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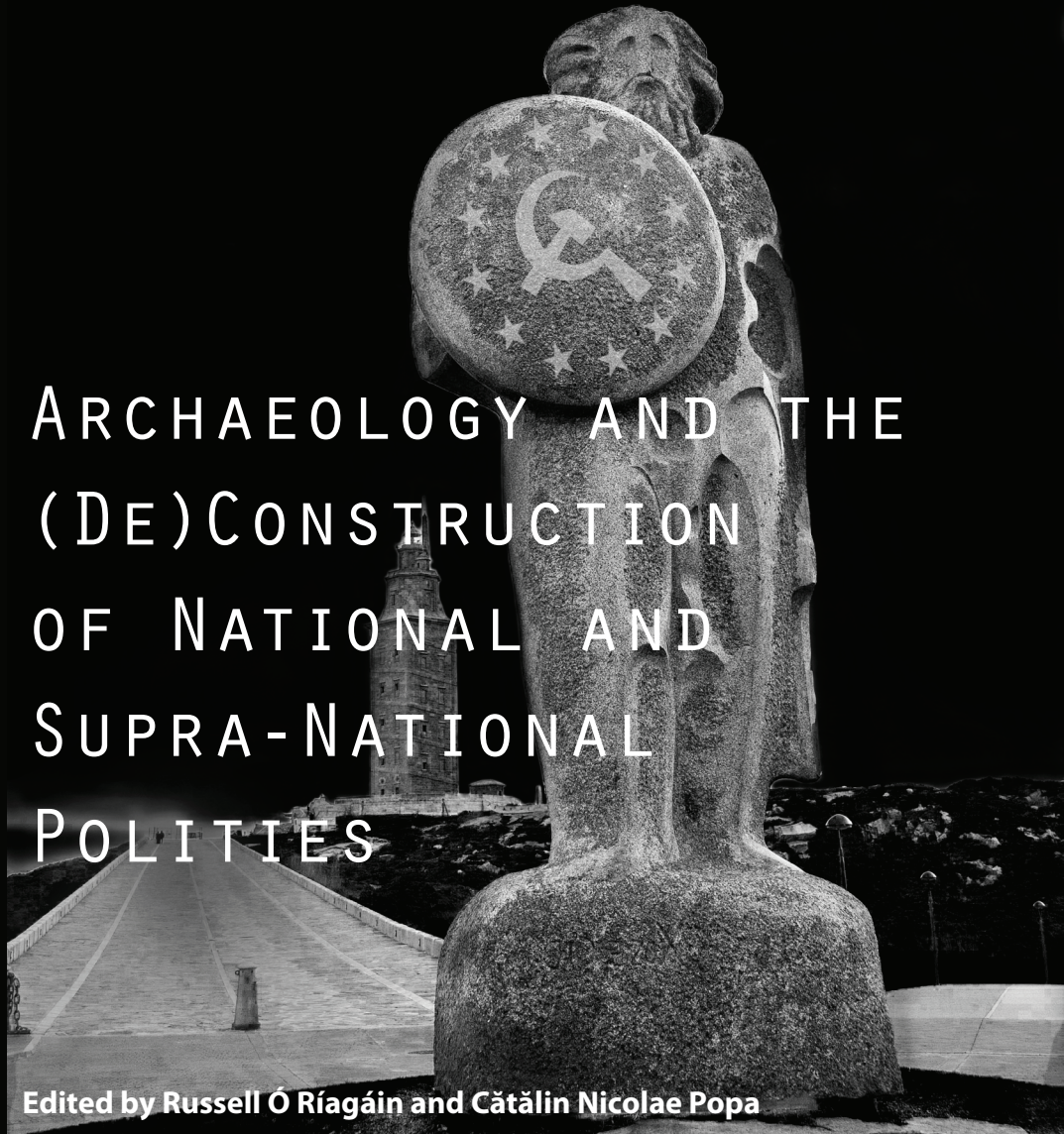
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ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE (DE)CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL AND SUPRA-NATIONAL POLITIES

Edited by Russell Ó Ríagáin and Cătălin Nicolae Popa

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**Archaeology and the
(De)Construction of
National and
Supra-National Polities**



Edited by Russell Ó Ríagáin and Cătălin Nicolae Popa

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The *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* is a bi-annual journal of archaeology. It is run on a non-profit, voluntary basis by postgraduate research students at the University of Cambridge.

Although primarily rooted in archaeological theory and practice, *ARC* increasingly invites a range of perspectives with the aim of establishing a strong, interdisciplinary journal which will be of interest in a range of fields.

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Volume 27.2 Archaeology and the (De)Construction of National and Supra-National Polities

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Introduction

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The world sits at an interesting crossroads. Behind it lays the route to nationhood for its constituent nations, originating in the romantic nationalism of the nineteenth century and beyond. In another direction lays a route to further integration, to supra- and trans-national geopolitical configurations with national identity relegated to the status of regional identity. Another, perhaps, leads to further fragmentation, with populist rhetoric rearing its head in recent years due to recession, war, ethnic conflict and a number of other causes/processes. This has led to a new intensification of discussions of issues such as national identity, transnationalism and national sovereignty. One region where these issues are being discussed with particular intensity is Europe with topics like the 2012 Fiscal Treaty polarizing ideology to an extent not seen in decades.

“History is never for itself; it is always for someone” (Jenkins 1991: 21). Produced knowledge can be a very important power resource, and the selection and promotion of certain aspects of produced knowledge even more so (cf. Berger and Luckmann 1966; Foucault 1970; 1977). The producers of knowledge are thus very important for the maintenance and legitimation of the position of a ruling group. They normally act to preserve their own position in society, and are often, if not always, part of that ruling group, which in turn can mean they act to preserve the position of the ruling class. The following famous quotation is apt in this respect:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force (Marx and Engels 1976: 67).

Can this be said to apply to archaeology and archaeologists? Can it be stated with any level of confidence that archaeologists can, at times, be agents of the maintenance of political authority?

It has been convincingly argued that archaeology is inevitably linked to politics and nationalism (Kohl 1998). The historical development of the discipline was in many instances directly linked to the coagulation of the national idea, both in terms of an ideology and an actual political entity. However, one should avoid the pitfall of embracing this relationship and accepting it as *sui generis*. Archaeology is not nationalist and political through its very nature; it is rather extremely sensitive to political and national factors. While it may be said that this sensitivity arises from the way the discipline is institutionalized, as archaeologists are often employed by state institutions, such as universities, museums *et cetera*, the true reason lies in the potential of its products: the narratives of the past.

Regarding these products of archaeological research, it must be asked: *cui bono*? Seeking an answer to this query raises other questions.

The first is: who is archaeology actually for? Ascertaining exactly who the intended audience is can tell us a great deal about that research. The dominant and most pervasive answer to such a question is ‘the people’, or ‘the population’, but what people and what population? Are the products of archaeological research for the benefit of the population of the national state within which that research has taken place, or for the population of the earth in general? This might seem a facetious question, but it is far from it. Closer to the reality of the situation is that there are a number of overlapping audiences, so there are a number of other potential answers to the question. One is knowledge for its own sake, and by extension, for other producers of knowledge. But there are other audiences, which must now be discussed in terms of the ‘*cui bono?*’ question.

The beneficiaries of archaeological knowledge and its explicit audience are often not one and the same. Professional archaeologists must be paid. Research agendas must often rely on research funding. The majority of research that is carried out in any discipline is partly shaped by the wishes of those holding the purse strings. This means that the field (*sensu* Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) within which archaeological scholarship is produced in any period, including our own, is usually shaped and regulated by the ruling elements of that society. Therefore, archaeological knowledge can be a power resource for institutions or individuals holding socio-political power, who pay for archaeological research and its promulgation in order to legitimate and retain their position in society.

Used with the veneer of academic *authoritas*, upstanding monumental remains, items of portable material culture and other subjects of archaeological research can be important props in reproducing national solidarity. They can be used in justifying a group’s solidarity, an imagined community (Anderson 1991), which exists more in people’s minds than physical space. They can provide anchors for identity, instilling a sense of permanence of tenure in a region for this imagined community. One only has to think of the metonymic role that objects of potential archaeological study play in various societies. Taking one well known example, it is quite

common in the United Kingdom for its inhabitants to use 'the Crown' when referring to an array of things, such as the state itself, the Queen, the government and its related institution, in addition to being an item to base group solidarity around. A seat of national government, or the residence of a particularly important figure, *past or present*, can also serve the same function, examples are to be found in the Kremlin, the White House, Westminster, Brussels, etc.

The rhetoric of nationalism has proven extremely important in the processes at work in the formation of the national states in our modern world system. By having a set of tangible symbols, both in the form of portable objects and actual places—themselves physical space transformed by actors themselves linked to each other by this shared emotional bond—a profound attachment to homeland (*sensu* Tuan 1977) is possible. This can in turn, with the right mix of academic authority and popular sentiment, be scaled up spatially and transformed into nationalist ideology. Archaeology had had an important part to play in promoting an emotional tie to land and people, strong enough for people to be willing to die for it. The results of this effect are still visible in many areas, such as the Balkans (Kaiser 1995) or Transcaucasia (Kohl 1993).

However, archaeology can be a subversive activity. It is possible to use archaeology to critique and even pick apart these often arbitrary socio-political formations based on imagined communities. By doing so, archaeologists can help deflate potentially dangerous tensions based on ethnic identity by helping to illustrate their historically arbitrary and collectively imagined nature.

A salient example of archaeology as a subversive activity might be found in the cases of separatist regions seeking independence. Here, in some cases, archaeology is used to show the nature of the legitimation for the territorial extent of a national state and the collective similarities of its inhabitants for the imagined entities that they are. This is even more common in colonial cases, especially seeing as nationalism seems to be a necessary phase of the post-colonial condition (cf. Anderson 1991, 113ff

; Young 2003, 59–66). Young notes that ‘nationalism is Janus-faced: before independence good; after independence bad’ (2003: 62). The same can be said of the relationship between archaeology and that (post)colonial nationalism. Archaeology can be a necessary tool in providing historical legitimacy for self-rule of nations colonized from Europe, and pride-in-themselves for the subaltern inhabitants of these regions, which general consensus at present. However, it could be stated that once independence is obtained the *status quo* of the relationship between archaeological knowledge and socio-political power resumes. It might also be said that the example is actually superficial since the key relationship has always remained the same in form: the use of archaeological knowledge to legitimate and geopolitical entities and the imbalance of social power within them. It may be that it is only the socio-political context that changes, whereas the underlying relationship between the two remains the same.

Another point worth considering is that many states are in a position where institutional authority and its spatial extent have been legitimated to such an extent as to become reified. Here, reification is such that the legitimacy of the state seems as though it is of the natural world, a thing outside human influence, rather than the social construct that it is (cf. Lukaćs 1971; also Berger and Luckmann 1966). This means that state authority, and the legitimation process on which it is based, can absorb and even fund such subversive activities, as they carry with them little threat for the maintenance of authority. This can have the effect of making criticism part of the mainstream—disempowerment though what might be termed ‘repressive tolerance’ or a sign that state power and popular ideology is such that the legitimacy of the state is in little danger from criticism (cf. Elias 2000; Marcuse 1969). This might be regarded as a pathological aspect to liberal society. This has to be borne in mind for all archaeological research attempting to deconstruct national, or any other form of, identity. If liberal democracies, through their funding of universities, pay for research criticizing the arbitrary nature of national identity and its related spatial manifestations, can that critique be of any validity outside of the ivory towers of the academic sphere?

Following on from this, a third point to note, is that in many countries today, the political influence over archaeology has become so institutionalized in the hierarchy of the discipline, that those who would like to point out the situation cannot do so out of concern for their career. The nationalist discourse is often actively sustained by archaeologists in high-ranking, very influential positions, who in some cases are directly linked to leading political parties. Consequently, detractors are discouraged from expressing their doubts, as taking such actions can have negative effects on their job prospects. This situation, which can be encountered even in countries with a century-long democratic tradition, has determined a number of authors to renounce their contribution to the current volume and has probably dissuaded many more from attempting to put forwards their thoughts.

Finally, it needs to be added that all the above points are valid not only in the case of national states, but also apply to supra-national entities such as empires, transnational urban networks and geopolitical multinational formations such as the European Union (EU). In the case of the latter, its impact on archaeological funding has been substantial and much appreciated, as a considerable amount of today's research within Europe is conducted with EU finances. Nonetheless, it is easy to observe that while EU funded projects are clearly aimed at producing excellent quality research, there is often a second dimension. The results of some archaeology projects contribute in legitimizing the existence of a large political entity, such as the EU, by offering historical precedents.¹ Additionally, the way some of the projects are organized, containing institutions from several different European countries, and the conditions imposed in some of them, that one cannot apply for the project to an institution from their native country, suggests that such research does not only contribute to producing a narrative of the past, but has also the effect of forging an European identity among researchers (Maikel Kuijpers, *pers. comm.*).

¹ See for example the 1991 Venice exhibition about 'Celtic' Europe (Moscati 1991). In the last ten years, the attention has switched more towards the Neolithic and the Bronze Age.

These issues are important to ponder at present. Thus, outside of the present socio-political situation, archaeology is perhaps entering another period where discussion of ethnicity and identity come to the fore. This has also been encouraged by the growing prevalence of studies on population genetics and stable isotope analysis, made possible by technical and methodological advances in the biological and physical sciences. One only has to peruse the internet for a brief period of time to see how data and methods from these studies are already being misused. Therefore, we cannot ignore issues such as the relationships between archaeology and the legitimization of socio-political institutions, the exercise of power and identity formation.

This issue of the *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* was born from a series of discussions we had at various points early in our research at Cambridge. We had each noticed how national identity in our homelands was constructed along similar lines. We noted that in both cases group solidarity had been built around a perceived golden age in the past, which provided a present day group with a pedigree which they could both identify with and be proud of. In relation to this, we discussed how archaeology could be used to deconstruct these identities as easily as construct them, and about how it could be done in the cases of our home countries. It was originally intended to write a collaborative article on this, as indeed we have, but it was quickly realized that the subject needed a much broader discussion, and it is hoped that this issue, with the series of articles it contains, will go some way to facilitating a new, more prevalent, series of discussions on the related issues in archaeology and beyond.

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