archaeology international

RESEARCH UPDATE

Exploring Ancient Identities in Modern Britain

Chiara Bonacchi[*], Richard Hingley[†] and Thomas Yarrow[‡]

This brief update introduces the framework of a newly funded research project entitled 'Iron Age and Roman Heritages: Exploring ancient identities in modern Britain' to be undertaken collaboratively by Durham University and the UCL Institute of Archaeology, and supported by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (2016–2019).[1] The project assesses how the Iron Age, Roman and, via smaller pilot studies, the early Medieval pasts of England, Scotland and Wales are drawn upon today, situating this understanding in an international context (**Fig. 1**). Through this case study, the project team are also documenting the wider values of interacting with the past for different individuals and groups, and framing a debate that looks for ways to connect up the interests of stakeholders, as well as outlining directions for further coordinated research.

To study the use (and, indeed, the neglect) of materials, practices and ideas from the past in contemporary times, we are using a combined approach developed through previous research conducted individually by each of the team members. This approach

Figure 1: Boadicea at Westmister Bridge, London, England. Credits: Jessica Mulley; CC-BY-NC license: https://creativecommons. org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/.

revolves around three core foci that are described below.

1. The 'longue durée' perspective. Examining the heritage of an approximately one thousand-year period allows us to observe the unfolding and reception of a duality represented across Europe which opposes 'civilisation' to 'barbarism' (Kristiansen 1996: 38). A variety of conflicting concepts arise from how this opposition has played out (Beard & Henderson 1999: 47), and the way they interlink reflects the extent and complexity of the territories that make up the British Isles, the histories of the people who live in these places and their relationships to those overseas (Hingley 2015). Powerful ideas about European cultural origins, stemming from

[*] UCL Institute of Archaeology, London WC1H 0PY, GB

[†] University of Durham, Department of Archaeology, GB

[‡] University of Durham, Department of Anthropology, GB

Corresponding author: Chiara Bonacchi (c.bonacchi@ucl.ac.uk)

the writings of classical authors who drew a distinction between 'civilization' and 'barbarism', have been used to contrast native peoples with Roman invaders. These notions were also invoked later on to establish connections with a classical past sometimes in a search for legitimisation. Following this line of enquiry, we can discover how not only isolated aspects of Iron Age, Roman and early Medieval pasts (e.g. relating to military life, movements and migrations, sustainable economy, etc.) but, much more importantly, also (dis?)continuous long-term historical structures (e.g. frontier/s and frontier regions) have become part of modern social tissues in Britain, and the underlying reasons for this.

2. The making of heritage values. Most archaeological research aims to establish the meaning of the past as a subject of study distanced from the present. Smith and Waterton's (2012: 2) concept of 'authorized heritage discourse' defines the tangible monuments and ancient objects that have been kept and displayed by archaeologists and heritage practitioners as the resources identified to prioritize their own self-interests. Heritage can, however, have far broader meanings: the 'uses, values and associations' carried by the historic environment for various stakeholders (Smith and Waterton 2012: 1). How these values are made, unmade and rehashed, however, requires close scrutiny of the field of 'expert practices' to understand the micro-politics of different positions, while contemplating the extent to which some of these 'professional' actions and ideas are internalized by 'non-professional' actors (Jones & Yarrow 2013: 22).

If some heritage values derive from the meanings assigned to specific ancient identities, periods and places, others do not. Individuals and groups engage with the past for a number of reasons. These range widely from altruistic motivations of 'sharing and generosity' linked to online volunteering (e.g. Oomen & Arovo 2011) through to the desire to spend time with one's own family when visiting a museum or heritage site (e.g. Moussouri & Roussos 2013). A body of literature has assessed heritage values, variously theorized and subdivided into typologies encompassing intrinsic and extrinsic values, social and economic values, etc. (e.g. de la Torre 2002; Dümcke & Gnedovsky 2013). This literature is lacking a coordinated study, thus the intention is to research the value of public interactions with the past occurring in different contexts, via diverse media and platforms, and to look in depth at one case study and at different stakeholders.

3. Integrated methodology and the digital conundrum. In recent years, the proliferation and diffusion of web infrastructures have effectively challenged established epistemologies in public archaeology and heritage studies, as they have in the social sciences more generally (Bonacchi in press). Through the online space, it has become possible to investigate problems related not just to Internet cultures but also to offline ones, by interrogating the same web resources via study designs that can be both extensive, looking 'to collect larger amounts of data for quantitative types of analyses', and locomotive, examining 'in a continued way the effect of time passing' (Bonacchi in press; Housley *et al.* 2014). It has already been underlined (e.g. Kitchin 2014) that the analysis of online data can open unprecedented opportunities for research, thanks to its greater spatial and temporal detail. This quantitative-qualitative joined-up strategy will be used to elicit the manifold attitudes and behaviours towards Iron Age, Roman and early Medieval heritages, and to identify the wider values of interacting with the past current in contemporary Britain.

Through the multi-faceted approach outlined above, the project will explore new ground and attempt to set novel agendas in the fields of digital heritage, public archaeology and social anthropology. It aims to create innovative research-led and research-based teaching in synergy with existing courses and paths in the heritage studies, world archaeology and archaeological science domains at Durham University and UCL Institute of Archaeology (as, for example, in the MSc in Computational Archaeology – see 'News' section in this issue).

Notes

[1] The project team is composed of Richard Hingley (PI), Chiara Bonacchi (CI), Thomas Yarrow (CI), Kate Sharpe (Research Associate).

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

References

Beard, M and **Henderson, J** 1999 Rule(d) Britannia: Displaying Roman Britain in the Museums. In: Merriman, N (Ed.) *Making early history in Museums*. Leicester: Leicester University Press, pp. 44–73.

Bonacchi, C in press Digital Media in Public Archaeology. In: Moshenska, G (Ed.) *Key Concepts in Public Archaeology*. London: UCL Press.

De la Torre, M 2002 *Assessing the values of Cultural Heritage*. Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute. Available at: https://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/pdf_publications/pdf/assessing.pdf.

Dümcke, C and **Gnedovsky M** 2013 *The Social and Economic Value of Cultural Heritage: Literature Review*. EENC paper (European Expert Network on Culture).

Hingley, R 2015 Working with descendant communities in the study of Roman Britain: fragments of an ethnographic project design. In: Hayes, K H and Cipolla, C N (Eds.) *Entangling Colonial Narratives: Comparative Archaeological Approaches.*

Gainesville: University of Florida Press. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.5744/florida/9780813060705.003.0009

Housley, W, **Procter, R**, **Edwards, A**, **Burnap, P**, **Williams, M**, **Sloan, L**, **Rana, O**, **Morgan, J**, **Voss, A** and **Greenhill, A** 2014 Big and broad social data and the sociological imagination: A collaborative response. *Big Data & Society*, 1(1). DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/2053951714545135

Jones, S and **Yarrow, T** 2013 Crafting authenticity: An ethnography of conservation practice. *Journal of Material Culture*, 18(1): 3–26. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1359183512474383

Kitchin, R 2014 (Jun) Big Data, new epistemologies and paradigm shifts. *Big Data & Society* 1(1): 1–12. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/2053951714528481

Kristiansen, K 1996 'European origins – "civilisation" and "barbarism"'. In: Graves-Brown, P, Jones, S and Gamble, C (Eds.) *Cultural Identity and Archaeology: The construction of European communities*. London: Routledge, pp. 138–44.

Moussouri, T and **Roussos G** 2013 Examining the effect of visitor motivation on observed visit strategies using mobile computer technologies. *Visitor Studies*, 6(1): 21–38. DOI: 10.1080/10645578.2013.767732

Oomen, J and **Aroyo L** 2011 Crowdsourcing in the Cultural Heritage Domain: Opportunities and Challenges. In: C&T'11. Proceedings of the *5th International Conference on Communities and Technologies*, 29 June–2 July 2011, Brisbane, Australia. New York: ACM, pp. 138–149. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/2103354.2103373

Smith, L and **Waterton, E** 2012 Constrained by Commonsense: The Authorised Heritage Discourse in Contemporary Discourse. In: Carman, J, Skeates, R and McDavid, C (Eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Public Archaeology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 153–171. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199237821.013.0009