

## Prehistory as propaganda

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### Prehistory as nationalism

The end of the colonial era saw the birth or rebirth of many nations, especially in Africa and Asia. Not only did these events transform the face of the globe, they also had an immediate impact on archaeology. Nations wishing both to legitimate their own existence and to foster feelings of national pride began to define their own past and paid tribute to the achievements of their ancestors. Such feelings were especially strong in those countries where the colonial rulers had consistently subordinated the history of local peoples to that of the conquerors. In Rhodesia, as it was then called, the British were unable to accept the hypothesis that the magnificent structures at Great Zimbabwe were built by 'mere natives'. 'Foreigners' (King Solomon, the Queen of Sheba, etc.) had to be invoked to explain these sophisticated structures. It was not until several generations of archaeologists brought accumulated evidence to bear on the subject that Great Zimbabwe became known to the world as a uniquely African development (Garlake 1973; Summers 1963).

Hunger on the part of these peoples to establish their cultural ancestry, and to right the historical balance, led to the expenditure of large sums of money on the creation of national antiquities services and on the training of local archaeologists. In some cases archaeological artefacts became potent symbols of national pride and unity. More prosaically, such artefacts appeared on postage stamps and in souvenir shops; the sites themselves became rallying places and even national shrines. The new state of Israel used the imposing fortress of Masada as the location where new recruits were sworn in to the army, for it was there that the Jewish Zealots had held out with great bravery against the occupying Roman armies before committing mass suicide. During the Iraq/Iran war in the early 1980s Saddam Hussein set about a massive programme of restoration at the ancient Mesopotamian capital of Babylon. This site was seen as the embodiment of national unity of which all Iraqis, whatever their religious or family allegiance could be proud. It did not matter if they were Shia, some of whom felt close to their co-religionists in Iran, or Sunni; Tikritis (the clan to which the President belongs), or non-Tikritis - they all had a stake in 'the glory that was Babylon'.

More practically, many states poor in natural resources have come to realise that their archaeological heritage is also an important financial asset, providing them with attractions for tourists from hard currency countries. The past becomes an invisible export and a powerful tool for public relations. Here, archaeology is well and truly out of the ivory tower and stands amidst many attendant temptations - both ideological and financial. If the past is not quite as glorious as might be wished, or the facts are somewhat inconvenient, perhaps it would be a good idea to manipulate them; if, on the contrary, other carefully selected 'facts' prove useful in the battle for hearts and minds they can be embellished; if the monuments are not quite picturesque enough, perhaps they should be improved. It is not necessary to quote examples of the over-restoration of monuments in Europe or abroad. Each person will have their pet hate among the sites they know well where inappropriate materials and modern restoration techniques, together with tourist

tat, have corseted and prettified the place almost beyond recognition.

The misuse of the past for political ends is also widely recognised as a problem. The devil, they say, can quote scripture to prove his purpose! The states of Israel and Saudi Arabia have both, in the past, provided examples of the ideological manipulation of archaeology. Extremist factions among the first Israeli archaeologists saw their job not as uncovering the past history of the region, but as proving the truth of the Old Testament and so the right of the Israeli people to live in the Promised Land of their forefathers. The common heritage with other Semitic peoples living in the area and their great cultural contributions were ignored or deliberately destroyed. Even today some traces of this attitude survive.

In Saudi Arabia, for a brief period in the 1930s, the same attitudes could be seen in reverse. Christian and Jewish monuments are said to have been destroyed so that no other religion should pollute the cradle of Islam. In other countries active destruction is not necessary, a campaign of neglect and silence is sufficient to alter the history books. Armenian monuments in Eastern Turkey bear witness to this type of treatment.

Saddam Hussein again provides a couple of interesting examples. In spite of his infamous human rights record, especially in the marshes of southern Iraq and in Kurdistan, he portrays himself to the people of Iraq as Hammurabi, a king of Babylon who ruled around 1850 BC and was known for his attempts to establish a just society through his famous Law Code. The rocket attacks on Tel Aviv during the Gulf War and his rhetoric against the state of Israel apparently also qualify Saddam to portray himself as Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, who conquered Jerusalem and deported many of the Jews in 586 BC. Such posturing must, in its own small way, make any hope of lasting peace in the Middle East even more remote. Ideological manipulations of this sort are not unique to any one part of the world. The strait-jacket of Marxist historicism - forced on Soviet scholars for many years - seriously compromised much archaeological interpretation originating in the former Soviet Union. Only with *glasnost* did alternative views become acceptable.

A final ironic example is provided by the last Shah of Iran who organised an enormous international celebration at Persepolis, capital of the Persian Empire, to celebrate 2500 years of the Persian monarchy in order to glorify himself and his office. His grandfather was a commoner and a usurper. Shortly afterwards the Shah himself was toppled by the mullahs. Hubris perhaps?

The perversions of archaeology and history for propaganda are worth studying in their own right, once their true nature has been recognised, because they give us important sidelights on how people and nations wish to be seen and, in some cases, what their ideals and objectives are. Such groups may be righting a historical wrong, or they may be giving themselves a designer past. Archaeologists need to know which is the case.

### **Prehistory as racism**

The political importance of the past is immense. Thus archaeology and history are not purely scholarly pursuits - knowledge for knowledge's sake - but are intrinsically powerful weapons in ideological discourse and indoctrination. This is at its most obvious in totalitarian systems, such as that which existed as Nazi Germany, and those which continue to prosper to some extent in our present world. The past is of particular ideological importance when ethnicities compete for land or political supremacy; thus the situations of racial/ethnic conflict which exist in North America, South Africa, the

Middle East, the former Yugoslavia and many other areas where competing histories and mythologies vie openly for authority.

The ideological manipulation of the past is a massive subject. Here we will look briefly at only a small part of the whole, but it is a part which does much to illuminate some of the possible misuses of the past. We will proceed by considering certain 'hyperdiffusionist' theories concerning cultural change, and their relation to certain racist ideologies. It is interesting to note that today such theories, though widely available in pulp form at local book shops, remain largely ignored within professional archaeology. Whilst the average archaeologist may simply eschew the mention of such unorthodox theories, it is evident from the financial success of Erich von Daniken and Thor Heyerdahl that members of the public are more likely to have read and accepted their 'truths' than those of academic archaeologists.

The hyperdiffusionist theories with which we are immediately concerned are those which purport to explain the initiation of 'civilisation' or 'high culture' in various parts of the world by their diffusion from a single source (e.g. Elliot Smith 1923, 1930, 1933; Kossinna 1911; Perry 1923, 1924; Putzger 1940). Such diffusion, it is assumed, would have resulted from the migrations of a supposedly superior people and those acculturated by them. These 'culture-bearers' would, by their territorial expansion, progressively civilize 'primitive' or 'uncivilized' natives around the globe.

*Grafton Elliot Smith, Thor Heyerdahl and diffusion from a 'White Egypt'*

In the 1920s and 1930s, Professors Grafton Elliot Smith and W.J. Perry of University College London published what have become known as the primary works of hyperdiffusionism (Elliot Smith 1923, 1930, 1933; Perry 1923, 1924). In this endeavour Elliot Smith (the anatomist and armchair anthropologist) was very much the leader, and Perry (the ethnologist) an over-zealous follower, ever out-stripping his master in sheer dogmatism (Daniel 1973). Both of these scholars' research was driven by an interest in the global phenomena of mummification and monument building. Indeed, Elliot Smith (1930: 372-3) is perhaps best left to illustrate this enthusiasm by himself:

Though the practice of mummification was brought to an end in Egypt it survived elsewhere. In early times it was adopted in Palestine and Syria . . . It was also adopted in Nubia and the Sudan, in Uganda and the basins of the Niger and the Congo . . . With the wider diffusion of culture in later centuries it spread to Europe and India . . . Ceylon . . . Burma . . . Australia, Central America . . . and the north-west coast of America.

The art of mummification, in fact, is the nucleus around which the fabric of civilisation, its architecture, its stone-working, carpentry, and portrait statuary was crystallised . . . The practice of embalming provided the inspiration for the making of civilisation in Egypt before 3000 BC; and the persistence of vestiges of the ideas associated with mummification in the intimate texture of civilisation throughout the whole world affords the most emphatic corroboration of the influence of Egypt as the pioneer in the creation of civilisation . . . A sufficient number of undoubted instances of the actual survival of characteristically Egyptian methods of mummification at the present day afford the most concrete evidence of the reality of the early diffusion of culture, and of its Egyptian origin.

Elliot Smith (*ibid.*) and Perry (1923, 1924) made similar mileage out of megaliths, placing Egyptian mastabas as the mental template for every megalithic monument from Ireland to Indonesia. With such extreme practitioners preaching from Chairs at one of England's most prestigious universities, it is not surprising that diffusion remained the primary hypothesis for the transmission of culture well into the mid-twentieth century (*vide* the works of Childe and Forde). As Daniel (1973: 417-18) related of Elliot Smith:

The more he wrote and lectured, the more his *idée fixe* became to him unassailable. Everything started in Egypt - absolutely everything. When he was once asked what was taking place in the cultural development of the rest of the world when Egypt was allegedly laying the foundations of civilisation he answered, without any hesitation, "Nothing".

But who were these super-Egyptians, these global colonisers and universal light-bearers to the primitive masses? Elliot Smith (1930: 160, 163) was not without an answer:

The Nordic Race, which has played an obtrusive part in the developing and spreading abroad of civilisation during the past three centuries, did not take any part in the task of creating it. The foundations of civilisation were laid down for all time by members of the Mediterranean Race during the thirty centuries of arduous toil, in association with members of the Alpine Race, before any of the blond nomads of the north played any part whatever in the process . . . . In studying the ancient remains of Nubia, we find no trace of Negroes till late in the time of the building of the pyramids, which is well into the third millennium. The Nubians today are almost uniformly black . . . . The whole population has become permeated with the Negro influence, but they still conform far more closely to the original Egyptian (Mediterranean) type than with the Negro.

With the principals of hyperdiffusionism well in place, it did not take long for the German disciples of Kossinna to take them one step further. Egypt was not the centre to which modern civilisation could trace its lineage - instead high culture was shown to radiate from a Nordic hearth and to guide the progress of all European, Western Asian and even Native American (!) civilisations from 2000 BC onwards (Putzger 1940). Such ideas, of course, marched hand in hand with anti-Semitism and helped to legitimate ideologies concerning the future role of Nordic 'culture bearers' on the world stage.

With the passing of the Third Reich, one would think that ideas of 'white supremacy' might have passed away from all but right-wing bookstores. However, the celebrated Norwegian explorer Thor Heyerdahl has managed to pass off such ideas in best sellers and on prime time television - subtlety, it would seem, is everything.

In works such as *The Kon-Tiki Expedition* (1950), *American Indians in the Pacific* (1952) and *The Ra Expeditions* (1971) culture is portrayed by Heyerdahl as something which must be delivered. The Native Americans received their civilisation from Egypt with elements of this cultural package eventually being passed on by raft to Polynesia! Again, the Egyptians are white (Heyerdahl 1971). It is thus not surprising that Heyerdahl's ideas have proved popular in South America where the social structure of many countries

consists of a genetically or culturally derived European elite, dominating an underclass comprised of Amerindians and descendants of black slave populations.

Thus, the ideas of Elliot Smith may have faded away academically, but they continue to find fertile ground around its fringes (cf. the diffusionist journals *Kadath* and *The New Diffusionist* (Adam 1988)). Furthermore, while these originally white racist approaches have become closeted, a rather disturbing turn of events has come increasingly to light: the backlash of Black racist archaeologies.

*Cheikh Anta Diop, Ivan Van Sertima, and diffusion from a 'Black Egypt'*

Cheikh Anta Diop (1923-1986), a Senegalese physicist educated at the Sorbonne, may rightly be called the intellectual founder of the 'Afrocentrist' movement. Afrocentrism, concisely stated, is the belief that all human cultural achievement can be traced to a Black African source. Diop's first work *Nations Nègres et Culture* (1954) was the first of a long line of publications on similar subjects (e.g. *Antériorité des Civilisations Nègres* (1967), *Civilisation ou Barbarie?* (1981)). His major works have since seen publication in English (Diop 1974, 1991), and have attracted a number of fervent disciples (Carruthers 1984; Rashidi 1992; Van Sertima 1977, 1992).

In outline, Diop's (1974, 1991) arguments can be expressed as follows. The original (Pleistocene) inhabitants of the Sahara and North Africa were Black. They were responsible for the Pre-Dynastic (which came out of Nubia) and for all early dynasties. In the Old Kingdom the original Black Egyptians could have been 'lightened' by small scale incursions of Levantine populations seeking the prosperity of the Nile Valley. Invasions from Persia, Greece, Rome and Arabia further transformed the racial characteristics of the 'native' Black Egyptians to that of the modern Egyptians. Sub-Saharan cultures were cut off from the civilising influence of Black Egypt early in the Dynastic period - but linguistic and ritual traces remain. The Egyptians were the founders of civilisation and through the diffusion of their ideas were responsible for the grandeur of Greece and all subsequent European civilizations.

In later works, however (particularly *Civilization or Barbarism: an authentic anthropology* (1991)), Diop's ideas began to take on a particularly aggressive and overtly racist tone. In a chronological table of 'The Evolution of Humanity in General, and of the Black World in Particular', Diop (1991: 23) demarcates stages of the 'Supremacy of Blacks' (5000 BC - 750 BC), the 'Beginning of the Decline of the Black World' (750 BC - 525 BC), and the 'Period of Decline and Degradation of the Black World' (525 BC on). His discussions of the Black nature of Egypt, and its natural antagonism to Whites, also took on an ugly tone (Diop 1991: 65):

So, let nobody tell us that Ramses II was white and reddish-blond, for he was in fact the ruler of a people who systematically massacred reddish-blondes as soon as they met them, even on the streets; the latter were considered strange beings, unwholesome, omens of bad luck, and unfit to live.

Diop's disciples have taken his idea even further, spreading the imperative civilising influence of Black Africa to the Pre-Columbian Civilizations of Central and South America (Van Sertima 1977, 1992), the Harappan civilisation (Rashidi 1992), and even Albion! (ibid.)

The style of argument of the Afrocentrists is close to that of Von Daniken and

Heyerdahl: fortuitous photographs or figures show striking similarities from one side of the world to the other, photographs are misattributed or miscaptioned, and the work of other scholars is misquoted or taken out of context. In the end, by such scratching and clawing, preconceived opinions are confirmed. In the early days Africanists such as Mauny (1960) laboured through point by point refutations of Diop's arguments and exposed elements of his intellectual fraud. But Mauny - publishing in academic journals - was preaching to the converted. The people who Diop's message was reaching were not searching for Mauny's riposte on the library shelves. No popular refutation of Afrocentrism has yet been written. Oddly, it is Martin Bernal - considered a radical anathema by most Classical scholars - who has subtly done something to stem this tide. In *Black Athena* (1987), Bernal firmly places himself in the 'moderate' Afrocentrist school of Williams and Du Bois, and affirms that blacks, along with other races, shared in the building of an Egyptian civilisation which would have a profound impact on the Classical world.

Today most Egyptologists, although never publishing extensively on racial subjects, would agree that 'Whites', 'Blacks' and peoples of mixed race co-existed in ancient Egypt. Pharaohs and elites can, through artwork and human remains, also be demonstrated to be of diverse racial make-up. Egyptian civilisation is thus perhaps best seen as an African civilisation, rather than as a 'Black' or a 'White' one (Davidson 1966). Diop erred in his writings, just as Elliot Smith did, by attempting to brand the life force of Egypt with an exclusive racial character. In the end, the polemic of Diop and his disciples reeks of the same racism they ostensibly seek to exterminate.

#### *Two racial theories, one underlying ideology*

These 'theories' of White or Black cultural supremacy are of course rivals - if one is true the other cannot be - and yet they are fundamentally the same theory. They use many of the same arguments, based on the same sorts of 'evidence', and somehow reach contradictory conclusions. Both of these theories contain the following beliefs:

1) The origin of all civilisation is due initially to the activities of a superior race;  
 2) The place of origin for 'civilisation' must be the Old World, since that is where the 'superior race' - Caucasian or Negro - originated;

3) Ancient Egypt is the preferred place of origin for global civilisation. Some hyperdiffusionist writers hedge their bets, however, hence Heyerdahl's 'Tigris expedition' which could be used to suggest either Sumer's debt to Egypt or vice-versa. Still, for mystery and glamour Egypt is hard to match and all players are keen to claim Egypt for their own cause;

4) The Pre-Columbian civilisations of ancient America represent another happy hunting-ground for hyperdiffusionists. Here again we have elaborate early architecture in an exotic setting - and where else could those pyramids come from if not from Egypt?;

5) Naturally enough Easter Island is also a prime focus for such racial speculations. So far it has primarily been involved in the White supremacist vision - but we are sure that the Afrocentrists will get there shortly;

6) Both versions today try to cover their tracks with a degree of political correctness. The Afrocentrists have an easier lot - since 'Afrocentrism' itself fits in nicely with the agenda of present day political correctness. However the more astute Afrocentrists such as Van Sertima have recently recanted their more extreme views and stated that blacks, though central to the creation of civilisation, were not the only race involved (cf. Van Sertima 1992: 1-28).

In the other camp White supremacists have also made certain 'p.c.' concessions - hence Heyerdahl's apparent interest in development issues and the use of multi-racial crews in his Ra expedition. He has declared that these show that people of different races can work together in partnership (Heyerdahl 1971). However, for Heyerdahl and Van Sertima, one cannot escape the conclusion that such partnerships are as those which exist between riders and their horses.

Hyperdiffusionism, in whatever guise it takes, is a convenient ploy with which one group can attempt to show its superiority over another. As an hypothesis it was born out of the schools of imperial Europe, and continues today as a weapon for previously exploited groups to use on their old tormentors. As a West African proverb goes - 'the dog is gone and the cat is back'. In recent years both have been tacitly tolerated by the scholarly community - either for reasons of 'White guilt' or simply because they are deemed too absurd to be addressed directly. However we believe the time has come for professional archaeologists to become more involved in populist archaeologies, or risk being locked in their ivory towers.

### **An objective prehistory?**

Why, readers may ask, have we been regaling them with such extreme examples of archaeological 'research'? There are two reasons. First, so broad a gulf seems to exist between academic and popular archaeology, that it is important to remind academic practitioners of the worrying state of the latter. Prehistory, like history, plays an essential part in the formation of world views. If this article prompts one prehistorian to turn on their word processor and write for the general public from an academic standpoint, it will have achieved its purpose.

Second, Kohl (1993: 16) supplied us with a valuable incentive when he wrote that post-processualism, when taken to its ultimate conclusion, opens a Pandora's box: 'reality is a chimera or, at least unknowable . . . and one interpretation of the past is as valid as any other.' Thus, 'Mr. von Daniken's readings of prehistory are as true and meaningful as those of Mr. Hodder's' (ibid.). If a viewing of 'prehistory as propaganda' shows us anything, it is the true horror of this situation. If academics completely abandon the 'scientific' high ground then all the ideological furies of the world stand ready to be unleashed. Ironically, the ostensibly leftist, relativistic, and 'liberating' views of Hodder (1986), and Shanks and Tilley (1987), open the road wide for Fascism in archaeology.

We are not so naive as to argue that a strictly objective study of the past can exist. Even some of those great men, who Durkheim and Marx teach us have no independent existence, could understand well enough the nature of their posterity. As Napoleon Bonaparte dictated in his memoirs to Las Cases (Lachouque 1966: 11):

Real truths are very difficult to ascertain for the purpose of historical record. Truth presents itself in so many ways! Historical accuracy which is so earnestly desired and to which everyone is anxious to appeal, is only too often a mere word: it is impossible to discover the truth at the actual time of events and in the ferment of warring passions; and if, at a later date, general agreement is reached, it is because those who were implicated and held opposing views no longer exist.

As with history, so with prehistory - except perhaps in that our sources do not lie. Their fault lies in being inanimate and incomplete, although it must also be admitted that we sometimes do the lying for them.

'Intellectuals ought to study the past not for the pleasure they find in so doing but to derive lessons from it' states Diop (1960:10). Such sentiments hold grave portents for archaeology and for the use of prehistory as propaganda. It is one thing to try to gather together a sequence of events archaeologically, to grapple with the workings of prehistoric economies, or to interpret the modes of interaction between various archaeological cultures; but when we begin to make ethnic or racial links between the present and the past and 'derive lessons from them' - we are in danger.

Yoffee and Sherratt (1993: 7) voice this concern eloquently when they write:

The branch of post-processualism that argues that there are multiple versions of the past and that all or many of them might be equally valid (especially as it is espoused by Shanks and Tilley) contradicts the important call to political action by archaeologists. Just as they have refuted claims of the Third Reich and some South African and Israeli governments, for example, archaeologists cannot allow multiple versions of the past to proliferate. Rather it is critical that archaeologists assert that there is at least a partially knowable antiquity and that archaeologists are the guardians of its integrity.

We may never know exactly how the past was, but it is relatively easy to show how the past was not. Archaeological phenomena (monuments, technical innovations, and other remnants of material culture) can be independently dated; physical anthropology and DNA analysis now open means to determine (if necessary) the genetic identity of actors in prehistory; the chemical sources of materials can be established with some accuracy; and so on. Hypotheses can be shown to have a better, or worse, fit to data. Debates over interpretations will continue; this is how research proceeds. But when we leave the even playing field of the observational sciences, and begin to make strident connections between the past and the present, we are on our way down the slippery slope of ideology and the self-interest of racial, ethnic or gender groups.

This is not to say that we feel it inappropriate that peoples take pride in their past, or their ancestors - everyone should - but simply that we should not labour to glorify our ancestors in the face of evidence to the contrary. Writing personally one of us feels only pride in asserting that his Scottish ancestors were not fully 'civilized' (or conquered) by the English until the mid-eighteenth century. Indeed, a certain glory is derived from the Scots' maintenance of their essentially indigenous lifestyle in the face of their aggressive southern neighbour until the battle of Culloden and its disastrous aftermath. Equally Black African Civilizations (the Empires of Ghana and Tekrur, Ife, Kerma, Great Zimbabwe) should not suffer for want of pride because of a clinging devotion to a 'Black Egypt'. Perhaps it is culture that is ultimately of primary importance, and not mute monuments of stone.

It is both the responsibility and the right of professional archaeologists to measure interpretations of the past against the available evidence. In good conscience we must advocate positions which the evidence best supports, despite any popular views which would be discomfited by our interpretation. Finally, if professional academics wish to become more involved in safeguarding the past against political manipulation, or want



to be 'value-committed' in some way, then we would implore them to concentrate on writing popular accounts in the language of the people, rather than regaling the archaeological community with jargon-ridden diatribes.

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