-nationalisms in post-Franco Spanish archaeology. Unfortunately, as research on ethno-nationalist themes has waned, so too has interest in archaeology declined among both politicians and the general public.

Von Falkenhausen’s chapter illustrates how changes in the institutional and financial support of archaeology in post-Maoist China affected both

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the nature and scale of research and transformed the dominant interpretation of archaeological remains. Specifically, the growing regionalization of Chinese archaeology has resulted in the breakdown of the mononuclear model of the origins of Chinese civilization. By giving greater emphasis to the importance of regional developments, Chinese archaeologists are able to legitimize a much larger part of the country as ancestral to the cultural mainstream, thus encouraging the integration of people throughout China. This growing regionalism is supported by administrative reorganizations and new infrastructural bases of support, such as provincial museums. By emphasizing the importance of the prehistory of their particular region in the development of Chinese society, archaeologists can draw funding from the central government to themselves and away from neighboring regions, while they can also convince the regional government to devote more funds to their archaeological projects.

Archaeology thus appears as a discipline almost in wait of state interference. Dependent upon considerable support for their primary research, archaeologists seem peculiarly vulnerable to state pressures. Can one resist such demands? What roles are archaeologists able to assume, if they refuse to become implicated in state policies? Again, often a fine line separates legitimate from questionable research. Responsible archaeologists are able to determine the *limits* of the evidence they control, what they can and cannot reconstruct with reasonable confidence from the archaeological record. As empirical scientists, archaeologists can distance themselves from objectively non-verifiable myths which resort to divine intervention or similar explanations of the past.

Post-processual relativism provides no guide for determining when one should encourage the conscious construction of national pride and when one should condemn it as excessively chauvinistic. In fact, generalizations are extremely difficult to formulate. In any archaeological or historical analysis, each case must be examined in terms of its specific historical circumstances and be judged by a minimal *universal* standard which requires: first, that the construction of one group's national past not be made at the expense of another's; and, secondly, that concern and respect be accorded all cultural traditions.

As Kohl and Tsatskheladze argue for the highly politicized archaeology of the Caucasus, archaeologists need to be aware of the political implications of their work and be sensitive to the contemporary social setting of their studies of the remote past. They need to recognize and articulate the limits to which the archaeological record can be pushed when identifying prehistoric ethnic groups and the territories they once occupied. Finally, they can distinguish between archaeological and historical reconstructions affecting a people (in terms of group consciousness or historical claims to a

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territory) and governmental state policies affecting those people. In good conscience, one can admit a potentially damaging archaeological reconstruction as the most plausible and objective interpretation of the evidence and then condemn the state policy that bends and distorts that reconstruction for its own questionable political purposes. A similar point is made by Anthony when he distinguishes the ability to protest a racist explanation on ethical grounds from one based on accuracy and conformity with “the facts.” Presumably in most cases, these grounds coincide.

II Archaeology and the construction of national identities

That there exists a relationship between nationalism and archaeology is not a novel idea. As Trigger points out, nationalism has influenced the kinds of questions archaeologists have been willing to ask and the sorts of data they have collected since it became a political force in Europe and other parts of the world, particularly during the last three decades of the nineteenth century. The relationship between archaeology and nationalism has been, nevertheless, a somewhat under-conceptualized, if not prohibited, topic, particularly among archaeologists working in the North American or certain European archaeological traditions, although this is not true for all parts of the world. In Israel (Elon 1994), for instance, the political value of archaeology for nation building purposes has long been appreciated, while in Japan the relationship between archaeology and nationalism has been thoroughly discussed since the end of the Pacific War in 1945 (Fawcett 1990; Tsude 1986).

Trigger’s historical overview presents the issues of archaeology and nationalism within the context of a dichotomy between, first, the “rationalism, universalism and positivism” of French liberalism and, secondly, the “romanticism, particularism . . . and idealism” of German reaction which have dominated Western thought for the past 200 years. Trigger recognizes the impact of social, economic, and political factors on the interpretations archaeologists make of the past, while rejecting the extreme relativist position taken by some post-processual archaeologists. Ultimately, he believes that the growing empirical data base excavated by archaeologists year after year should constrain archaeological interpretations. Archaeologists should steer a course between the rigidity of an extreme positivism, which over-emphasizes the regularity of human behavior, and a radical relativism, which denies our ability to break through our individual and communal prejudices.

Since its inception, archaeology has been deeply involved in nationalist enterprises, above all in the construction of national identities. Silberman places the beginning of this relationship back to the time of the earliest

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stirrings of the Renaissance and a kind of proto-Italian reaction against the High Gothic movement, but the relationship becomes much clearer when nationalist political movements emerge as a political force throughout Europe in the nineteenth century and archaeology matures and becomes institutionalized as an academic discipline. C. Thomsen and J.J.A. Worsaae set up and tested their Three Ages of Stone, Bronze and Iron while collecting and organizing artefacts for the Danish National Museum. Even late nineteenth-century diffusionists, like O. Montelius who believed that the archaeological record documented the passage of civilization from the ancient East to northern Europe, were primarily involved in the reconstruction of the prehistory of their own nation-state (such as Sweden for Montelius). The relationship between nationalism and archaeology seemed so natural and close at so many levels – from the ideological to the material – that it remained largely unexamined, much less questioned, throughout the nineteenth century.

The cases presented here demonstrate, not surprisingly, that the close connection between archaeology, nationalism, and the construction of national identities has continued unabated in the twentieth century. Lillios, for example, provides a detailed case-study of the mechanism by which Copper Age archaeology in Portugal was influenced by nationalist ideology during the years of Salazar's regime (1932–74). Although Salazar stressed the Age of Discoveries (fifteenth and sixteenth centuries AD) as Portugal's greatest time of glory, he was committed to national history and, consequently, formed the Portuguese Academy of History which sponsored archaeological as well as historical research. Lillios shows how research on the Portuguese Copper Age by dedicated followers of Salazar's authoritarian regime, such as Manuel Afonso de Paço and Eugénio dos Anjos Jalhay, glorified this period as a prehistoric "golden age" which resembled, in greatness, Portugal's Age of Discoveries and, of course, the Salazar present.

Similarly, Nelson argues that, for historically ascertainable reasons, ethnic questions have always been paramount in Korean archaeological studies. The result of this focus on a Korean homogeneous ethnic identity has been that explanations have inevitably relied on the unlikely premise that from the earliest times intact groups of "Koreans" migrated into the Korean peninsula from either Siberia or China. Korean archaeology has been and continues to be detrimentally affected by the contemporary political desire to see Korean culture in the past and the present as highly distinctive and homogeneous, a view scarcely sustainable from a more impartial evaluation of the evidence, one not fixated on questions concerning Korean ethnicity.

Archaeological sites are such potent symbols of national identity (e.g.,

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Masada in Israel, or Zimbabwe in, significantly, Zimbabwe) that peoples today are frequently willing to fight over them. Archaeology and ancient history help define a people as distinct and occupying (or claiming) territories that were historically theirs. Thus recently we almost witnessed the outbreak of hostilities over the appropriate name for the breakaway area of the “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”; to the Greeks, use of the classical name of Macedonia by the peoples occupying this former republic represented an unacceptable historical appropriation of Greek history (the glories of Alexander and his successors) and also immediately suggested to them territorial designs on their northern territories. The ancient, archaeologically documented past is alive for many peoples throughout the world to a far greater extent than is often appreciated.

Wailes and Zoll espouse the more encompassing term *ethnic archaeology* in their review of the ethnically biased interpretations of early medieval Insular art. Their chapter presents a central theme around which European history and archaeology have been explicitly or implicitly constructed, viz., the transformation of human societies from barbarism to civilization, and they argue that this transformation has generally been understood within an ethnic frame of reference in which some groups are seen as “retarded” or “primitive” and others “progressive” or “advanced.” Although the debate about the time and place where Insular art emerged has long been couched in terms of ethnicity, barbarism, and civilization, Wailes and Zoll feel that Insular art, in fact, symbolizes the appearance of a new cosmopolitan civilization emerging in Europe during the early medieval period and question whether the early monasteries and Christian communities were ever as ethnically pure as later apologists would like us to believe. In a similar vein, Trigger (this volume, p. 276) observes: “It [nationalism] is also a phenomenon of recent origin. It is therefore a concept of importance to modern people, including archaeologists, rather than to the people who created the archaeological record.”

As Kaiser’s discussion of the hopelessly complex history of the Balkans makes clear, the terms nationalism and ethnicity may almost be synonymous, virtually obviating any need to distinguish between nationalist and ethnic ideologies. This correspondence, however, is a peculiar product of the Balkans’ specific, ethnically troubled history. More generally, we prefer to refer to *nationalist*, not *ethnic*, archaeology, for it is more specific and rooted in the shared history of the emergence of nation-states and the development of archaeology as a discipline. It is useful to distinguish nationalism from other forms of social and cultural group consciousness, such as ethnicity *per se*, and situate its rise within larger historical processes that began roughly during the past two hundred years. Since archaeology as a professional academic discipline emerged during this same period, it is