

Session title: FICTITIOUS PASTS: A DANGER FOR EUROPEAN ARCHAEOLOGY?

Organizer: Anthony Harding, University of Exeter, UK

Discussant: Margarita Díaz-Andreu, University of Durham, UK

Time: Friday morning

Room:

Session abstract:

The recent Bosnian pyramid fiasco has drawn attention to the way in which the creation of fictitious pasts can be used for political and nationalist ends, and has reignited the debate over the right of archaeologists to dictate to the public which past they should believe in. In a multivocal world, everyone can promote theories about the ancient past, whether or not based on sound evidence, and usually these are harmless since no action follows from them. Sometimes, however, such theories can take on an altogether more menacing aspect, endangering not just the well-founded mainstream beliefs about the ancient world, but also the scientists who hold to those beliefs.

The session will look at a range of case studies, from Europe and beyond, in which fictitious pasts of various kinds have been created, and consider to what extent such views are damaging to science and to scientists. Offers of papers are welcome on the various aspects of this debate, including the criteria by which unusual theories about the past should be judged, the role of the professional archaeologist in dealing with the media and the public when assessing such theories, and the courses of action which should follow when activities that are dangerous in social and political terms ensue.

Paper abstracts:

HOMELANDS IN THE PRESENT AND IN THE PAST: POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF A DANGEROUS CONCEPT

Phil Kohl, Wellesley College, USA

This paper critically reviews the concept of a homeland: its use in reconstructing the prehistoric past and its relevance for addressing contemporary political disputes among different ethnic groups. Memories of one's ethnic origin are long, selective, and typically defined in a manner that maximizes the spatial extent of the imagined homeland, excluding or minimizing the presence of others on it. An individual's actual lived experience of one's home, on the other hand, is short and frequently redefined during the course of one's lifetime. This paper focuses on the political implications of this exclusionary and primordial claim to a maximally defined territory. Examples of homelands from the USSR and former Soviet-controlled

territories illustrate some of the problematic consequences of this dangerously mythical and romantic concept.

DANGEROUS IDENTITY? ARYANISM IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

Victor Shnirelman, Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Moscow, Russia

In the last two decades the “Aryan idea” was picked up and fruitfully used by many ethnic nationalists throughout Eurasia.

A search for the “Slavic-Aryan civilization” was launched by the archaeologists who advertised a settlement of Arkaim as the most ancient town and the center of the “Aryan civilization.” This view was gratefully picked up by mass pop-literature and the regional school textbooks in the Ural history. A fast growth of “folk archaeology” was also encouraged which rushed to trace the “most ancient Slavs” and their prehistoric achievements.

The “Aryan idea” met a negative response in the Turkic world where they began to Turkify Arkaim together with its prehistoric inhabitants.

I will discuss a variety of the Aryan idea in Eurasia and demonstrate that today it enjoys many regional interpretations. Yet, the common feature of almost all of them is still a search for the enemy.

FICTITIOUS PASTS: SOME FINNISH CASES

Leena Söyrinki-Harmo, National Board of Antiquities, Finland

The reason for creating fictitious pasts can vary from in principle harmless social entertainment or artistic visions to a compulsion to correct the image of a group or a region. The common problem for archaeologists is when to interfere in the public discussions. Are we aware of the impression our interference creates amongst the public and does it affect our working conditions? And can we rely on that professional archaeologists share our opinion?

The Finnish efforts of discovering “runic stones” lasted for years. The opinions of some local inhabitants were strengthened by scholars with linguistic education whereas the archaeologists and geologists did not believe in the authenticity concerning the stones. The conflict was open and the local newspaper published rather insulting articles of the competence of Finnish – and Finnish speaking archaeologists.

Another widely known case is the “Temple of Lemminkäinen”: A mythological compilation of Finnish and Scandinavian myths seasoned with linguistic misinterpretations and mixed with fictional ancestors of the creator. There were large “excavations” in order to find the subterranean “temple”. Yet, the various actors, mainly from abroad, whose competence in archaeology was doubtful, were not given permission to excavate ancient monuments in order to reveal golden statues.

ARCHAEOLOGY, ANCIENT HISTORY AND ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN THE CAUCASUS

Askold Ivantchik, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia/CNRS, Bordeaux, France

Numerous ethnic conflicts, some of them in the form of local wars, took place in the Caucasus shortly before and after the collapse of Soviet Union; some of them are still not resolved (Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Chechnya, Ingushetia). Historical arguments often borrowed from the ancient history of corresponding peoples played an important role in the preparation and ideological justification of these conflicts. The influence of local historical schools on the development of local nationalism was very important and professional historians and archaeologists occupied leading positions (including highest ones) in the politics of several Caucasian republics (Armenia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia etc.). The paper will discuss some concrete cases of the use and misuse of historical arguments borrowed from Ancient History in the ideological preparation and in the escalation of national conflicts in the Caucasus. Some peculiarities of local historical schools, which propose their own versions of the history of their peoples, often very different from the commonly accepted ones, will also be discussed. The question of the applicability of the “historical” approach to modern national conflicts will also be raised.

INVENTED PASTS AND OFFICIAL ARCHAEOLOGIES

Anthony Harding, Exeter University, UK

In 2005 a new phenomenon hit the newsstands: a series of alleged pyramids near Visoko in Bosnia. Excavations have taken place since 2006, and are providing much of interest to the local public and to nationalist politicians. Condemnation of the project as a fraud by the EAA and other professionals has had little effect. Why is this? Why do people want to believe in a totally spurious past? In this paper I will consider some of the factors that lead to such situations, and ask whether official versions of the past are in some way defective. Are they themselves inventions? How can we legitimise our (perhaps rather boring) version of the past in the face of the excitement of new pasts which conventional archaeology has ignored or failed to spot, allegedly through ignorance or arrogance? And does it matter? Does it harm anyone if people want to believe crazy things? The paper will argue that while heritage professionals have a duty to take all points of view into account, they also have a duty to tell the truth as they see it, relying on the accumulated weight of evidence assembled by archaeologists. The dangers of other pasts only become significant if they lead to manipulation of the unwary for political ends, as has been the case in Bosnia.

FICTITIOUS PASTS, ENDANGERED FUTURES

Eleni Stefanou and Anna Simandiraki, Southampton University, UK

Debates about ‘proper’ and ‘improper’ archaeologies, perhaps symptomatic of postmodern societies, usually concentrate on standards of practice. They assume that professional archaeological associations and institutions are homogeneously united against ‘others’, the media, the public, religious or nationalist fanatics; and that accredited archaeologists themselves do not represent publics, empathetic citizens, amateur enthusiasts. Even worse, they take for granted that such archaeologists work in politically, financially, racially and academically unbiased environments, where they have freedom of speech and where archaeological ethics are much more robust than in the public domains.

In our paper, we paint a more nuanced picture, in which *all* intellectual and tangible production of accredited archaeologists is just as entangled in national, institutional and cultural identities, ethics and politics. By using specific examples from Greek archaeology to illustrate such complexities, we propose that accredited archaeologists be re-examined as *part* of the same media, nationalist narratives and publics they are so often, conveniently, distinguished from. We conclude with some thoughts about the reasons why the broad range of ‘fictitious’ pasts emerges, while also emphasizing the types of (whose) futures they may endanger.

ADDRESSING THE COMPLEXITIES OF INVENTED HERITAGE: THE CASE OF THE “BOSNIAN PYRAMIDS”

Tera Pruitt, Cambridge University, UK

Many professional archaeologists are not fully engaging with the complexities of pseudoarchaeology. Pseudoarchaeology is a product of complex social processes, therefore should be studied as such and addressed with sufficiently diverse range of methodologies or approaches. Most professionals who have attempted to combat pyramid mania in Bosnia have been (somewhat condescendingly) directing their pursuits at educating an ignorant public; however, the public in Bosnia is not exactly ignorant – people want and need these pyramids, and they have a stake in keeping the notion alive. This paper argues that invented heritage, such as pseudoarchaeology in Bosnia, can be an extremely complex socio-political subject matter whose complicated nature has been misunderstood, if not neglected. This study shows a dissonance between the simple professional pronouncement “this is pseudoscience”, and the complex story that emerges from a more in-depth examination. It stimulates discussion by examining two very important ways that archaeology is being invented at Visoko: (1) through participation and (2) through performance; by Semir Osmanagić, the mastermind of the project, by the general public, by experts (antagonistic, manipulated, and supportive), and by the media. If archaeologists wish to discourage or ‘combat’ invented heritage like pseudoarchaeology, then they need to be much more aware of what they are addressing. The burden to provide the public a sense of credibility in archaeology as a social science rests on mainstream archaeologists. If they wish to address a case like Visoko, then understanding the social processes which create pseudoarchaeologies is the first step in a productive direction.

WHEN A FICTITIOUS PAST DOES MATTER: PAST AS BATTLEFIELD AND TOOL IN THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

Predrag Novaković, Ljubljana University, Slovenia

The paper deals with abundant cases of fictitious pasts, abuses and instrumentalizations of archaeological and historical sciences, inventions of traditions and creations and re-creations of national mythical narratives in the former Yugoslavia, with particular respect to the period between 1980 and 2000, with the peak in the wars of the 1990s, and the ways in which political and religious leaders boosted and exploited them. The paper is not so much intended to list the abundance of such cases but rather to deal with the major structures which conditioned and determined the ways these fictitious pasts were produced, exploited and in some extreme cases even re-lived or re-staged. In particular, three major structural patterns which occurred in recent decades will be reflected: a) exploitation of myths of *sui generis*; b) accentuated religious intolerance and c) myths of *Antemurale christianitatis*.