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Museums and the Origins of Nations

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Abstract

Research into the ways in which museum exhibitions tell stories about the origins of nations suggests that these are, in some ways, dissimilar from many traditional historical and archaeological narrative texts in that they depend, in part, on the physical experience of moving through space. Using case studies this paper pays attention to the way in which this immersive process enables museums to tell contradictory and contrasting stories of the foundation of nations. The notion of the ethnic origins of nations and the way museums re-invent nations over time are examined. Websites and guidebooks are also considered. Representing work in progress this paper suggests other areas of investigation for further study.

Introduction

This paper is based on work carried out for Eunamus, (<http://www.eunamus.eu/>), on the grand narratives of the origins of the nation in Europe. It examines the way in which exhibitions in National Museums telling a national story appear to today's visitor, and how these displays can be experienced, read and understood. It acknowledges that readings of the museum, as made by visitors (McLean and Cooke 2000), and by curators, will be different, and that each individual will draw on a range of cultural and historical references and experiences to read the museum. However this analysis of some current exhibitions in selected museums considers how exhibitions offer certain types of narratives, particularly those relating to the origins of the nation. The report attempts to identify the ways in which these display certain implicit and explicit notions of these origins and how the nation is reinvented over time. As Ascherson points out in history '[T]here is an almost universal tendency to slip backwards in time as emotions mount' (Ascherson 2003: 37). He points out that France now starts in the Gaulish/Celtic millennia before the Romans, having once been understood to have been created in the reign of Louis XIV, the Sun King. The Germans default to Germanic warriors ambushing Romans in the great northern forests. Meanwhile

'In the nineteenth century the "Oxford School" of historians laid down that England's "when" began in the Anglo-Saxon period (although the English people have obstinately continued to think that the Welsh-rooted Tudor dynasty and Good Queen Bess brought England to its true self).' (Ascherson 2003: 37-8)

Likewise National Museums, as institutions which collect evidence for history and archaeology, tend to present evidence of an ancient communal past to explain how and why nations came into existence even when some nations, for example Germany and Turkey, are modern constructions.

Narratives of origin are not, however, permanent, though they are often presented as essentialised and unquestioned. They change as circumstances change as this Scottish example illustrates. Towards the end of the last century the Scots revived the Medieval Wars of Independence with England as the time when the nation found itself. The Declaration of Arbroath, 1320, an appeal to the Pope against the English King's attempt to establish his overlordship over Scotland during these wars, is a key text in the National Museum of Scotland.

As you enter the Kingdom of the Scots section you see a small case in front of you and on either side of the walls are two inscriptions in black ink written in script. One on the right states 'As long as one hundred of us remain alive we will never under any condition be brought under English rule.' The one on the left states 'For we fight not for glory, nor riches, nor honours, but for Freedom alone, which no good man gives up but except with his life'

The text panel explains the background to these assertions:

Scotland defined

The Declaration of Arbroath

These still resounding words appeal for freedom in the face of conquest by England. The 'Letter of the Barons of Scotland' to Pope John XXIII dated at Arbroath on 6 April 1320, was a declaration in the name of the *'whole community of the realm (italics in original)'* of their determination to retain the independence of Scotland and to support King Robert Bruce. The words in their original form in the declaration were in Latin:

The text panel then repeats the words in Latin.

The Declaration of Arbroath has enjoyed a resurgence of interest within popular culture, particularly in the United States where the 1995 film, *Braveheart*, starring Mel Gibson, articulated a modern sense of 'freedom' which resonates within America today. On 6 April some states celebrate 'Tartan days' with state tartans to 'commemorate the signing of the Declaration of Arbroath that inspired the American declaration of independence' (Minnesota State Legislature Resolution, cited Bruce 2007: 127). In Scotland the Declaration has been used repeatedly in support of popular devolutionist and independence movements, again partly prompted by enthusiasm for the film (*ibid*). In the nineteenth century when Scotland was, on the whole, satisfied with its place in a Britain that dominated world politics and economics, the Declaration and the Wars of Independence attracted less attention. The National Museum of Scotland opened in 1998, just after the Scots had voted for a devolved Parliament, their first since the Act of Union of 1707 when England and Scotland joined together and the Scots sent representatives to the Westminster parliament. We can, perhaps, at the very least see this focus on the Declaration of Arbroath in the Museum as a sign of the reassertion of a separate Scots identity within the Union.

Methodology

Research was undertaken in the British Museum, The Imperial War Museum, London, The National Maritime Museum, London, the V&A Museum, London, The Imperial War Museum North, Manchester, The National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh, The National War Museum, Edinburgh, German Historical Museum, Deutsches Historisches Museum (DHM) Berlin, The Neues Museum, Berlin, The Pergamon Museum, Berlin, Norway's Resistance Museum (Norges Hjemmefrontmuseum), National Gallery (Nasjonalgalleriet), Norway, the Armed Forces Museum (Forsvarsmuseet) Oslo, Historical Museum (Historisk Museum), Oslo, The National History Museum (Historiska Museet), Stockholm, the Army Museum (Armémuseum) Stockholm and the Military Museum, Askeri Müzesi, Istanbul, Ancient Orient Museum, Istanbul, the Archaeological Museum, Istanbul, Hagia Sophia Istanbul. While only some are designated national museums all display national stories.

The report outlines some of the first findings of this ongoing research. As a British citizen of English extraction the author recognises that she views most of these museums as a foreign visitor, without the specialist insider knowledge that a citizen possesses. In some respects this is no bad thing for all National Museums present the nation to people from other countries as well as to their own citizens. This report presents a general overview of some of the research to date, with selected case studies, and further research will be presented in later publications.

In all museums the author collected and analysed printed material and looked at websites. The main part of the research involved detailed analysis of selected exhibitions, looking at text, objects, layout, lighting and location within the museum. In the national Museum of Scotland two senior curators, involved in the development of the exhibition designs of the Museum when it opened in 1998, were interviewed. This research is part of a collaborative project and Dr Andy Sawyer's parallel report outlines his research into grand narratives relating to maritime nations, borders and Vikings. All the research was undertaken between December 2010 and April 2011 and thus refers to exhibitions as they existed during that period. Several of them were relatively

new, such as the History of Sweden exhibition in Historiska Museet, Stockholm, opened in 2010. Others were older, such as the national Museum of Scotland opened in 1998, The Military Museum Istanbul 1993 and, older still, the Medieval Gallery in the Historical Museum in Oslo, created in 1979 by the architect Sverre Fehn. A decision was taken early on in the project to review permanent galleries only. While science, art, geology and natural science museums also offer versions of the origins of the nation the research here focuses on museums that ostensibly offer a historical and archaeological narrative and whose collections were mainly those which could be classified as archaeological and historical.

Research into the construction of national narratives in historiography suggests that the nation is the lens through which most historians establish their sense not only of what they do but who they are. Berger points out that national history writing continues to flourish not only in post communist nations but also throughout Europe (Berger 2009). Many historians do not look beyond their boundaries and compare their histories or, if they do, they start from the premise that their own nation's history is 'just "there"' (Breuilly 2009:18). This is despite the fact that 'No serious historian ... thinks that there exists an "essential" nation, most truly itself within particular borders, or in a particular fashion of poetry, or at a particular season in the past' (Ascherson 2003: 37). Inadvertently historians, by accepting the notion of nationhood, assume certain mental constructions such as the nation in time and in place. Even when it appears not to exist, historians seek its origins, attempting to distinguish signs of embryonic development in the past; at the same time, they draw parallels between previous versions of the nation state and society and politics today, often attempting to use history to explain current issues.

This report approaches the nation from the perspective of the national museum, a place where material culture, architecture and the experience of the visitor in a multi media space influence the creation of master narratives. The kind of history written in a museum is not the same as that written in books or on the web. Writing is only part of this narrative and history is only one form of knowledge through which the story is told. The disciplines of archaeology, science, art, geology and geography all produce meanings that complement, supplement and compete with those of the historical narrative and material culture can be interpreted through all these lenses. However, in the process of exhibiting the nation, museums find themselves imitating the role of historians. Even when they attempt to deconstruct the nation they imply its existence. Objects chosen to debunk myths about origins may, by the impression they make on the visitor, function differently, particularly if the visitor omits to read the text accompanying them. For example, the national Museum of Scotland has an internationally important collection of Roman material, much of which is on display in the Prehistories Galleries. Despite strong textual prompts to view the Romans as the alien other the overwhelming number of Roman artefacts, along with their quality, gives the impression that the Romans were part of the story of the Scottish nation. Moreover, museums tend to exhibit what they have, and thus certain types of narrative may be omitted simply because the collections do not exist to allow their exposition.



Figure 1: One of the large Roman commemorative inscriptions in the national Museum of Scotland
(©The author).

Historians have identified the ways in which nations are narrated, the key common master narratives which impact upon our understanding of the development of the nation over time, and Berger suggests we can work out master narratives by asking the following questions:

...[W]ho are the central actors of national histories?

Which historical figures populate the national stage?

Who are described as enemies of the nation?

Who has agency?

How is the passing of time structured in national histories?

What importance is attached to concepts such as progress or contingency?

What periodisation does the story follow?

What origins are constructed?

(Berger 2009:34, *tabulated by author; original appears as normal text*)

This report will focus on the last and ask how do museum exhibitions deal with origins? In so doing it will touch on all other aspects of the questions. Certain important commonalities can be discerned. Ethnicity is ever present even when, for example, as in the case of Historiska Museet in Stockholm, its importance is overtly challenged. Religion also appears as a common denominator; the nation is often understood through the lens of its Christian or Muslim destiny. Many nations locate their beginnings in the medieval period when the material culture of the church and the ruler provide symbols of unity and status. The nation is periodically re-invented over time, thus possessing several, sometimes competing, and occasionally contradictory narratives of origin. Progress is implicit even when there are dreadful setbacks such as military defeats or plague. However, before we go further we need to consider how nations and nationalism have been defined.

Definitions of the nation and nationalism

Historians often use the concept of the nation as a kind of shorthand for a group of people who live within a clearly demarcated territory, have common legal systems and a sense of communal participation in the life of the group, share a common culture, claim autonomy of government with outside recognition of their existence as a nation state and tell stories as to how and why their nation came into existence (from Smith 2008: 12-3). For them the nation cannot exist until the conditions that allow this shared concept of nation and state come into existence, and for most nations this only occurred in the last two hundred years with notable exceptions such as England, where even modernists appear to recognise some elements of early national feeling (Gellner 1983 and Hobsbawm 1990).

This 'modernist' view (Smith 2008) tends to place the origins of nations in the recent past, at a time when mass education, democratisation and media enabled groups of people to collaborate effectively together with or against other such groups. This civic – territorial notion of the nation (Smith 2008: 13) relies on historiographical interpretation of the ideas and actions of mainly middle class and elite groups who overthrew traditional monarchs and emperors and justified many of the reforms they demanded in the name of the 'nation' as they conceptualised it at that moment in time. Museums are seen as one of the agents by which the nation 'imagines' itself and encourages others to accept its imaginings (Anderson 1991) and are thus understood to be agents of the modern nation state. However, this instrument of modernity, the museum, often presents the nation existing before the creation of the modern state. Thus a study of the origins of the nation in current museum displays illustrates the way in which the modern nation is a paradoxical mix of old/ primordial and the new/modernist ideas. Indeed research suggests that the historiographical attempts to locate the origins of the nation through text in books and written articles, rather than material culture and symbolic representation, may underestimate the importance and persistence of material culture in producing the notion of the nation. This materialised nation exists before modernist ideas acknowledge its formation. It also illustrates how modern notions of the nation, for example, the idea of mass participation in the life of the nation (Connor 1994 cited Smith 2008: 14) are projected back through time within displays. Such an impression may not, in fact, have been the intention of the curators and designers. However, we will see that the very act of accumulating material culture from a particular geographical region and displaying it tends to imply that the nation is ancient, even if the text accompanying the objects attempts to challenge this assumption as it does, for example, in the Historiska Museet, Sweden and the Museum of Scotland.

While some origin stories of nations suggest that they demonstrate continuities across space and time and some nations remain imagined as the same essential entity during long periods, all nations have been subject to periodic re-imaginings. These may be reactive, for example, after a military defeat as experienced by the Norwegians in 1940. This narrative is implicit and explicit in various museums in Oslo. In the National Gallery, part of the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, a painting by Aulie Reidar in 1943, titled *9 April 1940*, shows a lorry driving out of a snowy scene with a coffin draped with the Norwegian flag. This suggests that on this day, the day the Germans invaded, (note not the day the Norwegians surrendered), the Norwegian nation, as it existed in the land of Norway, died along with many combatants. In the Norwegian Armed Forces Museum (Forsvarsmuseet) in Oslo the nation survives after 1940 by

allying itself to Britain, as many individuals, sailors, military personnel and civilians fled to the UK. The museum makes a great deal of their contribution to the British war effort and it in a sense equates the British war effort to the Norwegian one. Churchill's image (the same as used in the Churchill Museum in London) and British resistance are foregrounded.



Figure 2: Visitors can hear excerpts from speeches by King Haakon VII and Winston Churchill in the Norwegian Resistance Museum by touching the screen (©The author).

Similarly in the Norwegian Resistance Museum Churchill and his voice become symbolic of the Norwegian nation's rebirth. He is positioned alongside King Haakon VII and speeches by both in 1940 can be heard sequentially. The King and his government fled to Britain in that year, and it was from London that he broadcast to his German occupied nation, offering them leadership in exile. The nation as a self governing entity thus disappears under Nazi rule but, at the same time, survives in an imagined way, becoming one with Britain in its fight against Nazi Germany through the contribution its citizens made to the British war effort. It later emerges as an independent country again, its honour and pride intact, because of the level of resistance civilians showed to German rule, both at home and abroad. Thus the Second World War becomes the testing ground in which the Norwegian nation, despite defeat and humiliation, rises phoenix like to take its place in the world once more.

Other examples of the nation reinventing itself are pro-active, reflecting historical constructions of the past which can be positioned to demonstrate positive aspects of a nation to which museums draw attention. For example, in the Museum of Scotland a great deal of emphasis is placed on the role of the Enlightenment and the industrial and agricultural revolutions in transforming the nation into a prosperous contributor to the great British industrial revolution. The visitor moves from the Medieval and Early Modern galleries up stairs to a hall in which the great Newcomen engine dominates. Scotland emerges in the eighteenth century more secure, more prosperous and, despite union with England in 1707, more sure of her identity as a world leader of a new age of industrial progress.

European values

Most of the case studies for this part of the project have been taken from Western Europe with its particular constructions of nationalism based on notions of shared values of liberalism and democracy (Jones and Graves-Brown 1996: 9). Here certain essentialist views on the ethnic origins of nations have been challenged, albeit they still exist to a greater or lesser extent in all museums. Here also there are some common assumptions about the way in which European civilization developed. Rome was influential in the dissemination of classical culture and is understood to be foundational to the notion of Europe and some nation states such as Britain and France (Jones and Graves-Brown 1996: 10). At the same time historically there was a second, apparently contradictory, dominant myth of origin which focuses on the indigenous nature of European origins and ‘situates “Barbarism” as the original source of uncorrupted freedom providing a vital alternative to the despotism of the Classical empires’ (Kristiansen 1996: 138). This can be seen in the Museum of Scotland where the Roman invader is depicted as a brutal tyrant with little or no influence on the native peoples. Certain indicators of civilization such as writing are seen here to be instruments of conquest and unjustified imperialism.

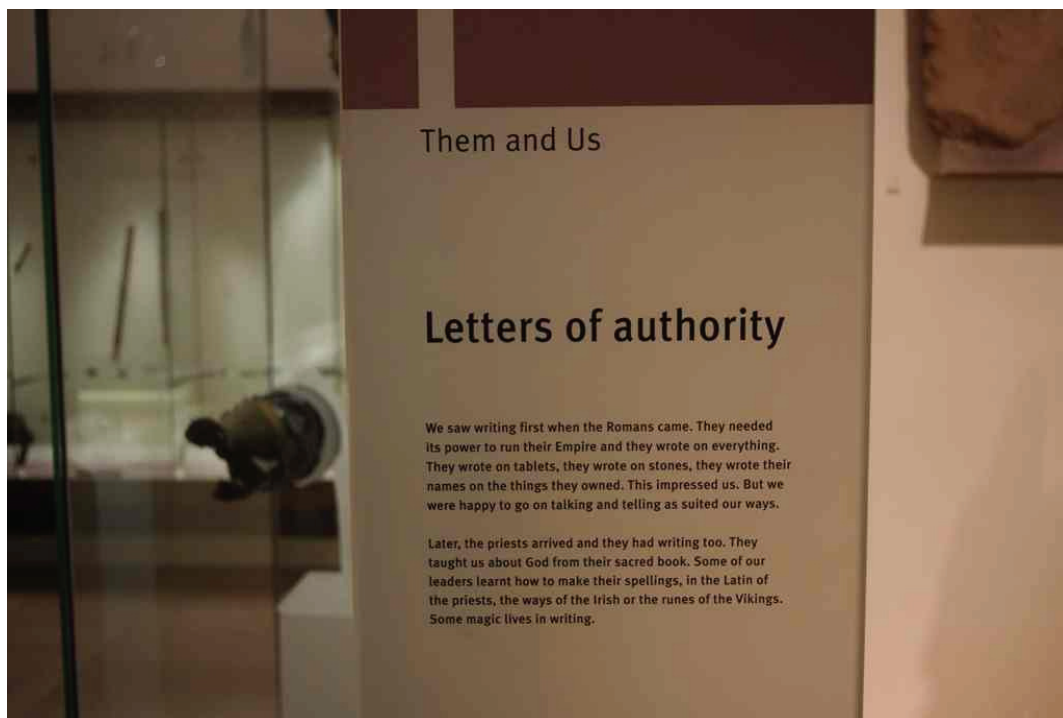


Figure 3: This text panel in the national Museum of Scotland suggests that the indigenous Scots were indifferent to Latin and adhered to their own traditions (©The author).

Similarly the Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin, positions the Romans physically opposite to the Germanic tribes in the gallery and presents the latter as the heroes who stopped the expansion of the Empire. However, Rome and Greece are also understood to be key in the foundation of European identity and both had empires and influence far beyond modern Europe. The Pergamon Museum in Berlin exhibits the Classical World as ‘our’ possession. Only when visitors walk through the reconstructed Ashtar Gate do Europeans, trained to see the classical past as the foundation of civilization, move into the exotic other, beyond Europe’s boundaries (Knell 2010: 23). In Turkey the heirs to Greece and Rome, Byzantium and its

peoples, are all displayed as the 'other' in both the Istanbul Archaeology Museum and the National Military Museum. These museums trace the origins of the nation to Attaturk, who is still revered, and to the Conquest of Constantinople in 1452. For the Turks understand themselves in their museums to be ethnically and culturally descended from the peoples who migrated into what is now Turkey over several centuries, adopted Islam, and conquered the ailing Christian Empire, heir of the classical world. In so doing they imposed in its place a tolerant but emphatically Muslim state which owed nothing to this past. Text in the Archaeological Museum about the Conquest of Constantinople in 1453 and its impact on the Byzantine world through whose gallery the visitor has just passed, states unequivocally that

Within a brief period the city had adopted a new identity characterised by Ottoman-style architecture and way of life.



Figure 4: The Market Gate of Miletus, Pergamon Museum, Berlin (©The author).

Interestingly the Pergamon Museum in Berlin exhibits much classical material from the geographical area that is now Turkey including the Pergamon Altar and the Market Gate of Miletus. In the past Turkey has indicated that it would like such material culture returned though it accepts that many of the pieces were taken with the consent of past sultans. In this case the Turkish material in Berlin is unlikely, in the current political climate and with existing laws of restitution, ever to be returned. Moreover, unlike the Greeks who seek restitution of the Parthenon Marbles from the British Museum, the Turks do not appear to regard such material as representative of a key part of their cultural identity as the Greeks do the marbles. Rather it represents a desire to own material culture originating from within its current national boundaries.

All National Museums position the nation within a religious framework, so Turkey is not exceptional in its conceptualisation of the nation through its Islamic destiny. Hale (1994) suggests that most people in the Middle Ages would not have been aware of the concept of Europe but would have been conscious of Christendom, and Christianity remains a defining identifier of nations and of Europe even today. The Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin, displays considerable amounts of medieval ecclesiastical material and foregrounds the Imperial nature of the state, thus implying that the Germans were heirs and defenders of the Christian Roman Empire by their association with, and rule by, the Holy Roman Emperor. Later, with the rise of Lutheranism, equal emphasis is placed on the Protestant character of much of Germany, suggesting that the nation was in some way chosen by God to be the leader of the reformist movements, even though not all the states that now constitute modern Germany were Protestant, and Germany today retains both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism as part of its religious inheritance.

Museums are physically experienced by the visitor and often this religious origin of the nation is encountered by movement through the Galleries. On ascending the stairs to the new displays in Historiska Museet, Stockholm, one is met by a crucifix suspended above the displays, casting a shadow across the embryonic nation. Visitors pass below this great object and, even if they do not read the text which explains that 'Christianity with its network of parishes and bishoprics will be the most important of the pillars sustaining the young Swedish monarchy' (Anon 2010, no page number), they are reminded of the Christian nature of the early state.



Figure 5: The Medieval Galleries, Historiska Museet, Stockholm. Note how the crucifix casts its shadow (©The author).

In the Norwegian Historical Museum Oslo, (part of the Museum of Cultural History) visitors move from the Viking galleries into a room adorned with the magnificent Chancel Ceiling of Al

Church, Hallingdal, Buskerud with images of the creation, Christ's birth, the last supper, the crucifixion and the resurrection. Around the gallery the glories of medieval Christian architecture, sculpture and painting, exhibited dispassionately in traditional glass cases, emphasise the Christian nature of medieval Norway. Only when visitors have passed through this section will they come to material culture relating to objects from daily life.



Figure 6: The Medieval Galleries in the Historical Museum Oslo are dominated by this decorated chancel ceiling (©The author).

Archaeology, growing out of its nineteenth century context has tended to 'accept modern political boundaries as frameworks for analysis of the past' (Jones and Graves-Brown 1996: 12). Despite attempts to break away from this intellectual constraint, national museums, on the whole, perpetuate this tendency, albeit sometimes unwittingly. Only the British Museum amongst our case studies, positions itself as a museum of world cultures. It deliberately eschews the notion of national archaeological frameworks in some galleries, though even there its older exhibitions tend to group material culture by national origin. More recent galleries such as the Medieval Europe gallery, as its name suggests, attempt a more international view rather than national perspective on objects and events.



Figure 7: The Royal Gold Cup, owned by many English monarchs. Medieval Galleries, British Museum. The text panel stresses the international history and significance of this object (@The author).

Different periods in the distant past have been adopted at various times as foundational moments for European civilization: the Celts and the Iron Age, the Bronze Age and the Neolithic have all been seen as key periods of time when Europe moved out of a savage early period into a time of progressive cultural and social development (Jones and Graves-Brown 1996: 14). The Bronze Age, for example, has been understood to be the time when Europe developed the foundations of a competitive ‘capitalist’ and individual society in contrast to a more ‘totalitarian’ and ‘despotic Near East’ (Childe 1925, 1958, cited Jones and Graves-Brown 1996: 15). However, in the Ancient Orient Museum, Istanbul, the Bronze Age Near East is exhibited as a civilization geographically partly located within what is now Turkey and outside modern day Europe. Thus do nations reinterpret archaeological narratives to suit their views of themselves in the present. Some national museums attempt a type of post-processual archaeology such as that advocated by Hodder (1991) who focussed on the diversity of individuals rather than monolithic cultural norms (Creighton 2006:11). For example the Historisk Museum, Oslo, for the most part avoids the use of traditional archaeological terminology and instead focuses on general human interest themes. For example the text ‘The burial grounds where men and gods meet’ is used besides a recreated mound into which have been inserted three perspex viewing portals and

behind which are a range of objects placed in burials. Other examples of such text include 'Hosting great feasts brought power and status' (3193) and 'only a few carry swords or large lances: they carry spears.' We are not told who the 'men' or 'they' are. Such approaches thus carry with them the danger that, in avoiding a chronological narrative anchored in traditional time frames, museums will confuse visitors.



Figure 8: The side of one of the recreated burial mounds in the Historical Museum, Oslo. Objects from the mounds can be seen through these viewing holes (©The author).

Themes

Bearing in mind all these many varied ways in which national museums understand or exhibit the origins of nations over time, the final part of this paper focuses on two main themes:-

1. The ethnic origins of nations
2. Nations re-invented over time

The ethnic origins of nations

Smith (2008: 30) points out that there are several different concepts of ethnic or ethnic groups upon which nations are premised. For the purpose of this report we will focus on the idea of so called full blown ethnic communities or ethnies whose members are united by shared memories and traditions. These can be defined as '*named and self-defined human populations with myths of common origins, shared historical memories, elements of common culture, and a measure of ethnic solidarity*' (Smith 2008: 30-1, italics in original). These ethnies often have members abroad and have common symbols and values. Their stories may involve self sacrifice and are often linked to landscapes which have been defended in times past. What is important here is felt or imagined history which is crucial to a sense of group identity (Smith 2008: 41). These ethnies do not necessarily involve racial

groupings and identification but may well do so. National museums, whether deliberately or unwittingly, promote such ideas in their galleries even when, as for example, in Scotland and Sweden governments adopt an official civic nationalism that attempts to ignore history and ethnic ties to the nation, replacing it with something akin to an allegiance to common values.

Case study: The British Museum's website on Anglo-Saxon England

The British Museum now positions itself as a museum of world cultures and, although it appears to try to avoid a distinct British history narrative, there are places in the Museum where this story becomes manifest. The older galleries exhibiting post Roman and early Medieval Europe present some cases which are dedicated to British history and archaeology, and the website illustrates some traditional forms of thinking. This is an extract from the website's description of the origins of the Anglo-Saxons and their contribution to the formation of the English nation state.

The Romans officially withdrew from Britain in AD 410. It is from around AD 450 that we notice large-scale evidence for new and different kinds of people in the archaeological record of the area today called England.

Following a new burial ritual, the dead received grave goods. Dress accessories suggest that a different costume was worn. Weapons and hand made pottery are of previously unseen form and decoration. We also see new house forms and the adoption of a Germanic language that would later become English.

Historical sources mention incomers from regions called Angeln and Saxony, so we call these newcomers Anglo-Saxons. Their way of life can indeed be paralleled in northern Germany and Denmark, but also in northern France, the Netherlands and Scandinavia and there would have been an element of the original Romano-British population.

By the seventh century a number of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms had formed. The treasures from the ship burial at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, for instance, may bear witness to an East Anglian royal house. At the same time Christianity became established, the first towns formed from trading centres and the Anglo-Saxons started minting their own coinage.

With time, the kingdoms were united, notably under Alfred the Great in the ninth century, when the Anglo-Saxons faced major opposition from Viking settlers in the east and north of England. By the 950s, one unified kingdom emerged.

The Anglo-Saxon collection of the British Museum reflects all the different influences and developments in the make-up of Anglo-Saxon England. It starts with the first settlers and illustrates with later pieces how England became one of the major artistic and intellectual forces in early medieval Europe.

http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/cultures/europe/anglo-saxon_england.aspx
accessed 10 June 2011.



Figure 9: One of the Sutton Hoo exhibition cases in the British Museum, which contains the helmet from the burial with the following caption: 'Helmet from the ship-burial at Sutton Hoo Anglo-Saxon, early 7th century AD. From Mound 1, Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, England' (©The author).

The helmet is an iconic object. It was excavated from a burial mound in Suffolk in 1939 and the story of its discovery, along with the date (just before the outbreak of war), along with its relative uniqueness (there are only four other such helmets in England), as well as the mystery of the identification of the owner have all helped to make this one of the best known archaeological objects in England and one which defines the nation. For example it appears on the cover of the Penguin History of England series *The Anglo-Saxons* by James Campbell, 1991.

This written text on the web is a traditional ethnic story of a nation which adopts both a racial ethnic interpretation of past inhabitants of the British Isles and, at the same time can be understood within the framework of Smith's ethnic – people with common myths of origin. It follows an established historiographical tradition of waves of invaders overpowering indigenous peoples and replacing their culture with something completely different. The native Britons are acknowledged but then ignored. The destruction or exile of many of them is implicit rather than explicit. They do not contribute anything to the new England which is being founded around this time. To a certain extent one wonders to what extent this view of post Roman Britain was influenced by the fates of indigenous groups in the new worlds of North America and Australia. Such a view of the Saxon invasion is still commonly held today but it is challenged on several fronts. The Germanic peoples are now understood to have inhabited the British Isles before the Romans. We might thus begin to see the traditional narrative of origin of England, the arrival of the Anglo Saxons, a new wave of immigrants who drove out, killed or enslaved the indigenous ancient British and Roman inhabitants, as part of a pattern of migration that had been taking place for centuries before the Roman invasion, and probably continued during the Roman occupation itself. Russell and Laycock (2010: 207) suggest that the Britons survived in far greater numbers than hitherto assumed, and point out that the Saxon kingdoms appear to have been built on the basis of British tribal states, which suggests a degree of interaction between Saxons

and Roman Britons not usually acknowledged in traditional stories of Saxon migrations. Pryor's thesis that an indigenous culture flourished before, during and after the Roman period (Pryor 2005) and that many of our traditional legends such as that of King Arthur had their roots in prehistory, comes to a similar conclusion about the continuity of culture and peoples. Carver, Hills, and Scheschkewitz (2009)'s study of the Anglo Saxon cemetery at Wasperton suggests that the inhabitants of this post Roman settlement exhibited characteristics from Roman, Pre Roman British, Anglo-Saxon, pagan and Christian traditions, indicating a community of Britons adopting other practices as time went on. Moreover some of these ideas have now been aired in popular archaeology and history texts (Harper 2007).

Both the Museum of Scotland and Historiska Museet Sweden attempt to deconstruct ethnic stories of nations. Yet despite their best efforts they only partly succeed for a variety of reasons, one of which is dealt with here. Both museums accompany their objects with maps illustrating where they were found. Inevitably given that these are both national museums the maps outline the nation and, in both cases, the collections displayed are only those found within the current national boundaries. Thus inadvertently both museums present the nation as a construct whose origins can be found back before recorded time in the objects and peoples who once inhabited the landscape. In this they have unwittingly adopted one of Smith's key identifiers of the ethnic group, a group of people attached to a landscape. Moreover the use of maps is a very political act. Batuman, drawing on Harley (1988, 1989, 1990) and referring to the work of Foucault suggests that maps are products of 'socio-political power relations' (Batuman 2010: 222). For, as he points out, maps are understood to be scientific and therefore accurate, appearing objective. However, what appears to be objective is, in fact, a 'representation' and 'the gap between the real and the representation is filled with power relations consumed within socially constructed meanings' (Batuman 2010: 222, with reference to Monmonier 1996 and Wood 1992). Maps are tools by which groups of people claim territories and Anderson (1991) refers to the process of mapping as a means of imagining the nation. Moreover, as we have seen, Smith considers land associated with forebears as a key marker of ethnies. Maps therefore become tools by which a group of people, implicitly linked by ties of history and ethnicity, assert their nationhood by depicting the land to which they are currently emotionally bonded. We can assume that neither Historiska Museet nor the national Museum of Scotland intended to imply this ethnic link, indeed both go out of their way to explain in text how the current national territory was not a nation during the past in the modern sense of the word. However, the map is a powerful tool that visually asserts the contrary.

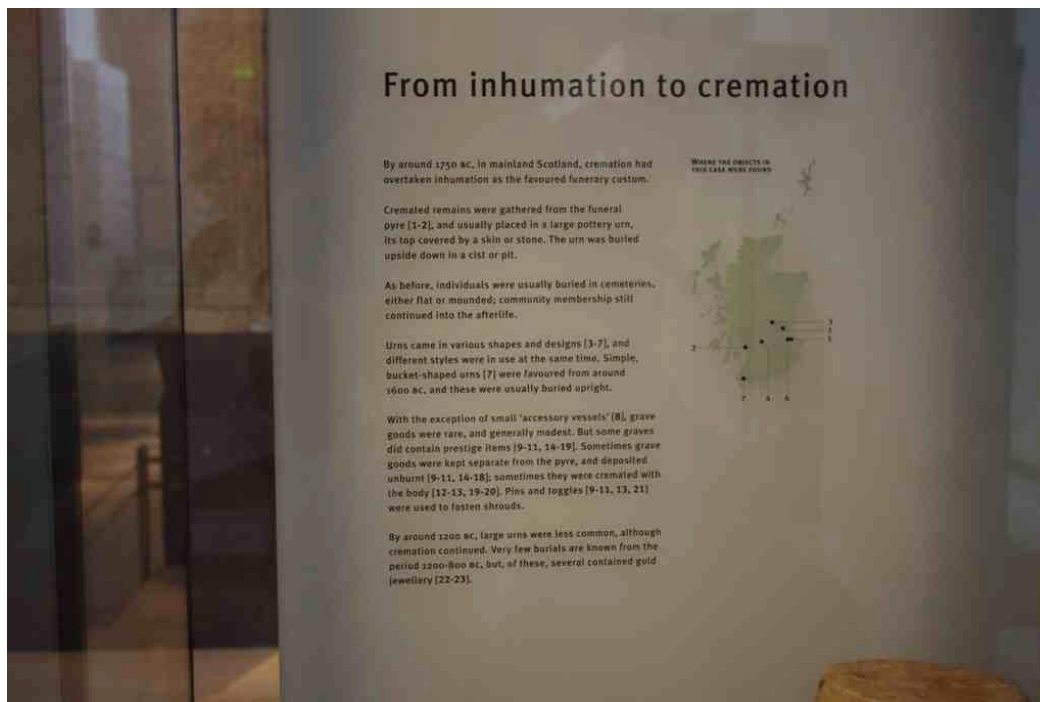


Figure 10: Text panel from the Prehistories Galleries in the national Museum of Scotland with a map of modern Scotland (@The author).

Nations re-invented over time

The physical space of the museum lends itself to periodisation. Rarely are museums located in one large space, though there are some new-built museums such as the Imperial War Museum, North Manchester, where the main gallery is one huge area. Many national museums are located in older buildings that have been adapted. They therefore use what they have and each room provides a narrative that often can stand alone. Sometimes narratives are extended through several rooms and the nation changes only when the room layout does so. For example, the Armemuseum, Stockholm, redisplayed in 2000, exhibits the military history of the nation, a nation which reinvented itself several times in the course of the last few centuries. It is housed in an 1867 artillery arsenal converted in 1877 into an Artillery Museum. The spaces are used to emphasise the periodisation of Sweden's history. For example, a defining moment in Sweden's history, The Great Northern War is illustrated by a moving scene shows the deaths in the snow of Swedes attempting to retreat to Sweden. Two men lie dead in the snow. Another soldier with his back to them tries to light a fire. The audio guide explains that this is Arnfeld's death march 1718-19, during which time the leader travelled to Sweden by sleigh in furs. The kingdom was bankrupt, 200,000 Finnish and Swedish farm boys were lost. The audio guide tells visitors that this episode ended the 'so called age of greatness. Sweden retreated to its position as third rate power on the remote fringe of Europe.' The scene occurs at the end of a long series of galleries through which visitors have progressed starting with the exhibition 'The Power and the Glory 1649 – 1679', and moving through rooms displaying 'The Era of Absolutism (1680 – 1700)' and 'Triumphal March towards Catastrophe (1700- 1709)' and then 'Carolinian Catastrophe (1709 – 1721),' of which this is the last life size diorama, before visitors turn right and enter another room where the decline of the Great Power is narrated. They then follow the story back to the entrance of this floor of the museum, walking through rooms illustrating the new non-aggressive Sweden.

The representation of the rise of Sweden to a great power is physically located on one side of this floor of the museum, and its decline and re-invention as a peaceful, smaller nation with no colonial ambitions, is demonstrated on the other. Space thus re-enforces the idea that the nation becomes something different –visitors physically move through space and imaginary time in a different direction when they view the decline of Sweden from that experienced previously when they were engaged with the narrative of Sweden’s rise to power. The Army Museum like others provides examples of what Wallerstein (1998) describes as ‘TimeSpace’; ways in which human beings conceptualise space and time through different types of historical thinking.



Figure 11: Deaths in the snow, Armémuseum, Stockholm (©The author).

Conclusion

All case study museums place a great deal of emphasis on religion, in particular the role of Christianity or Islam in the Middle Ages as part of the nation’s identity. Nations look to ethnic origins to demonstrate longevity but the narrative they tell is often fragmented, though implicitly and explicitly links are made between prehistoric or early medieval peoples and current populations. The nature of the museum, a space through which people progress, often divided into sections or small rooms, means that the nation tends to be remade across time with new ideas, people and events appearing immediately after earlier ones with no story linking them. Sometimes connections are made between these narratives but often they are nonexistent and, such is the museum convention, this appears to be accepted by visitors, normalised within the framework of the museum experience. Research into visitor responses to national stories which is part of this project may provide some interesting insights into the ways in which people read these changing narratives. Conflict is a recurring theme which will be the subject of another set of

reports within this project, and is difficult to disentangle from the main themes selected for study here: ethnic origins of the nation and the re-invention or re-discovery of the nation over time.

While research is ongoing for this project and findings are still in their early stages we can begin to see some new themes amongst the museums studied so far. National stories in museums rely on material culture that, on the whole, represents the elite. However, most case studies also include material culture that is used to demonstrate the lives of ordinary people so that the nation is, implicitly, more than, and older than, a modern construction of the wealthy and educated. Peasants are ubiquitous and deserve study in their own right. Interestingly the relatively recent Medieval Galleries in the British Museum, one of the few that does attempt a comprehensive study of European culture as a whole, focuses almost entirely on elite culture and this is one example of a national museum not attempting an overt national story but displaying world cultures. In this particular gallery, cultures are aestheticised and understood to be illustrated only by the 'best' objects, thus excluding the majority of European populations during this period. Other topics emerging in various national museums include the idea of a certain type of national character that reappears over time and is integral to the narratives the nation tells about itself. Within all museums the origins of the nation reflect not so much what they once were nor, necessarily, what they are now, but how they aspire to be seen today and in the future.

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