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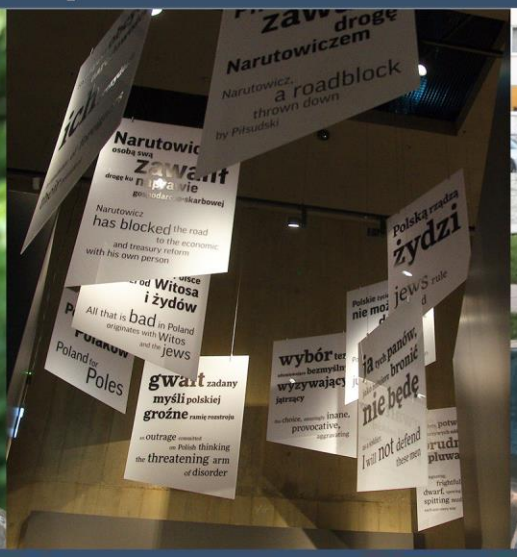

Heroes, anti-heroes and villains:
How we use, (re)create and dismantle them

Conference proceedings

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Interpret Europe

Conference 2025
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Interpret Europe's Conference 2025, **Heroes, anti-heroes and villains: How we use, (re)create, and dismantle them**, #iecon25, was held in Sulejówek, Poland, on 11-14 April 2025. The host was the Józef Piłsudski Museum at Sulejówek, supported by the Warsaw Museum and the Maria Skłodowska-Curie Museum in Warsaw.

Interpreters seek stories that trigger meanings beyond mere facts. Sometimes, a fictional character who engages with the heritage is used to create an interpretive story. Such idealised creations allow us to condense historical, socio-cultural or ecological knowledge and arrange it into a sequence of events which resonate with universal values. Fictional 'heroes' typically face up to an adverse environment or antagonists who represent another set of values. This technique helps people to relate more easily to the heritage, but it may also raise questions: Do interpreters who invent 'heroes' or 'villains' risk perpetuating clichés and stereotypes, and would this always be problematic?

Historical people are considered 'heroes' because they symbolise particular community values which may change over time. Traditional stories about established heroes frequently convey an idealised image by highlighting certain traits while omitting others. Should heritage interpretation challenge collective stereotypes by confronting clichés with counter evidence and reinterpret the heroes of the past? Should interpreters spearhead the replacement of old heroes with new ones who represent progressive values? Or, rather, should we deconstruct the entire concept of 'heroes' and create interpretive stories around anti-heroes, or even depersonalise our interpretations?

The Józef Piłsudski Museum at Sulejówek on the outskirts of Warsaw was an ideal place to discuss the interpretation of heroes and the depiction of their counterparts. Józef Piłsudski is one of Poland's national heroes, one who fought for an independent republic and for freedom for the Polish people. But he is also an ambivalent character, admired and criticised by different factions of Polish society for different reasons. The museum aims for dialogue with its audience, respecting their diverse personalities and sometimes separate points of view.

During the conference, attended by 103 people from 26 countries, there were 40 presentations and workshops as well as seven different study visits for participants to choose from. These study visits included structured outings to look at and open discussions around the Warsaw Uprising, the post-war reconstruction of Warsaw to a UNESCO landmark, and the rewilding of the primeval Kampinos Forest. Participants were invited to time travel to experience everyday life under the Communist regime, witness Jewish heritage, follow in the footsteps of double Nobel Prize winner Marie Skłodowska-Curie, and explore the legends and nature of the Vistula River.

Thanks to our keynote speakers:

- Jurn Buisman (Netherlands) – Secretary General of ICOMOS, member of the supervisory committee for Interpret Europe and Europa Nostra
- María Luz Martínez Seijo (Spain) – Member of Spanish congress and Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
- Anna Kowalczyk (Poland) – Journalist, writer, feminist, activist, Founder of the Women's History Museum Foundation
- Marcin Napiórkowski (Poland) – Professor at the Institute of Polish Culture at the University of Warsaw

And thanks to our special guest, Sacha Dench (UK) – aka the Human Swan – CEO of Conservation Without Borders and Ambassador for the UN's Convention on Migratory Species 2019-2024. For the first time at an IE conference we had a 'cinema night' with a special screening of Sacha's award-winning conservation film, Flight of the Swans, offering those potentially framed as the 'villains' a chance to be re-cast as 'conservation heroes'. A Q&A session followed the screening to round off this evening.

The following participants submitted full papers to be published in these proceedings:

- Thomas Bak & Gerda Stevenson (UK)
- Stuart Frost (UK)
- Penelope Gkini (Greece)
- Maria Kaminska (Poland)
- Lisa Keys (UK)
- Jacek Kolodziej (Czech Republic)
- Anna Pikula & Olga Tarczyńska-Polus (Poland)
- Kristyna Pinkrova (Czech Republic)
- Talida Roman (Romania)
- Eva Sandberg (Sweden)
- Barbara Struys (Belgium)
- Terri Sweeney Meade (Ireland)

The abstracts of the other presentations and workshops are included after the full papers. Thanks to Peter Seccombe and the review committee for their support in putting together a programme that explored many angles of the conference theme.

All opinions expressed are the authors' own and are not necessarily endorsed by Interpret Europe.

Copy editing and proofreading: Marie Banks.

Thanks to our conference organising partner, the Józef Piłsudski Museum.

Muzeum
Józefa Piłsudskiego
w Sulejówku

Contents

Welcome address

Helena Vičič, IE Managing Director (Slovenia)

Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed guests, and fellow interpreters, it is a pleasure to welcome you to the IE conference 2025 in Sulejówek!

Sincere thanks to our hosts, the Museum of Józef Piłsudski, and to the Director, Robert Andrzejczyk, for the kind invitation!

It is the second time our conference has been hosted in Poland. Exactly ten years ago, we gathered in Krakow and discussed sensitive heritage. What a coincidence that we're coming back dealing with sensitive subjects again! Or perhaps it is no coincidence.

The theme Heroes, anti-heroes and villains doesn't only suit the venue – a museum dedicated to a national hero. We are living in a time when statues fall and hashtags rise. When yesterday's visionary becomes today's controversy. When public figures are glorified with lightning speed — and often, dismantled just as fast.

The world around us continues to be shaped by the stories we tell — and especially by the figures we cast in those stories: the heroes we celebrate, the villains we condemn, and the many, many people in between. Think of how quickly a single tweet, a bold act, or even a misstep can turn someone from admired to admonished. Or — let's be honest — how that same tweet can make them a folk hero depending on your algorithm.

This isn't just about celebrity culture or politics. It's about something deeper. It's about values. Whose values do we immortalise in stone, in street names, in national holidays? Whose stories are elevated — and whose are erased?

And that's where we, as heritage interpreters, come in.

Because interpretation does not simply retell history. It frames it. It asks us — and our audiences — not only what happened, but what it meant, and what it means now.

We are not the neutral middlemen of memory. We are guides. And why not even provocateurs. We help people navigate the complex legacies of figures like… well, like Józef Piłsudski.

Piłsudski is — to some — the father of Polish independence. To others, a political figure whose legacy raises difficult questions.

A hero to many. A controversial figure to others. A reminder that the people we enshrine in our museums, our curricula, and even our conference venues… are rarely simple.

And so we begin this conference in a place that invites us not just to learn, but to wrestle with meanings.

Over the next few days, we will ask questions like:

- How do we deal with the legacies of people who were once admired but now provoke discomfort?
- Can a single figure be both a hero and a villain?
- What does it mean to 'dismantle' a historical narrative responsibly — without falling into historical amnesia?
- And how can we equip ourselves — as interpreters — to deal with this ethically, critically, and creatively?

Now, I know those are big questions. The kind that stir debate. But don't worry – we've scheduled coffee breaks!

Over the coming days, we will hear from more than 100 participants, from 25 countries. From Malta, to Ireland, from Bulgaria to the USA and Brazil, and other countries in between! Each bringing a unique lens to this vital conversation.

And while we may not leave with easy answers, I'm confident we will leave with new ideas and more courage to deal with heroes and villains even with those living in contemporary times.

Finally, I'd like to express my sincere thanks to the organising team, to the tireless crew behind the scenes, Anna Wachowiak from the Museum and Bettina Lehnes from Interpret Europe.

Thank you for bringing us here to this space so charged with relevance.
Let the conference begin.

Keynotes & special guest

In search of a moral compass: Interpreting contested heritage in a polarised world

Jurn A.W. Buisman (Netherlands)

Jurn Buisman has over 35 years' experience in cultural heritage preservation. He has developed projects with the UN, and conceptualised exhibitions, festivals and other events in the Netherlands and abroad. He is Secretary General of ICOMOS the International Council on Monuments and Sites, VP of ICOMOS-IFLA ISCCL, a serving member of Interpret Europe's Supervisory Committee and also of Europa Nostra, and a member of ISCs and ICOM.

ICOMOS is often referred to solely as a reference for World Heritage. However, its scope is much broader as it concerns conservation and advocacy of cultural heritage worldwide. ICOMOS just published its new website which includes a wealth of relevant documents.

Watch a recording of this keynote on IE's YouTube channel:
https://youtu.be/lRSq3GS5F-4?si=kZQHYlrsvJ5eImRX

Introduction

I speak to you based on my experience as a museum director and co-curator of exhibitions. In daily life, I am director of Museum Geelvinck, a historic house museum with a focus on layered and sometimes uncomfortable histories in the Netherlands – in Amsterdam and on a country estate, Kolthoorn House & Gardens. Also, Museum Geelvinck stewards a rich collection of keyboard musical instruments – so, both tangible and intangible, living heritage. For some 35 years now, together with my wife, Dunya Verwey, we have curated exhibitions that use the personal stories of the previous residents of these historic houses to engage with contemporary issues. Quite a few of these exhibitions concerned cultural dialogue, next to for instance historic gardens, and concerts, festivals, symposia, and more recently, video-podcasts and documentaries.

Dunya, is known in the Netherlands and Flanders as one of the four founders of Dolle Mina, a feminist movement that in the early 1970s used ludic public actions to spark societal change. It was a movement for equality, for bodily autonomy, and for rethinking the roles of men and women. Dunya also spent part of her youth in Suriname and has strong personal ties with the Surinamese and Antillean communities in Amsterdam. I tell you this because it became the cornerstone on which we were able to approach some of these complex challenges.

The name of our museum, Museum Geelvinck, derives from the place where our museum was located for a quarter of a century: the Geelvinck Hinlopen Huis, a canal mansion located in the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Amsterdam Canal Crescent. The Geelvinck family were among the most powerful regents of Amsterdam during the 17th and 18th centuries. They co-financed the global trading networks of the Dutch Republic: the Baltic Trade, the VOC – the Dutch East-India Company – and, especially, the WIC – the Dutch West-India Company. They stood at the cradle of New Amsterdam, today's New York. They helped to turn Amsterdam into one of the richest cities of that time. But this wealth was not innocent. It was tied to systems of forced labour: grain from Eastern Europe under a system of serfdom and foreign oppression; spices, indigo and porcelains from

Asian rulers, which were using bonded labour and slavery; and – in the case of the WIC – sugar, salt, cocoa beans, coffee beans and tobacco produced on plantations in Brazil, Suriname and the Caribbean, which were economically viable solely by making use of red and, more-over, black slavery, Africans which were forcefully shipped to these colonies. And this is not only ancient history. For instance, Amsterdam today remains Europe's largest ports for cocoa beans – a commodity still linked to indentured labour.

Already, we had quite some experience with exhibitions within the realm of cultural dialogue, also abroad with Russia, with the United Nations and with the Council of Europe. And, for instance, we did an exhibition on objects from the past of today's Indonesia, which many Dutch families still have at home and which in fact are traces of the colonial past of the Dutch East Indies. In the Netherlands this is still considered an uncomfortable, if not dissonant heritage, even through 4.5 centuries of shared history. Indonesia fought a bloody war of independents with the Netherlands, with many atrocities on both sides. In fact, this exhibition in 2011 on colonial traces at home became our most successful, in visitor numbers: it attracted many visitors with cultural roots in the former Dutch Indies, who were glad that at last a museum had had the courage to give attention to their bi-cultural past.

In 2013, the city of Amsterdam was going to celebrate '400 years' Glory of the Canal Crescent'. This was based on the dominant narrative that presents these canal houses purely as symbols of wealth and Golden Age glory. Ironically, the same year was a year of national remembrance commemorating the end of slavery in Suriname and the Dutch Antilles. Amsterdam had been the main shareholder of the exploitation company of Suriname. Our gut feeling was, that we could not present the splendour of the canal mansion, the Geelvinck Hinlopen Huis, without addressing this legacy. So, we decided to reconcile both narratives in one exhibition.

Our colleagues from other canal house museums urged us that this was too risky. That slavery was a topic better to be avoided: it might provoke controversy and could even lead to riots. Note: this was only 15 years ago. But we did it anyway. That became the exhibition Swart op de Gracht (Being Black in the Canal Crescent).

The exhibition was built around a document from the Municipal Archive, that held the archives of the exploration company for Suriname, as at the time it was owned by the City of Amsterdam: this document concerned an order to purchase 500 enslaved Africans in Calabar, today's Nigeria, to be shipped and sold to the plantations in Suriname. The document was signed by the secretary of this Amsterdam exploration company of Suriname. And that secretary was Albert Geelvinck, who was the builder and first inhabitant of the Geelvinck Hinlopen House. Our exhibition showed the links between slave trade, the production of the commodities sugar, cocoa beans, coffee beans and tobacco – all based on trans-Atlantic slavery – and the history of Amsterdam. It also encompassed stories of emancipated black people living in Amsterdam during the 17th and 18th centuries and the image of the black servant as an exotic display of wealth. In addition, we included a photo series of gable stones on canal houses with symbols linked to slavery. Through Dunya's network in the Surinamese and Antillean communities, we engaged influential members within these migrant communities. For instance, to honour the ancestors of the Surinamese community in Amsterdam a Surinamese ritual, a libation was poured in our garden. Keti Koti Dialogue Tables were organised in our museum. Black schools sent student groups for educational tours to our museum. And the Geelvinck Hinlopen House

became the starting point of the Amsterdam Black Heritage Tours.

Our goal was not to provoke, but to connect. To help visitors understand that heritage is not just about the past, but moreover about our society today: that the Glory of the Amsterdam Canal Crescent is strongly intertwined with the history of Suriname and the Caribbean. Because of this shared history the Amsterdam Canal Crescent became a source of pride – a boost to the cultural identity of these migrant communities. Our exhibition inspired similar initiatives across the country. The lesson learned: multi-vocal storytelling is not only possible, but necessary – and transformative. Moreover: it attracts a broad and inclusive audience.

That is why the theme of this conference – Heroes, anti-heroes and villains: How we (re)create, use and dismantle them – resonates so deeply with me, here at the Museum commemorating Marshal Józef Pilsudski.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, Dutch national identity was built around glorified figures such as 'sea heroes' of the Dutch East and West India Companies. Streets were named after them. Statues were raised. Their exploits became schoolbook pride.

Today, we ask harder questions. Can a 'hero' also be a perpetrator? How do we deal with monuments and street names that no longer reflect our values? You can quite easily change a street name; it is slightly more difficult to dismantle the UNESCO World Heritage Amsterdam Canal Crescent; this although it has an even stronger link to this history of slavery, racism and exploitation, which not only today, but even at the time was seen as inhumane and, at least by some, was condemned. And there it is: a UNESCO World Heritage site celebrating Golden Age wealth, a tourist destination attracting millions of visitors every year, while it can also be read as a guilty urban landscape that silently bears witness to a charged past. You could cover or even demolish the gable stones, which relate to this history. However, by erasing the evidence, you do not erase the past. Instead, you dismantle an opportunity to tell multivocal stories, which should not be forgotten.

Can we find ways to tell stories that honor complexity – that bridge the divide between those who wish to preserve the heroic narrative, and those who see these figures as symbols of injustice, exploitation and oppression? Are there tools, methods, and experiences that can help us interpret such contested heritage in a way that fosters understanding, not polarisation?

I have already given some examples, such as the Amsterdam Black Heritage Tours in the Amsterdam Canal Crescent. During this conference we'll explore a few more.

Heritage is never neutral

Let me now turn to a central theme in this discussion: heritage is never neutral.
At first glance, that phrase may sound abstract – or even contradictory. What does 'neutral' mean when we speak of heritage? Isn't a monument just a statue, a building just a building? A landscape just a landscape? Aren't we simply preserving what has come down to us? But the reality is that heritage is always in some way interpreted – and interpretation is always shaped by the values, interests, and perspectives of those who do the interpreting. As such, heritage is often a mirror of power: of who has the authority to tell the story, to choose what is remembered – and what is forgotten.

We must ask ourselves: Whose history is being told? And just as importantly: Whose stories are left out?

Too often, national history is written from the perspective of political and economic elites. It

reflects what dominant political forces want to emphasise – stories of greatness, unity, and success. But the histories of ordinary people – of working-class communities, of migrants, of enslaved and colonised peoples, of religious or ethnic minorities – are all too often ignored, silenced, or marginalised.

Interpretation, therefore, carries an ethical responsibility: to ask uncomfortable questions, to include voices that have long been excluded, and to uncover the many layers of meaning and memory in a place.

This is at the heart of the Council of Europe's Faro Convention, which calls for a democratic and participatory approach to heritage. The Faro Convention recognises that heritage belongs not only to institutions or experts, but to the people – and that every person and community has the right to be represented in the way heritage is interpreted.

To take this seriously means we must go beyond a singular, top-down story. We must create space for conflicting narratives, for emotional truths, and for living memories. We must allow people to see themselves – and each other – in the heritage that surrounds them. Because heritage is never just about the past. Our society today is rooted in this past. It influences the choices we make in the present – and the future we want to build.

The interpretative dilemma

Let us now turn to the ethical challenges that lie at the heart of heritage interpretation. Because when we deal with contested heritage – with statues of colonial figures, with monuments of former regimes, or with buildings steeped in injustice – we are faced with a dilemma.

Do we erase? Do we reframe? Do we add new layers of interpretation? Do we invite dialogue – or risk conflict?

Interpretation of such heritage is never neutral or passive. It is always an act of positioning – an act that requires awareness, sensitivity, and, above all, moral courage.

Let me share a few concrete and contextualised examples.

Jan Pieterszoon Coen

In the Netherlands, a large statue of Jan Pieterszoon Coen still stands at the main square of his historic hometown, the once seafaring city of Hoorn. Coen, a high-ranking officer of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), is remembered for his decisive military actions both in the Dutch-English War and in Asia, in today's Indonesia. His famous quote from the Dutch-English War, "Ende dispereert niet" ("Do not despair"), became a national symbol of resilience during the Nazi occupation in the 1940s. Yet, when the statue was erected in 1893, there was already criticism about his brutal conquest of the Banda Islands in Indonesia, where on his orders the local population was effectively wiped out. Still, in 1964, this statue was declared a national monument. But in the last 15 years, public debate has intensified. In 2012, the municipality added an explanatory sign detailing the atrocities committed under Coen's command. Nearby, the local museum organised exhibitions offering a multi-perspective interpretation of his legacy. For this effort, the museum received the Europa Nostra Award in 2010. This is often cited as an example of how to engage constructively with a controversial monument.

Van Heutsz Monument

The enormous Van Heutsz Monument in Amsterdam was erected in 1935 to honor General Van Heutsz, known for brutally suppressing uprisings in the Dutch East Indies around 1900. From the beginning, the monument faced strong opposition from socialist sides. Ironically, it was designed by Frits

van Hall, who sympathised with socialist ideals and later joined the resistance against the Nazis, for which he was executed in Poland in 1943. Van Hall reportedly stated that the monument could easily be repurposed to reflect a shared history between Indonesia and the Netherlands. That transformation actually took place in 2003. In the 1970s, the monument had already come under increasing criticism. The bronze plaque bearing Van Heutsz's likeness had been stolen and was never recovered. In 2012, Framer Framed organised public events to reflect on the monument's future with the aim to stimulate the discussion how to decolonise public space without erasing historical context.

Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Month

A powerful initiative by the National Park Services in collaboration with ICOMOS US has been ongoing successfully for several years: the Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Month. It maps and commemorates annually during the month of September places where escaped enslaved people found refuge on their journey to freedom. Three years ago, an effort was started to roll it out internationally. Dunya and I contributed by making connections with similar stories outside the US, such as the marron societies in Suriname. Last year, we were involved in an advisory project conducted by ICOMOS US for the US National Park Service, on how to deal with monuments and statues that had come under fire since the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020. An overview was made with possible solutions for this challenge, which should be considered on a case-by-case basis for each monument to be removed, or reframed. However, the political situation in the United States has dramatically shifted with the return to power of President Donald Trump. I regret to say, that projects like these are now being radically defunded and actively dismantled at an incredible pace. This retreat from inclusive memory is not limited to the United States. Also, across Europe, influenced by parties and governments with a more nationalistic stand or under the influence of the church, such as the Catholic Church in regions of Spain, there are growing efforts to promote a more traditional, often nationalistic, reading of history. In these contexts, the idea of multi-vocality is no longer self-evident – and may even be seen as subversive.

Motherland Monument

Under pressure of the ongoing war with Russia, the situation in Ukraine is quite similar, I regret to say. There are, however, also positive examples. In Kyiv, the Soviet-era Motherland Monument, part of the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War, was for decades a point of controversy. Built in the 1970s, it featured a large shield bearing the hammer and sickle. In 2015, the Ukrainian Parliament banned communist symbols from public space, except for WWII monuments. In 2023, on the initiative of the director of the museum, the Soviet emblem on the shield of this huge monument was replaced by Ukraine's national trident. It is a good example of symbolic transformation: rather than demolishing the monument, its meaning was reframed.

Ukrainian government's stained glass window

In 2023 at the ICOMOS Europe Group conference in Estonia on Dissonant 20th Century Heritage, Professor Jörg Haspel, former President of ICOMOS Germany, gave a few other examples in Ukraine concerning modernist buildings from the Soviet period: the Derzhprom complex in Kharkiv and the DniproHES dam in Zaporizhzhia – sites that represent both technical achievement and political oppression. He urged to avoid erasure and instead to interpret these places as guilty landscapes – landscapes that carry a moral weight, not because of what they are, but because of what they represent. He also highlighted a specific case in Kyiv: a large

stained-glass window in the stairway of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; it depicts Moscow and includes Soviet symbols such as the hammer and sickle. The Ukrainian authorities initially intended to remove it due to its ideological content. However, Haspel convinced them to retain the window, as it was designed by Ivan Lytovchenko, one of Ukraine's most important artists of his time. The window was preserved and accompanied by an explanatory panel that helps visitors understand the piece in its historical and artistic context.

These cases illustrate a fundamental truth: the way we deal with monuments, with lieux de mémoire, with guilty landscapes, is not only about the past – it is also about how we shape public space, identity, and justice in the present.

Take Napoleon, for example. He lies in a grand tomb in Paris, honored as the man who brought order after the chaos of the French Revolution and established lasting institutions like the Code Napoléon. But he was also a dictator, whose wars cost millions of lives, who rolled back women's rights and reinstated slavery. How do we reconcile these legacies? In winter 1813-1814 the Netherlands was liberated from Napoleonic occupation by mainly Russian and German allied troops. This did not fit with the identity-affirming nationalistic story that the Netherlands had liberated itself and called in the Orange-dynasty to return as King of the Netherlands. Since WWII, the notion that Russian and German troops had liberated the Netherlands from French occupation was even fully eliminated from the Dutch school books on history.

The closer history comes to our own time, the harder it becomes to keep space for such complexity. Think of Woodrow Wilson – seen in Europe as a visionary who laid the groundwork for the League of Nations, the predecessor of the UN. Today in the US he is remembered as the president who legalised racial segregation and opposed women's suffrage. That is, until March 27th, when President Donald Trump signed an Executive Order, which is intended to revise multivocal views, which, in his opinion, "fosters a sense of national shame, disregarding the progress America has made and the ideals that continue to inspire millions around the globe."

So, the task before you – as professionals in heritage interpretation – is not a light one. You are asked to navigate this tension. To hold multiple perspectives. To honor both the pain and the pride in our shared past. And, above all, to resist the temptation to simplify history into a single story. Because only through complexity can we foster understanding. And only through understanding can we build a more just future.

What do all these examples have in common? They show us the importance of multi-vocality – of telling more than one story. Of including the voices that have long been ignored. Of recognising that heritage is not about glorifying the past, but about understanding it as the root of today's world in its full complexity.

Ethical framework for interpretation

To address these challenges of interpretation, we need guidance. Let me begin with Interpret Europe itself. The foundational vision for heritage interpretation within this network was laid out by Thorsten Ludwig, one of its first thinkers, alongside pioneers such as Freeman Tilden, whose landmark 1957 publication, Interpreting Our Heritage, continues to influence the field globally. Ludwig, together with other early contributors to IE, emphasised that interpretation is not about transmitting facts, but about provoking meaning-making. It is a value-based process that seeks to connect places with personal and societal values. In this view, interpretation becomes a tool for

democratic engagement, cultural understanding, and civic empowerment.

Interpret Europe promotes heritage interpretation as a means to help people relate their own life experiences to broader historical and environmental narratives. Through training, publications and practice, IE encourages interpreters to act ethically, inclusively, and reflectively – especially when dealing with controversial or emotionally charged topics. At its core is the belief that interpretation should foster empathy, critical thinking, and intercultural dialogue.

The foundation of the heritage profession as we know it today was laid with the Venice Charter of 1964, a seminal document that established international principles for the conservation and restoration of historic monuments and sites. The charter emphasises the importance of authenticity, context, and historical continuity, and it laid the groundwork for the establishment of ICOMOS in 1965 as a global advisory body to UNESCO.

Since its establishment, the international scientific committees of ICOMOS developed a range of charters and professional standards; to name just a few:

- The ICOMOS Ename Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites (ICIP, 2008) laid the groundwork for an integrated approach to heritage interpretation. It emphasises transparency, inclusivity, and community participation. Interpretation, according to this charter, should communicate the significance of heritage in a way that reflects its layered meanings and contested histories.
- The ICOMOS Ethical Principles (2021) go further, providing a professional compass for heritage practitioners. They stress independence, integrity, and a duty to respect human rights and cultural diversity. The ethical interpreter must resist political or commercial pressures that distort or manipulate history.
- The Madrid - New Delhi Document (ISC 20C, 2017) highlights the value and vulnerability of 20th-century heritage – especially sites associated with war, ideology, and totalitarianism. It urges us not to avoid these places, but to interpret them critically and contextually, as part of our collective memory.
- The ICOMOS-IFLA ISCCL Florence Declaration on Heritage and Landscape as Human Values (2014) bridges natural and cultural heritage. It affirms that landscapes are not only physical or aesthetic spaces, but also lived-in environments shaped by human values, memory, and perception. For interpreters, this means recognising the multiple dimensions of landscape – ecological, historical, emotional, and social – and addressing them in ways that respect both natural processes and cultural meaning.
- The ICICH Charter on the Interpretation of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2024) expands on the principles of the 2003 UNESCO Convention by providing practical guidance for how to engage with living heritage. It encourages interpreters to work in collaboration with heritage bearers, to safeguard oral traditions, crafts, rituals, and other intangible expressions.
- The ICTC Charter on Cultural Heritage and Sustainable Tourism (2021) addresses interpretation in the context of tourism. It calls for authentic, respectful, and locally grounded storytelling that avoids commodification and fosters mutual respect between hosts and visitors.

Another key document that must be mentioned again – although not developed by ICOMOS – is the Council of Europe's Faro Convention (2005).

This treaty places communities and their right to engage with cultural heritage at the heart of heritage policy. It champions a bottom-up, participatory approach and acknowledges that heritage plays a fundamental role in democracy, identity, and community cohesion. In Europe, this convention serves as an important reference point and its human-rights-based framing aligns closely with our shared professional values.

In 2022, WHIPIC, the International Centre for Interpretation and Presentation of World Heritage Sites, was established. Based in South Korea, it is affiliated with UNESCO and plays an increasingly active role in promoting inclusive, values-based interpretation at World Heritage sites – including those focused on natural heritage. In 2024, Interpret Europe signed a Memorandum of Understanding with WHIPIC to share knowledge and methodology around the interpretation of both cultural and natural World Heritage. Though many of WHIPIC documents are still published in Korean, they have started to translate tools and examples for wider application.

Landscape, nature and justice

Speaking about natural heritage, heritage interpretation is not limited to testimonies of human expression. It also plays a vital role in understanding and engaging with natural heritage – ecosystems, geologies, and landscapes that are valued not for human construction, but for their intrinsic ecological, aesthetic, or symbolic significance. This is an area where Interpret Europe has developed particular strength. Many IE-trained interpreters work in national parks, biosphere reserves, and World Heritage Sites designated for their natural values – from the Alps to the Wadden Sea.

IE has consistently argued that interpreting natural heritage is not only about biodiversity or geology. It is also about how people experience nature – their emotional connection to the environment, their sense of awe, belonging, or responsibility. Especially in rural landscapes, interpretation also reveals the interactions between human livelihoods and natural systems: farming, forestry, seasonal practices. The aim is not just to inform, but to foster meaningful engagement with the natural world as something we are part of, not separate from – and to foster discussion based on values (such as peace and tolerance) wherever this makes sense for the heritage in question.

Heritage Interpretation of landscape – natural, water, polar, rural and urban – is also increasingly supported by digital technologies. Tools such as GPS-based apps, augmented reality, and remote sensing allow us to reveal hidden layers of meaning in the terrain – from archaeological traces to ecological patterns. Visitors can now use their smartphones to explore what is not visible to the naked eye: former land uses, disappeared settlements, or symbolic markers. These technologies make the landscape more legible and enhance public access to its stories.

One powerful methodology in this regard is the use of landscape biographies. These combine natural, cultural, and socio-economic narratives to trace how a landscape has evolved over time. They help uncover not only what has happened in a place, but how people have shaped it – and been shaped by it – through generations. This is especially valuable for understanding complex, layered rural or peri-urban landscapes where nature and culture are deeply entwined.

In Europe, the Council of Europe's European Landscape Convention (2000), co-developed with IFLA (the International Federation of Landscape Architects, and ICOMOS' partner in the ICOMOS-IFLA ISCCL), is another essential framework. It defines landscape as an area

perceived by people – not just in terms of scenic beauty, but as a reflection of culture, memory, and identity. It promotes democratic approaches to planning and managing landscapes, involving local communities in decisions that affect their surroundings.
The CoE's annual Landscape Awards highlight exemplary projects that combine environmental protection with social inclusion, cultural continuity, and public participation. This aligns strongly with the ethics of interpretation: understanding a landscape not as a neutral background, but as a dynamic, sometimes contested space of meaning.

Within this framework, migration heritage has become increasingly important. As new communities have settled in Europe, they brought their own memories and attachments to the places they now inhabit. Interpreting these new layers – and helping migrants connect their own cultural narratives to the physical environment – is one of the great challenges and opportunities of our time. In this way, nature, culture, landscape, memory, and justice all come together. And it is the interpreter's role to make those connections visible, meaningful, and transformative.

As the impacts of climate change become increasingly visible, interpretation of its impact on heritage, and especially nature and landscape, plays a key role in raising public awareness and supporting efforts toward adaptation and mitigation. Interpreters help communities understand how changing climates affect ecosystems, landscapes, and livelihoods, and foster a sense of responsibility for sustainable stewardship of our shared environment.

Together, these above mentioned and other documents offer a toolkit – a moral compass – to interpret heritage in complex and contested environments. They remind us that interpretation is never just about transmitting information. It is about making space: for dialogue, for healing, for agency, and for accountability.

A moral compass for challenging times

At the heart of this entire discussion lies one essential truth: heritage interpretation is, at its core, a moral practice. It demands that the interpreter not only be knowledgeable and skilled, but also ethically grounded. As professionals, we are often the ones who give voice to the past – and with that voice comes responsibility.

In a time when political climates are shifting across the globe – with increasing polarisation, populism, and historical revisionism – the position of the heritage interpreter is under growing pressure. There may be calls to 'stick to the positive', to avoid controversy, or to conform to official narratives. In such moments, it becomes all the more vital that we, as interpreters, stand firm.

We must keep our backs straight. We must hold onto our professional integrity. And we must remember that we are not alone. The charters, guidelines and tools developed by Interpret Europe, ICOMOS, UNESCO, the Council of Europe and others are not abstract texts – they are anchors. They are shields. They are references we can use to defend the importance of our work, especially when facing institutional or political pressure.
But that protection only works if we take these principles seriously. If we follow them not selectively, but consistently. The ethical interpreter must embody the values they represent: inclusivity, transparency, critical engagement, and respect for human dignity. These are not optional. They are essential.

Because, ultimately, interpretation is not just about the past – it is about the choices we make

today. And in those choices, our moral compass must remain steady. To interpret is to care. To question. To give space. And to speak truth – even when it is inconvenient.

Conclusion

In closing, I want to return to the fundamental question that runs through this presentation: the message the professional in heritage interpretation wants to convey to its audience. Heritage interpretation is not simply a matter of educational textbooks or explanatory billboards at touristic landmarks or a museum's exhibition. It is a civic act, which influences its audience. That impact implies cultural responsibility. It is, therefore, a moral undertaking. It invites the audience to see heritage not as a fixed narrative about the past, but as a landscape of meaning in which today's society is rooted – a landscape that shifts depending on who is looking, and from where.

As interpreters, we have the tools to build bridges: between past and present, between communities, between perspectives. But those tools must be used with care. With courage. And with conscience.

The charters and principles we have explored are more than professional guidance – they are our ethical foundations. They remind us that interpretation is not about simplifying stories, but about honouring complexity. Not about pleasing audiences, but about challenging them to think. Not about preserving silence, but about enabling dialogue – and conversation.

At the same time, our approach must remain impartial. We are not activists for a single cause, nor spokespeople for political interests. Our role is to interpret truthfully, based on the best available evidence, and informed by the outcomes of scientific and historical research. That is what gives our work its credibility – and its power.

Let us also be vigilant in the face of political forces that seek to instrumentalise or control historical narratives. When, for instance, on March 27th, the President of the United States, Donald Trump, signed an Executive Order seeking to ban "divisive concepts" from federally funded historical institutions, it sparked outrage among historians and educators. In response, the renowned historian David W. Blight, President of the Organization of American Historians, wrote in the New York Times: "Trump cannot win his war on history". He recalled the words of Professor James Horton: "Would you want your doctors not to be revisionists?" – pointing out that any field of study must innovate to remain relevant. "The assumption that there is a standard, agreed-upon truth about the country's past is a fantasy. But when declared by a sitting American president, it becomes a provocation and an insult."

Upholding our professional ethics is not just a matter of principle – it is also a path to impact. By embracing inclusive, honest and multi-perspective storytelling, we can reach a broader and more diverse audience. More people will feel seen, acknowledged, and engaged. In doing so, we extend the power of heritage interpretation to foster connection, relevance, and shared ownership across communities.

So let us be bold in our work. Let us hold space for discomfort. Let us lift up voices that have long been silenced. Let us dare to tell the full story – even when it is painful, even when it is messy, even when it resists resolution. Because, ultimately, our task is not to provide answers, but to open possibilities.

To interpret is to believe that a common understanding is still possible – even in a divided, polarised and increasingly geopolitically fragmented world.

Or, as Professor Klaus Schwab, the driving force behind the World Economic Forum, recently put it: “The world needs microlevel activists – people who make a difference at the level of everyday life. It’s about doing good in your own environment”. That is exactly what I would like to call upon you, as professional heritage interpreters, to embrace. Ethically and with integrity.

Multiperspectivity in remembrance and history education for democratic citizenship

María Luz Martínez Seijo (Spain)

María is a Member of the Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe and a Member of Spanish Congress. She holds a degree in English Philology and a PhD in Innovation and Education Programmes and is a Professor of English in Secondary Education. She has published numerous articles in the media and high impact journals about different education topics. Among other tasks she was member of the Permanent Deputation of the Spanish Congress, spokesperson of the Education, Vocational Training and Sports Committee in the Spanish Congress, Rapporteur for the Spanish educational laws: LOMLOE, Vocational Training and Artistic Education. She is Member of the Spanish Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, where she is Chair of the Subcommittee on Culture, Education and Democratic Values.

Abstract

In today's complex societies, education for democratic citizenship plays a crucial role in providing individuals with the skills to engage fruitfully with historical and contemporary challenges. History education, when approached through a democratic and multi-perspective lens, can foster critical thinking, respect for diversity, and an understanding of human rights. These qualities are essential for combating the erosion of democratic values and the increasing society polarisation.

There can be many views and interpretations of the same historical events and there is validity in a multi-perspective approach that assists and encourages students to respect diversity and cultural difference, instead of conventional history teaching. This is the case with the understanding and interpretation of heroes and villains in history.

History teaching is presented not merely as the transmission of facts but as a tool for analysing the past, understanding the present, and shaping a more inclusive future. It supports the development of competencies such as evaluating multiple perspectives, distinguishing between facts and propaganda, and working critically with sources.

Despite its potential, history education faces significant obstacles, including rigid and overloaded curricula, traditional teaching methodologies, insufficient teacher training, and resistance to addressing sensitive historical topics.

We will focus on multiperspectivity in history and remembrance education as a means to foster democratic citizenship. Because openness to cultural otherness and to other beliefs, world views and practices help young people to make sense of the world they live in. Therefore, it is highly recommended to bridge the gap between formal and non-formal education by 'using' remembrance sites, museums, cultural routes and promoting dialogue about history in Europe, establishing partnerships between research centres, public institutions, and non-governmental organisations to commemorate sensitive historical events networks.

Keywords

democracy education, human rights education, Council of Europe, value-based interpretation

Watch a recording of this keynote on IE's YouTube channel: https://youtu.be/4nquxSV1rIc?si=0I3UJs7QOA0haoLG

In response to the horrors of two World Wars, several international organisations were born aiming to defend peace and human rights: the UN and UNESCO at the global level, and the Council of Europe with a particular focus on the European continent. Since its creation in the aftermath of the World War II, the Council of Europe has been a fundamental actor in promoting cultural diversity, human rights, and peacebuilding. The Council of Europe launched a number of initiatives in the fields of education and culture which can be relevant for the daily work of heritage interpreters who care about upholding democratic values.

But, apart from international policy makers, most citizens lack even basic knowledge about the Council of Europe. Even many of those who work in culture or education have very little knowledge of its achievements.

As democratic values and human rights are called into question again, we need to leave our silos and join forces between policy makers, heritage institutions and actors in formal and non-formal education. Together, we must ensure that European societies never forget those atrocities that happened in the past due to totalitarian regimes which started in Europe. They started with speeches of hatred, violation of human rights, racism, intolerance… the same atmosphere that is dangerously spread again by extreme groups all over Europe.

Safeguarding and promoting Cultural heritage

The European Cultural Convention of 1954 is an early example of the Council of Europe's efforts to safeguard and promote European cultural heritage and fostering mutual understanding.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) has recognised the important role of museums as resources for human development and citizen engagement. Since 1977, awards have been given to European museums that have demonstrated exemplary practices and stimulated innovation in the sector.

In the current context, with the political and societal challenges of the 21st century, the Council of Europe's action in the field of culture and heritage focuses on promoting cultural diversity and dialogue to cultivate a sense of identity, collective memory, and mutual understanding. The Faro Convention of 2005 is a milestone: it introduces a new way of considering cultural heritage, focusing on its value for different heritage communities and their cultural identities. This convention highlights the importance of cultural heritage in sustainable socio-economic development and the promotion of democratic values, cultural diversity, and cultural identity. It recognises that cultural heritage is a resource for developing dialogue, democratic debate, and openness between cultures.

Education for democratic citizenship and human rights at schools

Less known among heritage professionals is the Council of Europe's long-standing work on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights. An important milestone was the approval of the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) in 2016, including knowledge and critical understanding of oneself, society, and the world. Nowadays, there is a necessity to put it into practice, and this requires serious adaptations of the educational systems of the member States, together with the

implementation of the new initiative of the Council of Europe: The European Space for Citizenship Education seeks to reinforce democratic culture through education and remembrance.

Education for democratic citizenship and human rights has always been a priority for the Council of Europe. This is why it has promoted the inclusion of sensitive and controversial parts of history in school curricula as it can reinforce democratic culture within a society and respect for different opinions, pluralism, tolerance, and diversity. However, we must be aware that delivering quality history education in schools can be challenging due to overloaded curricula, traditional teaching practices, and, in many instances, highly centralised education systems.

Teaching history and memory is essential for understanding historical events constructively and openly, developing the competences needed for democratic citizenship. The inclusion of sensitive and controversial issues in history lessons enhances democratic culture, as the critical understanding of controversy facilitates respect for different opinions and promotes tolerance of ambiguity.

While these initiatives deal primarily with formal education at schools, a lot can be transferred to the non-formal field of heritage education.

Multiple perspectives on heroes and villains

There can be many views and interpretations of the same historical events and there is validity in a multi-perspective approach that assists and encourages people to respect diversity and cultural difference, instead of conventional history teaching.

This is the case with the understanding and interpretation of heroes and villains in history. In Spain, contemporary history has been marked by the coup d'état of 1936, the Civil War, and Franco's dictatorship for 40 years. Franco, the dictator, was a villain for the people who were killed, for the political prisoners, for the millions of citizens who did not enjoy liberty, for those who were deprived of their social and civil rights, for the losers. On the contrary, for the winners, Franco was seen as a hero, a vision that continues. Even today his death is commemorated every year by his followers, the extreme right and very conservative political groups. The arrival of democracy in 1975 was a milestone in the country's history. This year is the 50th anniversary of his death and, funnily enough, his death is commemorated by the defenders of democracy and by the ones who don't believe in democracy.

In 2006, an educational reform was approved that included the subject of Education for Citizenship and Human Rights, aiming to promote self-esteem, personal dignity, freedom, and responsibility. However, in 2013, this subject was suppressed as a full school subject. In 2014, the UN Rapporteur urged the extension of recognition and coverage of reparation programmes, highlighting the need to consolidate efforts in historical and human rights education. This demonstrates that memory and tools for the interpretation of the past require legislation to guarantee the inclusion of these topics in school curricula and restore dignity to the victims.

The 2022 Spanish Democratic Memory Law focuses on the recovery, safeguarding, and dissemination of Spain's democratic memory, promoting knowledge of Spanish democratic history and the struggle for democratic freedoms.

Bridging the gap between formal history education and non-formal heritage interpretation

Everywhere, memory sites play an important role as physical materialisations of the past.

Careful interpretation can help to rationalise and soothe the emotions and memories of survivors and victims.

The world outside the classroom – whether real or virtual – can restore many victims of historical atrocities to historical significance and recognition and send powerful messages of inclusion and respect for diversity. Openness to cultural otherness and to other beliefs, world views and practices help young people to make sense of the world they live in.

Therefore, the PACE through its resolution on 'Multiperspectivity in remembrance and history education for democratic citizenship' (Resolution 2584 (2025)) called on member States of the Council of Europe to bridge the gap between formal and non-formal education by 'using' remembrance sites, museums, cultural routes and promoting dialogue about history in Europe. This requires close collaboration and partnerships between research centres, public institutions, and non-governmental organisations to commemorate sensitive historical events networks.

Beyond collaboration with schools, non-formal education plays a crucial role in lifelong learning, especially in the context of historical memory and democratic citizenship. At heritage sites people from all ages can engage with concrete pasts. Interpreters can facilitate a vivid understanding of what it meant to live in a place where the values of democracy and human rights were neglected, thus (re-)motivating people to uphold these values in the present and future.

The PACE Resolution, while addressing member states, also provides guidance for reviewing heritage interpretation practice at museums and sites, e.g. in section 7.2, whether they could enhance their methodological approaches to:

- stimulate critical thinking through learning how to evaluate historical sources and make well-informed judgements;
- develop human rights-based analysis of historical events, multiperspectivity in history education, and critical consideration of different standpoints; and
- foster interactive pedagogies and co-operative learning in small groups, acknowledging cultural differences and multiple identities among learners.

Sections 7.3 and 7.4 provide guidance for creating a supportive and enabling environment for teachers and learners at schools. But some of this is also transferable to continuous professional development of interpreters and their trainers, as well as for co-creating heritage interpretations together with local communities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the teaching of history and its relevance for democratic citizenship education are fundamental for strengthening democratic values, combating authoritarianism, and promoting social cohesion. History and heritage should be taught in a way that fosters critical thinking and addresses multiple perspectives, allowing students and adults to understand better the complexities of the past and its relevance to the present. This is a key issue, considering the evolution and spreading of ideologies that undermine shared values that we have built as a European society for decades.

Therefore, Education for Democratic Citizenship should be a compulsory subject at all stages of formal education and form part of vocational training and non-formal education. It is more important than ever before. Democracy cannot be taken for granted, as we saw in the past, and we see happening again now.

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Sheroes and anti-sheroes – How do we remember and celebrate womens' history in recent Poland?

Anna Kowalczyk (Poland)

Anna Kowalczyk holds an EMBA and is a journalist, writer, feminist and activist. She is the authoress of the bestselling book, The Missing Half of History. A Brief History of Women in Poland, the first popular science synthesis of the history of women in Poland from the Paleolithic to the present day (WAB, 2018/2024). Anna is currently running the Missing Half of History show and podcast on Polish National Radio.

Anna is founder of the Women's History Museum Foundation, and a member of the board of the Humanity in Action Poland. She is editor and co-author of the Applied Herstory manual for educators, the 'Herstories' card game, and the Women's History Database, as well as ambassador and content supervisor of the BNP Paribas campaign 'Where are our sheroes?' and co-author of the Polish-German musical spectacle, Das Moderne Maedel (The Modern Girl).

Watch a recording of this keynote on IE's YouTube channel:
https://youtu.be/nwvullrBN34?si=PdYrrthst1a8KIWj

Why do we still need heroes? Towards a polyphonic culture of memory

Marcin Napiórkowski (Poland)

Marcin Napiórkowski is a doctor of philosophy (IFIS PAN), professor at the Institute of Polish Culture at the University of Warsaw, and associate professor of semiotics at the University of Warsaw. His research interests include collective memory and contemporary mythologies.

He is the author of several books and co-author of a popular musical. He is also a passionate science communicator and a columnist for the popular Polish weekly, Tygodnik Powszechny. Recently, Marcin began a new adventure as acting director of the Polish History Museum.

In his keynote, Marcin takes us into his research areas and activities of the last few years.

Watch a recording of this keynote on IE's YouTube channel:
https://youtu.be/rV8YxLN9P0I?si=RYakixuPQGzHJo4q

Flight of the Swans: How to distinguish heroes from villains, and influence which of those roles people might see themselves playing

Sacha Dench (UK)

Sacha Dench is the CEO of Conservation Without Borders (www.conservation-without-borders.org), a wildlife conservation charity that she set up in 2019 to deliver story-focussed action to protect migratory species.

Sacha is a scientist and adventurer who gained a reputation for devising innovative methods to uncover the threats and potential solutions to saving species on the brink. In 2017, she flew an epic 7,000km flight in a paramotor from the Arctic to the UK, meeting different communities, industries and decision makers along the way, to rally mass support for tackling the decline in Bewick's Swans and their habitats: Flight of the Swans.

For this project, undertaken when she worked for the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT), she became known as the 'Human Swan', was named UN Ambassador for Migratory Species, became the first woman in 50 years to win the Britannia Trophy for an outstanding feat of aviation, and the project won Environmental Campaign of the Year.

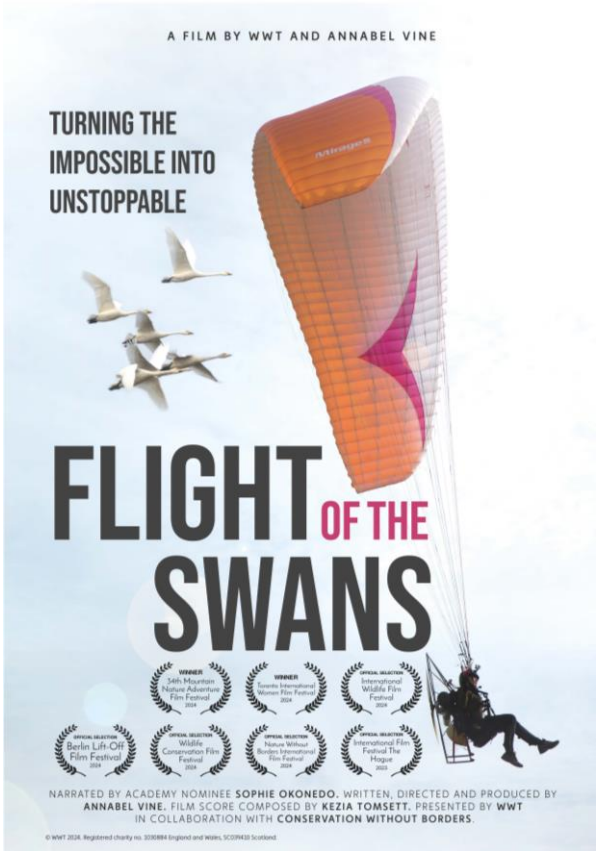
With three decades working in conservation research and problem-solving around the world, she founded Conservation Without Borders to continue to develop innovative collaborations for nature, including opportunities for global corporations to be at the heart of saving species. Sacha's work is often described as 'a kind of James Bond for Nature' and is all about heroes and villains.

Her bold approaches to conservation combine science and creativity and involve literally landing right in the middle of potential conflicts over conservation. This has taught her, the hard and fast way, how to rapidly distinguish heroes from villains, and influence which of those roles other people might see themselves playing.

Sacha's conservation film, Flight of the Swans, was shown during #iecon25 followed by a Q&A session to discuss the issues raised and how to frame sensitive conservation topics to allow positive outcomes by framing potential 'villains' as the 'heroes' of the story.

You can watch the film trailer here:
https://youtu.be/9YLcTq53CUg?si=Jpvt8PI7hXSZ7Nwd

You can watch a preview version of the full film here:
https://conservation-without-borders.notion.site/Flight-of-The-Swans-Documentary-84ffc156f28c4f459b1b732c9fd52950?pvs=4



iecon25 conclusions

Conference wrap-up

Barbara Struys (Belgium)

Barbara Struys works for the open air museum Bokrijk in Belgium in the heritage interpretation team. She is also a freelancer who does consultancy work for heritage and guiding organisations. She is an Interpret Europe Certified Interpretive Guide (CIG) and trainer (CIT).

Heroes and villains at iecon

When I was asked to do the wrap-up of this conference, I was genuinely surprised—and I hesitated. But then I thought, "Yes, I'll do it," because it would push me to be fully present throughout the conference. I'd have to pay close attention to everything that was said. It seemed like a great way to get the most out of the experience.

Following the sessions, keynote speakers, guides—for four days, all in English, which isn't my mother tongue—was intense. Listening to people who, like me, were expressing themselves in a language that's not their first can be quite demanding. Can anyone relate to that?

Maybe we've shared more than just language challenges during this conference.
Let me ask you:

- Who learned something about Polish history? (Many hands go up)
- Who had meaningful conversations with people they'd never met before? (Again, many hands)
- Who felt connected to people from other countries because you face similar challenges in your work? (Lots of hands again)

Yes, we've shared experiences. And yet, I don't have any truths for you as we close this conference. I can only offer my perspective—my point of view as a woman in her forties, from Belgium, working in cultural heritage, who only experienced part of this conference due to the many parallel sessions and study visits.

This conference reminded me that all we ever really have is our own point of view. What we perceive triggers associations—concepts and memories drawn from the personal backpack we each carry. And everyone's backpack is different. We don't know what others are carrying. So, we experience the world—and each other—differently.

For example: one morning, I stepped outside the hotel and said, "Wow, fresh air!"
The next person came out and said, "Oh, it's so cold!"
Same moment, different perception.

After sessions, I would talk to others and be struck by how differently we interpreted the same speaker. So, I've come to believe, from my point of view, that if we want to truly understand one another, we need to listen more. Not just hear—but really listen. And perhaps ask questions that help us listen better, more deeply—questions that allow us to get past the walls our backpacks might build between us.

Another takeaway from the conference for me was the power of words.
This was beautifully explored during the guided tour I joined at the Piłsudski Museum. And it echoed throughout the conference—how words can empower, how they can give voice, and how sometimes, we need new words.
Take "sheroes" instead of "heroes".
Maybe history should become herstory.

Thankfully, someone reminded me—we already have her-itage!

Words matter

I called my partner in Belgium and was raving about the study visit to Basha's museum in Warsaw. He was surprised: "Marie Curie was Polish?!" So, from now on, I've decided not to refer to her simply as Marie Curie, but as Marie Skłodowska-Curie.

Words matter. Talking about *motherhood* isn't the same as talking about the *mothering soul* in all of us.

Words matter—like the word 'originality' in UNESCO's World Heritage criteria. If we strictly followed the Western, material-based interpretation of originality, post-war reconstruction in Warsaw wouldn't have been recognised as World Heritage. But thanks to the Eastern perspective—where originality lies in form—it was.

Words can unite, but they can also divide

During the conference I learned that words can also limit the space for dialogue. Someone pointed out that if the Warsaw Uprising Museum had instead been called the Museum of the Polish Underground State, it might have allowed for a broader range of perspectives. Which title leaves more room for complexity?

This idea—making space for more—truly resonated with me during the conference. As we discussed, we live in turbulent times. Rhetoric around protecting borders and making our own group "great again" dominates. So yes, perhaps striving toward a polyphonic approach to heritage, one that makes space for all perspectives, is more vital than ever. I was inspired by Marcin Napiórkowski's keynote—and I think many others were too. But I was also struck by the questions that followed his talk.

What about views that—fuelled by social media or political leaders promising simple answers to complex problems—turn out to be racist, sexist, or divisive?

Someone said: "Yes, but multiperspectivity must be grounded in an ethical framework."
Hmmm, … From my point of view, that's a difficult one. Because how can I advocate for values like openness, if I tell someone their point of view isn't welcome? Where does that leave room for dialogue?

Perhaps the value of openness—which I hold really dear—means that I, as an interpreter, must make space even for perspectives that might undermine my own values. That's not easy. It's even scary.

Still, the conversations I had in Sulejówek and Warsaw give me hope. Hope that it's possible. That spaces like non-selective museums or natural environments can serve as starting points for real dialogue. For building trust—so we can keep talking, even when it's hard.
(I learned that in Poland, there's a study showing that while people may no longer trust institutions, they do still trust museums!)

Yet even with this hope, I'm left with another question: Am I equipped to embrace radical multiperspectivity?
It feels like a risk.
How do I prepare myself for that?
How do I empower the guides in my museum, who are also afraid of this challenge?
How do we, as interpreters, become more like composers, as Marcin Napiórkowski suggested—people who step back, listen actively, and help shape harmony in this polyphony?

From my point of view, I hope we can keep talking about this. I'd love for us to explore how to meet this challenge together.

I will close with a quote from Piłsudski that I read in the museum. Suddenly, it meant something to me: "Only action has meaning. The best intentions are of no effect unless they result in practical consequences."

So, when we are in our own places of action—natural and cultural—let's struggle, try, fail, and try again. And let's come back together next year, to share what we've learned and to interconnect our points of view.

Full papers

John Knox and the women of Scotland: Interpreting Scottish heroes through guiding and poetry

Thomas H Bak & Gerda Stevenson (UK)

Thomas Bak is an STGA (Scottish Tourist Guide Association) Blue Badge tourist guide for Scotland and a Professor of Cognitive Science of Language and Multilingualism at the University of Edinburgh. Originating from Cracow, Poland, and trained as psychiatrist and neurologist in Switzerland, Germany and in Cambridge, England, he works currently on a project exploring multilingualism and religious experience. When guiding, he specialises in religious tourism, from Celtic Christianity, through Pilgrimages, to Reformation Tours, working in five languages with visitors from a wide range of religious, cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

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Gerda Stevenson is an award-winning Scottish writer (in English and Scots), as well as an actor, film and theatre director, and singer/songwriter. She has presented her poetry and prose at literary festivals throughout the UK and across Europe. Her stage play *FEDERER VERSUS MURRAY* toured to New York, sponsored by the Scottish Government. Her poetry collections include: *IF THIS WERE REAL*, and *QUINES: Poems in Tribute to Women of Scotland*, *TOMORROW'S FEAST*, and two collections of short stories, *LETTING GO*, and *CAT WUMMAN*. Nominations include: for the Gilder/Coigney International Theatre Award (New York), the Trad Awards as Scots Singer of the Year for an album of her own songs, *Night Touches Day*, and for the Critics Awards for Theatre in Scotland. The founder of Scotland's leading women's theatre company, Stellar Quines, she has directed and appeared in many theatre productions and films, including *Braveheart*, winning a BAFTA for her performance in Margaret Tait's feature film *Blue Black Permanent*.

Abstract

This paper brings together two complementary ideas. In terms of content, it focuses on one of the most influential and controversial figures in Scottish history, John Knox (1515-1573), widely perceived as the father of the Scottish reformation. It contrasts him with female figures from different time periods, including Mary Queen of Scots, Mary Fleming, cousin of Mary Queen of Scots, Helen MacFarlane and Isabel Emslie Hutton. In terms of method, it combines interpretive guiding by Thomas H Bak with poetry from Gerda Stevenson's book, Quines: Poems in Tribute to the Women of Scotland. This allows us to approach the topic from different angles, combining a sense of place, 'historical empathy' and an exploration of alternative points of view.

Keywords

historical empathy, poetry, John Knox, Mary Queen of Scots, religion, Reformation, politics, education, feminism

John Knox and Mary Queen of Scots: two contrasting Scottish heroes

Scotland is a country rich in heroes, many of them well known beyond its borders, from the heroic leaders of the war of independence, William Wallace and Robert the Bruce, through

Bonnie Prince Charlie and his dramatic rise and fall, to thinkers (David Hume, Adam Smith), inventors (James Watt), and writers (Robert Burns, Walter Scott) of the Scottish Enlightenment. This list can be further extended by fictional heroes of books and films, from Rob Roy and Sherlock Holmes to James Bond and Harry Potter.

Within this long list, few figures captured the imagination of the world for such a long time and to such a degree as Mary Queen of Scots and her contemporary, chief adversary, and indeed her anathema, John Knox. Mary Queen of Scots remains arguably the most popular Scottish figure in world literature, inspiring dramas, biographies, operas and films (including by Friederich Schiller, Juliusz Slowacki, Giuseppe Verdi, Stefan Zweig, and more recently, Scottish playwrights Liz Lochhead and Linda McLean, to name just a few).

However, within Scotland itself, it is John Knox, whose far-reaching influence, both positive and negative, is arguably more profound, noticeable and lasting. It's impossible to escape from him: his statues are found in important places (e.g. overlooking, from a high column, Glasgow's Cathedral and Necropolis, or the High Kirk of St Giles in Edinburgh); his former house and grave in Edinburgh are major tourist attractions, his influence on Scottish life is lasting. His long shadow affected not only his contemporaries, but continues to divide the country up to the present day (as will become clear from the poems below).

The life stories of Queen Mary and John Knox are tightly interlinked. Mary is often seen as a tragic victim of the brutality of her times, and in such a perspective it is John Knox who best personifies her ruthless, cruel, power-hungry and fanatic tormentors. From the opposite perspective, Mary Queen of Scots is seen as amoral, irresponsible and unsuitable for the leading role as a monarch that her birth gave to her; such a view contrasts her with the idealised figure of John Knox, elevated by Thomas Carlyle in his classical book on heroes (1842) as a man of "sincerity", a prophet, and Scotland's salvation, father not only of Scottish Reformation, but of modern Scotland, its democracy, its Enlightenment, its industrial revolution. Modern historians tend to paint a more differentiated picture (Dawson 2015, Marshall 2001), pointing out that despite their frequent conflicts, on occasions both were working together for the common good of the country (Dawson 2002). And a recent, very critical biography of Mary by Jenny Wormald (2017), describes her reign as "a study in failure", partly because of her failure to counter the political pressure of Knox.

The contradictions of John Knox: how to present a controversial hero

While the different, often contradictory aspects of Mary, her strength and weakness, power and vulnerability, playfulness and seriousness, luck and doom, can still be integrated into a single, albeit complex picture (indeed, it might be this complexity which makes her into such a fascinating and prominent figure of literature, art and popular imagination), the views on Knox are almost always strongly polarised. He can be seen as a prime example of personalities admired as heroes by one group and considered villains by others. For some, he is a man of conviction, courage and action, a source of inspiration, liberating Scotland from an oppressive, reactionary and corrupt Catholic Church. For others, he is a fanatic, misogynistic religious fundamentalist. For many visitors, their view of Knox aligns with their religious affiliation: protestant visitors, particularly those with a presbyterian background, are likely to perceive Knox as their spiritual ancestor and Mary as a sinful, unworthy queen, while those with a catholic background tend to abhor Knox's intolerance and the destruction of churches and

religious art, and are likely to feel sympathy for Mary as a victim, persecuted for her genuine religious convictions.

These contrasting visions are difficult to reconcile and most tourist guides tend to embrace one of them, the critical one being nowadays the more popular, as it appears to be more in line with our 'modern' and 'progressive' times. Such a one-sided presentation, apart from being historically inaccurate, risks antagonising those of our visitors who might have a different point of view, with a potentially negative influence on their travel experience. So, should we, as tourist guides, just agree with our visitors and mirror and reinforce whatever views (or even prejudices) they might have?

Regularly guiding religious groups from different religious creeds and denominations, Catholic, Lutheran and Presbyterian, as well as secular, agnostic or atheist, Thomas H Bak (THB), the first author of this paper, chose a different, a 'third way' approach between these two extremes. He tries to 'pick up' the guests where they are, validating their opinions, and then gently inviting them to consider alternative points of view. This approach has been inspired by that of music therapy, as used in psychotherapy and familiar to THB from the first years of his professional work in psychiatry in Switzerland and Germany. Experienced music therapists do not introduce their patients immediately to the mood towards which they would like them to move, e.g. confronting a depressed patient with cheerful music, or an anxious one with calm tones. They usually start with the mood they encounter their patients in, and take them slowly, gently and gradually into a different direction.

Likewise, THB's approach is to begin by acknowledging the visitors' point of view and linking it to widely held views of contemporaries and posterity. Only then would he mention the existence of other perspectives. If, for instance, a group sees John Knox as a fanatical "Taliban of the 16th Century", the task would be to mention his influence on democracy and education, with his idea of "a school in every parish" contributing to the fact that Scotland had one of the highest literacy rates in 18th Century Europe, illustrated by the fact that a person from an economically very modest peasant background could become one of its most internationally acclaimed poets: Robert Burns. In contrast, a group uncritically idealising Knox might be invited to consider his effect of polarising Scottish society and suppressing any points of view different from his own. In this way, we can lead our visitors from an uncritical idealisation to an understanding of his more problematic aspects, or, conversely, from an outright vilification to an appreciation of the positive aspects of his influence.

If the visitors are interested in this type of information, as a further step, one can discuss the question to what extent one person, even one as charismatic, strong-willed and influential as Knox, can single-handedly shape history. In terms of his influence on the Reformation, one can point out the presence of the followers of John Wycliffe in Ayrshire, long before the actual Reformation. One can mention that the Reformation movement in Scotland had strong support among substantial parts of the nobility and urban population, independently of his actions. In terms of his influence on democracy and education, one can draw attention to democratic elements in Scottish history since the Middle Ages (e.g. the fact that Scottish monarchs tended to call themselves King/Queen of Scots, rather than of Scotland, or the Declaration of Arbroath in which Scottish nobility reasserted their right to choose their own monarch). Likewise, one can stress the value attached to education in medieval Scotland, Scots scholars abroad (from Duns Scotus to one of John Knox's admired teachers,

John Mair), the existence, since 1333, of the Scots College at the Sorbonne in Paris, or the fact that at the time of Reformation, Scotland had already three universities (St Andrews, Glasgow and Aberdeen), as opposed to two (Oxford and Cambridge) in England, with its ten times bigger population.

Knowledge of such facts, supporting a more differentiated approach to controversial heroes like John Knox, can be very useful, particularly in answering visitors' questions. But it cannot and should not be the only, or even the main part of guiding. A much more promising approach to enhancing the visitors' experience, while at the same time challenging stereotypes and promoting multiperspectivity, is that of "historical empathy". It tries to imagine how one would feel if one were living in Knox's times in different social positions: as a monarch or a servant, a noble or a peasant, a minister or a merchant, a man or a woman. This approach has been inspired by the writings of Rosalind K Marshall, in particular her biographies of the prominent adversaries in the Scottish history of the 16th Century: Mary of Guise (the mother of Mary Queen of Scots) and John Knox, in which she achieves a remarkable level of intellectual and emotional understanding of so radically different characters (Marshall 2001, 2023). Such an approach can help us understand our fellow human beings, their thoughts as well as their emotions, while at the same time recognising the essential plurality of human experiences in any place or time.

Historical empathy: guiding meets poetry

This is a moment where history can be meaningfully complemented by art. Paintings, poems or songs can express powerfully what a scholarly article can only hint at. Including them in the guiding narrative will make the experience of the visitors deeper, more engaging, more intense, more memorable. At the same time, it can allow the guide to present many different voices and allow them to be heard without having to take sides. And, while appreciating the uniquely individual, we can also recognise that the big themes of the past (and of the 16th Century in particular) remain big themes today: truth and authenticity, tolerance and democracy, education and respect.

Such a combination of guiding and poetry was piloted by the authors of this paper as part of the 'Being Human' Festival of Humanities and Social Sciences in November 2023 in Edinburgh. The topic of the Festival that year was 'Rhyme and Reason'. The authors, inspired by another of Gerda Stevenson's books (second author of this paper), entitled 'Edinburgh', took this festival as an opportunity to present science and literature as two complementary and closely intertwined aspects of Scotland's capital city. 'Edinburgh' includes a series of poems which accompany photographs by leading Scottish landscape photographer Allan Wright, and also an introduction by Gerda, outlining a very personal relationship to her home city. Stevenson and Wright pay homage in word and image not only to this glorious city's prestigious landmarks, monuments and masonry, but, through word and image, they also unearth Edinburgh's many contradictions, exploring what lies beneath the veneer. John Knox is present within its pages, of course, bible in hand, his house too, situated on the Royal Mile.

The current project, presented in this paper, builds on the success of the aforementioned festival event, taking it further. The basis for it is Gerda Stevenson's poetry collection 'Quines: Poems in Tribute to Women of Scotland'. This is much more than a collection of poems: it is a book of Scottish history, from prehistory to present, experienced through women. Importantly for the topic of this paper and the "historical empathy" approach described above, Gerda's vision has been influenced by her experience as a professional theatre and film

actor, as well as director. The poems are not only written in the voice, but also from the perspective of the women she is celebrating.

For this paper, its authors have selected from Gerda's Quines, four very different female characters, whose lives were, in different ways, affected by John Knox and his legacy. The first two poems are written in Scots, a Germanic language related to English (as well as Dutch, German and Norwegian), which would have been the language used in Edinburgh and the central areas of Scotland at the time when the action of the poems takes place. It was then not only the spoken language of the people, but also the official written language of the state (e.g. parliament documents, legal texts), as well as of a thriving literature, including poetry, drama and translations from Latin classics such as Aeneid. The next two poems, in contrast, are written in English, as by that time (19th-20th Century) it replaced Scots as the language of the educated, in spoken as well as in written form and thus would have been the language used by the heroines of the two last poems.

The poems can be related to prominent Scottish landmarks, such as the Holyrood Palace in Edinburgh, the favourite residence of Mary Queen of Scots, where the action of the first poem takes place, Loch Leven Castle, a prominent landmark on the way to the Highlands, the place of abdication of Mary Queen of Scots described in the second poem, or Edinburgh's Old Royal Infirmary (now Edinburgh Future's Institute of the University of Edinburgh), architecturally inspired by Holyrood Palace with its characteristic conical towers, where the heroine of the last poem trained in medicine.

Mary Fleming

The first poem is in the voice of Mary Fleming, a cousin of Mary Queen of Scots, and one of the queen's four ladies-in-waiting. These were known as the Four Marys – Mary Seton, Mary Beaton, Mary Fleming and Mary Livingston, chosen to accompany the young queen to France in 1548. A year before this, Mary Fleming and Mary Queen of Scots, who were only four years old at the time, accompanied by the infant queen's mother, Mary of Guise, fled from the English King Henry's army, and went into hiding on the island of Inchmahome, on Lake of Menteith. Mary Fleming remained close to the queen into adult life. The two slept together at Holyrood Palace, as protection, after a French poet, Pierre de Bocosel de Chastelard, was found hiding in the queen's chamber, under her bed.

Although John Knox had banned, in his iconoclastic fervour, Christmas and Epiphany (called in Scots 'Uphaly Nicht'), the celebrations, under the queen's instructions, went ahead. On Twelfth Night (eve of Epiphany), 1563, Mary Fleming got the piece of traditional King cake (Black Bun) with the bean concealed in it – a traditional game – and so was 'Queen of the Bean' for the night. The English ambassador Thomas Randolph, who was present at the Twelfth Day of Christmas pageant, at which Mary Fleming played this role, described the costumes: "The queen of the Bean was that day in a gown of cloth of silver; her head, her neck, her shoulders, the rest of her whole body so be-set with stones, that more in our whole jewel house were not to be found."

Queen o the Bean

Yon wis a ploy! In ma mindin fur aye.
It stairtit at breakfast, wi cake - she couldnae wait.
We were sat up in bed thegither (ever sin I claucht
thon cuif o a French poet hid in her chaumer, fired up
fur hoochmagandie, we'd slept side by side);
"Noo, ma douce wee cuz," says oor Lady Queen,
giein me the ashet, "tak a bite o Black Bun,
an let's see if ye'll beir the gree!" I sink ma teeth
intae crisp pastry crust, syne hinnie faulds o moist daurk –
raisons, cinnamon, almonds, citrus, ginger, as if
the essence o thae gifts the Three Kings
brocht tae Christ are fluidin ower ma tongue's buds;
and then it comes - the haurd, leamin surface

agin ma gums – the bean! An her lauch like licht
fills the mornin: "Ye will be Queen this Uphaly Nicht!"*
says she, awready oot o bed, rakin through her kist
o treisurs – they're skailin tae the flair in a skinklin spate.
"I'll hae ye geared up sae braw, ma Mary dear,
ye wull cherm the hale court - a glisterin spreet
o Christmastide ye sall be, nae maitter that Maister Knox
hus bainished it frae the almanac; I wull mak ye
a merrie Phoenix that wull rise afore us aa!"

Och, ye shoud hae seen me, 'tho I say it masel -
I wis braw! She hud me happed in a siller goon,
Orient stanes threidit through ma braidit hair,
dreepin frae ma broo, ma halse, ma paps –
ma hale form a veesion in amethyst an jade,
emerant, amber, topaz, an a sash o sapphires, blue
as the dawn ower Bethlehem; bangles o gowd,
pearls like snawdraps, rubies reid as Rizzio's bluid.

Bluid. Ower muckle o't hus syped awa
doon the years sin syne, thae daffin days
o licht-hertit ploys. The warld is grey an mirk,
a wanlit place withoot a braith o colour tae its face,
nae feastin noo, nae dancin, guisin, liftin o the hert
in sang; oor anely solace fur the saul is kennin we hae
lauched thegither, lauched sin we were careless bairns
in a blurr o bluebell wids on haly Inchmaholm; lauched
as lasses, at the lottery o it aa, the castin o the die:
Queen fur aiblins hauf a hunder year,
or ae ferlie nicht, fur juist a blink.

Mary, Queen of Scots

The second poem, The Abdication of Mary Queen of Scots, is inspired by a painting of the same title, by Gavin Hamilton (1723-1798), which can be seen in the University of Glasgow's Hunterian Art Gallery. The painting depicts what could be a highly charged scene from a play. The drama, captured so vividly by the artist, is taking place on the July 24th, 1567, in Loch Leven Castle (a prominent landmark in the East of Scotland), where, at the time of her abdication, Mary Queen of Scots was imprisoned – a castle on an island from which it would have been almost impossible for her to escape. We see Mary surrounded by men: a soldier is grabbing her arm, a lawyer preparing a document, a sage-like individual observing in the background, another soldier watching from outside through a window, the queen herself in the centre, the expression on her face suggesting that she is almost absent, in another dimension altogether; one of her ladies-in-waiting, probably Mary Seton, is clutching her arm, weeping. On the day before her abdication, Mary Quen of Scots had given birth to still-born twins, and was not permitted to attend their burial – if, indeed, the infants were buried at all. Gerda's poem is in the voice of the queen, a highly educated woman, who, although a native French speaker, would have also spoken Scots.

The Abdication of Mary Queen of Scots

Tak ma croon, an dinna fash –
aa yon wis ower fur me lang syne.
Ye needna glaum at ma silk goon
wi yer coorse nieve – I'm nae threit;
I'll sign yer muckle scroll, dae whit I maun,
past carin noo; thae last three days ma flesh
an saul hae wandert shores o hell-fire, dule an daith:
twa bairns I cradled in ma wame aa through the months,
sae douce, o Spring an Simmer, slippit cauld an stieve
intae the dowie air o Leven's grey stane waas,
claucht frae ma jizzen, an burriet ootby, wi nae prayer,
fur aa I ken, an nae sang, twa scraps o heiven,
aa ma howp in their twin licht smoorit noo,
tho milk's aye buckin frae ma breists unner ma lace an steys;
an I couldnae gie a fig fur yer fouterin laws,
sat there, scrievin yer Latin clatters o queens an kings –
O, I could run rings roon ilka yin o ye in Greek an aa,
as weel's ma bonnie French, but ye're naethin, naethin noo,
juist ghaists; an, och, Mary, Mary Seton, last
o ma fower leal ladies, dinna waste yer tears
on gien up a bittie gowd an glister, haud ma airm
if it helps, but dinna, dinna greet fur this.

Helen Macfarlane

Helen Macfarlane was born in Barrhead, near Glasgow, 1818. She was a Chartist revolutionary, and a deeply religious woman, who believed that Christ was a socialist. Admired by Karl Marx as a political commentator and essayist, she was the first translator into English of The Communist Manifesto, published in The Red Republican magazine, under the male nom de plume of Howard Morton. Her identity as translator was not revealed till 1958. Her family

owned calico printing works, producers of Turkey red dye, used in the production of popular fashion items. During the economic distress of the 1830s, the workers in the calico mills went on strike against the introduction of unskilled labour. The mill owners (including the Macfarlanes) were able to call on the government to break the strike by sending in the Redcoat Dragoons.

In 1848 Helen Macfarlane travelled to Vienna when the Revolution against the Hapsburg monarchy broke out. Later, in a critique of Thomas Carlyle (one of the most ardent admirers of John Knox, as mentioned before), she wrote:
"I am free to confess that, for me the most joyful of all spectacles possible in these times is the one which Mr. Carlyle laments; one which I enjoyed extremely at Vienna, in March 1848, i.e. 'a universal tumbling of impostors...' For it amounts to this, that men are determined to live no longer in lies... Ça Ira! And how do men come to perceive that the old social forms are worn out and useless? By the advent of a new Idea..."

Seeing Red – Helen Macfarlane

I've always seen red:
Christ's hands on the cross –
He bled to show us, mother said,
that we are all divine, and no-one
may enslave another.

Workers' hands in the family mills, steeped
in vats of red madder and bullocks' blood,
raised high like flames, waving our wealth:
Turkey Red bandanas they'd laboured to create –
a crimson tide against redcoat dragoons
riding in to break the strike.

Red raw my sisters' eyes – how they cried
when the mills went down, our brothers forced
to sign away the family fortune, all we owned,
our gracious home – its stair carpet a scarlet artery
under the skin of Royal Crescent's cool façade.

Red the robin's breast on a winter branch,
my spirit soaring, Christ's gospel with me as I board
for Vienna; and red the anger I found there; a fire of hope
within me when the monarch fell, a tumbling imposter –
the advent of a new idea preached in ancient Galilee.

Bright red the joy when my babe was born, red hot
the scalding pain at the flutter of her failing heart, my ear
to that hidden ruby buried deep, as she slipped into Christ.

And red, red my thoughts that flow with His tidings,
onto page after page: how can we leave a single soul to die
by inches in squalid lanes and gutters, making slop shirts
at tuppence apiece, while another is swathed in silk?
We must grasp the meaning of His words, His dying prayer
that All may be one, even as we are one.

Note: The last stanza includes a transposition of Helen's own writings published in Red Republican.

Isabel Emslie Hutton

Isabel Emslie Hutton, CBE (Commander of the British Empire, an honorary title awarded by the British monarch), was born in Edinburgh, 1887, where she later studied medicine. She was brought up near the Ochil Hills, north of Stirling, and trained in Edinburgh as a doctor and psychiatrist. She was awarded the Serbian Order of the White Eagle for services with the Scottish Women's Hospitals in World War I. Hutton was a trailblazer in mental health, and worked privately at a time when the Marriage Bar prevented women from working in their profession after they had married, a practice abolished in Scotland and many other countries only after World War II. In her vivid autobiography, Memories of a Doctor in War and Peace, published in 1960, Hutton reflects on the impact of religion (strongly influenced by John Knox's interpretation of it) upon the national psyche in Scotland: "...children in my day were brought up on the maximum of Christian terror and the minimum of Christian love. It is indeed not too much to say that many Scottish children went through a mild conflict, which might almost be termed religious melancholia, before their first decade of life, and that some carried their guilt and fears with them into adult life."

Skull

I'd entered the graveyard after church,
my thoughts leaning from Genesis towards
Darwin's take on events, when the spade
broke your rest among my ancestors;
I feared you might be retribution, or even a curse,
worms churning the earth through clogged eye sockets;
but my friend the gravedigger only laughed:
'Tak him! He'll be mair use at yer studies
than moulderin here in the bane-thrang grun!'

The Sabbath air under the Ochils brewed
with coming thunder, my mind with dread
of parental censure, so I wedged you in a cleft
above the burn, and left you there, to the elements.
All night, through lightning flash, my pillowed head
filled with you, a skull inside a skull.

You hadn't budged an inch from your post,
that storm-washed dawn. Rain had scoured you
to pristine white; your benign smile a sure sign
that no transgression had occurred –
you were ready for service in another life.

From the shadows of my haversack,
your mandible flings its jaunty grin
into Auld Reekie's streets, a salvo
at the lowering legacy of Knox,
and a silent rally to the fearful.

You've given me a head start;
I'm getting to know you –
the perfect pyramid of each petrous apex,
the melancholy slope of your lacrimal bones,
and your entire compliance in anatomy class,
when we sawed off your vault to view the interior
that once housed a whole world.

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Taking Sir Hans Sloane off his pedestal? Interpreting legacies of enslavement and empire at the British Museum

Stuart Frost (UK)

Stuart Frost is Head of Interpretation and Volunteers at the British Museum. Prior to this, he spent eight years at the Victoria & Albert Museum working on the redevelopment of the Medieval and Renaissance Europe 300-1600 galleries (opened 2009). At the British Museum he co-curated the Desire, love, identity: exploring LGBTQ histories exhibition which also toured to five UK venues (2017-2019), Collecting histories: Solomon Islands (2019) and a Collecting and Empire trail (2020 onward).

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Abstract

The British Museum was established in 1753 thanks in large part to Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753). A physician, Sloane was also a collector of objects from around the world. By the time of his death he had collected more than 71,000 items. Sloane bequeathed his collection to the nation and in 1753 it became a founding collection of the British Museum. In London, Sloane is celebrated with one of English Heritage's blue plaques and in the name Sloane Square.

However, Sloane's significant relationship with the transatlantic trade in enslaved people has long been overlooked.[1] His collecting began in Jamaica, then an English colony where he worked on slave plantations. Sloane married an heiress to Jamaican sugar plantations worked by enslaved people, profits from which contributed to his ability to collect. This paper will focus on recent initiatives from August 2020 onwards, including collaborative work with communities around the UK and a contemporary artist, to acknowledge and reinterpret Sloane's complex biography.

Keywords

British Museum; Hans Sloane; enslavement; statues; slave trade; protest; empire

The British Museum is – as is often pointed out – not very helpfully named. It is a museum of world culture located in London. Its collection is global in scope and ranges from deep history to the present day. Today it may look as though it has always been as it is, but of course that is not the case. It has a long history and that means – inevitably – that it has a lot of baggage (Frost 2019). The collection includes about 8 million objects; 80,000 of which are on display in Bloomsbury.

I will briefly explain who Hans Sloane is because he is not a household name in the UK or elsewhere. Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753) was born in Ulster in what is now Northern Ireland. He studied medicine and botany in London, Paris and Montpellier. In 1689, Sloane set up a successful medical practice at his home in Bloomsbury Place in London, very near to the British Museum. This building is still standing today, and its connection with Sloane is commemorated with a blue plaque set into its

[1] Sloane's relationship with transatlantic slavery has been well-known, both in the academic literature and in the British Museum (BM), Natural History Museum (NHM) and British Library (BL), for some time, particularly since 2007. However, it is only more recently that it has been given prominence in displays and exhibitions at the BM.

façade by English Heritage.[2] Sloane's patients included Queen Anne and Kings George I and II. He became President of the College of Physicians in 1719 and in 1727 he succeeded Sir Isaac Newton as President of the Royal Society. In brief, he was a high achiever. In the context of this paper, what we are most interested in is his collecting. Sloane assembled a large collection which on his death became one of the founding collections of the British Museum in 1753.

Sloane built up his vast collection – natural history specimens and human-made artefacts – through two principal means. He absorbed complete collections made by others, through purchase or inheritance. He also bought numerous natural and artificial curiosities from travelers and colonial immigrants around the expanding British Empire, including North America, the West Indies and East Asia. I think it is reasonable to say that without Hans Sloane, there would be no British Museum, and least not in the form that came into existence in the 18th century. Originally held entirely at the British Museum, Sloane's collection is now spread across the British Museum (BM), the British Library (BL) and the Natural History Museum (NHM).

In 2003 the current Enlightenment Gallery was created at the BM, located in a gallery built to house the King's Library, the oldest surviving part of the current building (now located at the British Library, St Pancras, London) (Sloan 2004). The Enlightenment Gallery evokes the BM as it was in the 18th century, and it was intended to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the founding of the British Museum (Figure 1). Like any display, it is inevitably a reflection of the time that it was created. It included a bust of Sir Hans Sloane (Figure 2) placed on a pedestal on open display[3], with a very short label which read:

Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753)
Physician and Founder of the British Museum
By Michael Rysback (1694-1770)

Figure 1. The Enlightenment Gallery (Room 1) at the British Museum (Image: The Trustees of the British Museum)

Figure 2. Bust of Hans Sloane by Michael Rysbrack (Image: The Trustees of the British Museum)

[2] The plaque, installed in 1965, makes no reference to Sloane's relationship with enslavement. For more details see: www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/blue-plaques/hans-sloane/

[3] Room 1 contains many other portrait busts of other notable 18th century figures. This type of display was typical of private and university libraries in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Pandemic, protests and pedestals

In August 2020 – when the Museum was closed because the world was in a Covid-19 enforced lock down – Sir Hans Sloane was taken off his pedestal and moved into a nearby case (Frost 2021). The existing display in the case was removed, and a new one was added around the bust with the aim of placing Sloane in a more informative, accurate and helpful context. [4] The prime reason for this change was that Sloane was a slave owner, and someone who invested in – and profited from – the transatlantic trade in enslaved people. The wealth he accumulated through the exploitation of enslaved people contributed to Sloane's ability to acquire artefacts and specimens and he also drew on their knowledge. This information was missing from the label on the plinth that held his bust, nor was it provided elsewhere in the room.

Sloane's biography is intimately connected with the British Empire and the transatlantic trade (Delburgo 2017). His collecting began in Jamaica, then an English colony. He was physician to the governor and also treated those who worked on its slave plantations. Sloane drew on the knowledge of enslaved people to help him collect, and understand, plant specimens. On his return to London, Sloane married an heiress to Jamaican sugar plantations worked by enslaved people, profits from which contributed to his ability to collect.

The murder of George Floyd, killed by a white police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota on 25 May 2020, was a pivotal moment that year. Floyd's death triggered protests in many countries across the world, including the UK. Many protesters marched as part of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which campaigned for justice and equality. In the UK the protests led to the toppling of a late 19th-century statue of Edward Colston (1636-1721) in Bristol on 7 June 2020, a highly symbolic act that generated wide-ranging and long-lasting debate in the Houses of Parliament, the media and the heritage sector.[5] Colston, an English merchant and Tory MP, was heavily involved in the transatlantic trade in enslaved people and his statue had been a focus for debate within Bristol for decades before it was finally toppled (McConnell Simpson 2024).

In response to BLM, and the toppling of Colston's statue, many museums and cultural organisations issued statements including commitments to be proactively anti-racist. The British Museum's Director, Hartwig Fischer, issued a statement which attracted a large number of responses from the public ranging from supportive to highly critical (Fischer 2020). A number of changes to displays at the British Museum were made on the one-way route that was being developed for reopening at the time. These small changes were intended to openly better acknowledge the museum's own historical ties with slavery, empire and racism, and to show a sincere, visible commitment to making more meaningful and substantial change in the medium-to-long term (Frost 2021).

Hans Sloane's bust was placed at the heart of the new case which was titled 'Sir Hans Sloane, Empire and Slavery' within the broader theme of 'Empire and Collecting' (Figure 3). In part,

[4] The British Library has a copy of the British Museum's bust of Sir Hans Sloane, on open display to the public, and they went through a process of revising their interpretation at the same time.

[5] Colston's statue is now the centre of multivocal display in M Shed Bristol. It is laid horizontally in a large case, with protesters' graffiti preserved rather than removed. The statue's empty plinth is still in-situ, but a plaque has been added explaining the events of June 2020 and giving the statue's current location. For a wider discussion of the removal of colonial statues and monuments, and an overview of the history of the phenomena, see Hicks, D. *Every Monument Will Fall: A Story of Remembering and Forgetting* (Random House, London, 2025).

moving the bust into a vitrine was to protect it in the unlikely event that a protestor might seek to deface, damage or destroy the sculpture, but the main reason was to create a new display to give more prominence to the transatlantic trade in enslaved people in the Enlightenment Gallery. It seems like a surprising oversight now, but when the Enlightenment Gallery was created in 2003 there was no real prominent discussion of the transatlantic trade in this vast room, nor any significant display elsewhere on this subject at the BM.

Figure 3. The new display, 'Sir Hans Sloane, Empire and Slavery' as it was in August 2020. (Image: The Trustees of the British Museum)

The two main headings in the new case were: *Sir Hans Sloane: physician, collector, slave owner* and *Legacies of Empire and Slavery*, and hopefully these give a broad sense of the approach taken in contextualising Sloane. In truth, although this new display represented a significant change at the BM, it was a modest one. Nevertheless, it attracted a disproportionate amount of media coverage, some of which was willfully misleading. Some major newspapers erroneously reported that Sloane's bust had been removed from display altogether, rather than simply relocated and reinterpreted. As Professor David Olusoga wrote in a national newspaper at the time:

> "In less hysterical times, a minor act of curatorial reinterpretation and recontextualisation would be of little interest outside the museum world. Instead, it sparked yet another confected outbreak of needless hostilities in Britain's ongoing History Wars. Taking Sloane off his pedestal and setting him within historical reality is not an act of erasure—it is a small act of recognition." (Olusoga 2020)

The new display was generally well received, although it provoked strong reactions from a vocal minority, with comments expressed on social media and in correspondence sent directly to the museum. Some felt the display was a 'politically correct' attack on a great man, and that the museum was betraying its founder; others that the museum needed to do much more to acknowledge the horrors of slavery and its own relationship with colonialism and empire. A series of high-profile online events, many involving the Museum's director (at the time, Hartwig Fischer), also took place, and podcasts and social media posts related to Sloane, Black history, slavery and empire were published on the BM website.[6]

Subsequent developments

The updated case included a short text that invited feedback from the public, which made a commitment to further initiatives.[7] There have been subsequent changes to that exhibit. Some of these were driven by the need to replace works on paper which for conservation reasons

[6] Lowe, M., Delbourgo, J., Fischer, H., and Jansari, S. [Online] The Museum Podcast Special: Sir Hans Sloane (August 2020) https://www.britishmuseum.org/the-british-museum-podcast#hans-sloane-special [Accessed 21 April 2025]

[7] The text read: **Collecting, empire and slavery**. The Museum is developing plans for new displays and programmes to address questions around collecting, empire and the transatlantic slave trade. This work will evolve over time, and we will continue to engage in these crucial debates and discussions. Please visit the Museum's website for the latest information.

could not be on permanent display. The removal of a large abolitionist print related to a slave ship, for example, provided an opportunity to add a remarkable Taino ritual seat – or duho – from the Bahamas that had been languishing in a location where it was overlooked.

Taino chiefs sit on duhos and, aided by hallucinogens, communicate with their gods, a practice that continues today in the Caribbean. The Taino were the Indigenous inhabitants of the Bahamas, but they were removed to the island of Hispaniola by the Spanish. The Bahamas were subsequently colonised by the British who established plantations worked by enslaved people. The stool has part of its history inscribed beneath the seat. This tells us that it was found in a cave by an enslaved man called James Thompson in 1820. He subsequently sold it to a Methodist missionary in 1835 – by this date slavery has been abolished in the British Empire and James Thompson was now a free man and a local leader. The Taino stool was added to the Sloane display as a new stop on an existing 'Collecting and Empire' trail, with a view to encouraging more people to visit the case. [8]

During 2023 a drawing by British-Jamaican artist Charmaine Watkiss was added temporarily (March-October). This new commission, called The Warrior's Way: Safeguarding the natural history of Jamaica, replaced an earlier historic work on paper and was part of a wider project lead by the Reimagining the British Museum team. Watkiss's work responded to botanical drawings commissioned and collected by Sloane for his book, A Natural History of Jamaica (1707;1725), highlighting the knowledge of Jamaican plants held by local healers and enslaved Akan people from West Africa which Sloane drew on. The drawing was accompanied by an online film, details of which were included on the object label, part of an experimental series titled 'Entangled Histories' (Watkiss & Hughes 2023).

Sloane Lab

More recently the case has been updated as part of a project called Sloane Lab. 'Sloane Lab: Looking back to build future shared collections', was a unique research project and partnership between the British Museum, Natural History Museum and University College London, funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), which digitally reconnected elements of the Sloane collections so that everyone can explore the collection online.[9] As part of the Sloane Lab project a co-curated touring exhibition about Sloane and his collection was developed, called For the curious and interested[10]. (Figure 4)

Figure 4. *For the curious and interested* at Amgueddfa Ceredigion Museum, Aberystwyth, Wales (27 April – 7 September 2024). (Image: The Trustees of the British Museum)

[8] The Collecting and Empire trail, including the Taino stool, can be accessed on the Museum's website here: https://www.britishmuseum.org/visit/object-trails/collecting-and-empire-trail

[9] For more information visit the Sloane Lab website: https://sloanelab.org/ I would like to thank Dr Alicia Hughes (Project Curator: The Sloane Lab: Looking back to build future shared collections) for reviewing this paper and making several very helpful suggestions.

[10] More information is available online via the BM's website here: https://www.britishmuseum.org/our-work/national/uk-touring-exhibitions-and-loans/current-tours/curious-and-interested

This touring exhibition brought together a small part of Sloane's collection – including human-made objects, natural history rarities, books and prints – that is now held between the British Museum, the British Library and the Natural History Museum. It explored new perspectives on the collection with two UK partner museums and their local communities in the devolved nations of Northern Ireland and Wales.[11] The exhibition was co-created in collaboration with staff at the partner museums and their local communities, arguably bringing more personal and emotional connection to the fore than might otherwise have been the case.

The exhibition investigated how and why objects from across the world were brought together by Sloane. It also gave more weight to some of the previously hidden stories of those Sloane worked with and relied upon for their knowledge and skills, including indigenous and enslaved people, and other collectors, explorers and naturalists.

And after the exhibition was over, some elements and learnings from the touring exhibition, including contributions from community partners, were used to update the case in Room 1 (Figure 5). More focus was placed on Sloane's wife, Elizabeth Langley Rose, than had previously been the case. An object from the touring show, an ivory horn from West Africa, part of Sloane's collection, was also added, along with a long-term loan of a sculpture made by a community creative practitioner for the touring exhibition in Wales which focused on a young Black boy owned by Sloane in London.

Figure 5. The current Sloane case in Room 1, updated as part of the Sloane Lab project. (Image: The Trustees of the British Museum)

A new artwork that had not been in the touring show, *The Rapacious Edict* by artist Charmaine Watkiss, was produced and added following Watkiss's six-month Sloane Lab fellowship with University College London, the Natural History Museum and the British Museum (Figure 6). Sloane advised the Royal African Company on a venture to West Africa to find lucrative uses for local plants. This new work highlights the extraction of Indigenous knowledge of plants from African people before they were sold into slavery in the Americas and Caribbean.

Figure 6. *The Rapacious Edict* by Charmaine Watkiss in the Sloane case (Room 1). (Image: The Trustees of the British Museum)

[11] The two venues were: Down County Museum, Downpatrick, Northern Ireland (20 January - 13 April 2024) and Amgueddfa Ceredigion Museum, Aberystwyth, Wales (27 April - 7 September 2024).

Towards a new British Museum

Work at the BM is ongoing to engage the public in debates about legacies of empire and enslavement. The Museum recently held a special exhibition, *Hew Locke: what have we here?*, a collaboration between staff at the BM and British-Guyanese artist Hew Locke (Locke 2024). The exhibition explored messy and complicated histories and legacies of empire through the Museum's collection.[12] Locke created a series of sculptures known as The Watchers, figures that watch visitors as they look at the objects in the exhibition, their clothing carrying dates related to contested objects in the Museum's collection. Most of *The Watchers* were installed in the exhibition, but some were placed in the Enlightenment Gallery where everyone could view them. It was not an accident – I suspect – that one of *The Watchers* in Room 1 was emerging from a vast neo-classical vase and looking towards the bust of Hans Sloane in the one case in the BM that explicitly addresses the transatlantic trade.

The British Museum has embarked on an ambitious masterplan to completely redisplay the collection and create a series of new galleries. The work is starting on the Western side of the BM but at some point, the Enlightenment Gallery will be replaced. There are big questions that need to be addressed, including the BM's own relationship with the transatlantic trade, the British Empire and colonial violence. These are not easy issues to resolve, and the solution will need to be much more comprehensive than one small display case in a vast gallery in an enormous museum. The initiatives briefly outlined here do illustrate the value of bringing new perspectives and other voices into dialogue, whether through the work of contemporary artists, or through co-curation with community partners.

There is no doubt that Hans Sloane is a key figure in the early history of the BM, and he is a useful and important focus for opening up much needed wider debates about enslavement, empire and colonial exploitation. His biography needs to be presented accurately and honestly, But I think it is also important to note that, as significant as Sloane is in the history of the BM (and the British Library and Natural History Museum), today his collection at Bloomsbury amounts to only 0.4% of the registered collection.[13] The number of individuals involved in shaping the Museum's collection over three centuries is vast, and Sloane is not typical of the majority.[14]

The intention is that the masterplan will be complete by 2053 in order to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the founding of the BM. It will be fascinating to see how the BM transforms itself in the decades ahead, and how the new museum addresses its complex and often contested past for contemporary global audiences in more substantial and integrated ways than have been possible to date.

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12 For a curator / artist-led tour of the exhibition, visit: https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=AW4o3lZw8qc

13 Isobel MacDonald, Counting when, who and how: Visualising the British Museum's history of acquisition through collection data, 1753-2019, Journal of the History of Collections.

14 There are other people whose collections have come to the BM, of course, who also merit greater scrutiny and more meaningful contextualisation to acknowledge connections with the transatlantic trade or colonial exploitation or violence. The BM also seeks a tricky balance between acknowledging where past collecting has been problematic, falling short of current standards, whilst communicating that the majority of the collection has been acquired ethically and appropriately, to challenge the misconception that "everything in the British Museum is stolen" (Frost 2019).

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On the crossroad of responsibilities: Living between two eras, an experiment from Chania, Crete

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Abstract

It was in the town of Chania, on the island of Crete, that the Cretan Greek statesman Eleftherios Venizelos, started his political career by achieving the passage from the Ottoman rule to the Cretan Autonomous state first and then the union with the Greek state. He was the prominent figure of modernisation in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Between the Cretan and Greek culture, between the Greek and European identity (he was one of the founders of the United Nations), between royalty and republic, he lived in very intense times. He had to balance all the uprising political and military groups, the geostrategic interests of the Great Powers and his personal life. As prime minister, as diplomat, as revolutionary, he never avoided responsibilities. Therefore, he became the most famous, and at the same time the most unpopular, politician of modern Greece.

That's what inspired the initiative to propose an interpretive walk to the Venizelos Museum-Residence, as an innovative approach. As heritage interpretation is not very known in Greece, the procedure of convincing and preparing it passed through several levels. The pilot test took place with the guides of the museum in order to approve the approach. After many months of research and thanks to the open-minded workers, the first walk took place with local visitors.

This paper dismantles not the hero itself but the underground procedures that finally blocked the interpretive tours. Between ideology and openness, between innovation and traditional tours, between deep-rooted mentalities and visitors searching to connect with their heritage, in the middle of the crossroads of a museum and residence, what could this experiment teach us? Where does the interpretive guide stand?

Keywords

heritage interpretation, interpretation ethics, professional ethics, Venizelos Museum, interpretive guiding, national heroes and villains

Introduction

In line with the central theme of the conference, Heroes, anti-heroes and villains, this paper explores the ethical dimensions of heritage interpretation by reflecting on the notions of good and bad choices as they manifest in professional practice. These moral landscapes often present us with binary crossroads—paradise or purgatory—that frame our interpretive choices. Yet, in the contemporary world, ethical dilemmas appear increasingly complex and layered. Conferences such as this should offer space not only for theoretical debate but also for critical reflection on our practices as heritage interpreters—practices shaped by the decisions we make within these ethical terrains.

This paper presents and critically examines a recent, ultimately unsuccessful, heritage interpretation initiative undertaken at the Museum-Residence of Eleftherios Venizelos in Chania, Crete. Through a contextualised case study analysis, it aims to reflect on the ethical and methodological challenges encountered, and to situate them within a broader theoretical framework relevant to interpretation, memory, and narrative construction. By revisiting this experience, the paper seeks to contribute to ongoing conversations about the role of interpreters in navigating contested legacies and the shifting boundaries between heroism, villainy, and ambiguity in historical representation.

Heroism

What is a hero? Theoretical assumptions of heroism

In the context of heritage interpretation, particularly when engaging with contested narratives and figures, the concept of the 'hero' demands critical scrutiny. What, indeed, distinguishes a hero or heroine from a morally upright or 'good' citizen? This paper posits that heroism is not merely defined by ethical conduct or civic virtue, but by a distinct set of attributes and social dynamics that elevate certain individuals into the symbolic realm of the heroic. Drawing from cultural, philosophical, and interpretive theory, we outline four foundational assumptions regarding heroism:

- A defined mission: Central to the identity of a hero is the existence of a clear, often transcendent mission—typically framed as a quest to rescue, protect, or preserve something deemed vital. Heroic actions are not simply ethically commendable; they exceed the boundaries of ordinary moral behaviour, positioning the hero as someone who acts in exceptional and transformative ways.
- Distinctive capabilities: Heroes and heroines are believed to possess unique abilities—whether in the form of charisma, courage, skill, or insight—that enable them to undertake and fulfill their mission. These capacities are often perceived as innate or extraordinary, setting the hero apart from the general populace.
- Cultural expectation: The figure of the hero is also shaped by the expectations placed upon them. These expectations are not incidental; they form part of the performative nature of heroism. Society expects heroes to act in certain ways, and these anticipations guide, affirm, or even compel their actions.
- Social construction and recognition: Finally, heroes do not exist in a vacuum. They are produced and sustained within a cultural matrix of recognition, admiration, and often mythologisation. Heroism, in this sense, is a socially constructed identity, reliant on narratives of valour and symbolic elevation. The existence of a believing or worshipping audience—whether local or institutional—is critical to the hero's status.

By articulating these assumptions, we can better analyse how individuals are positioned as heroes within heritage spaces, and how such constructions influence interpretive practices, memory politics, and public engagement.

Heroic crossroads: Ethical dilemmas and the weight of responsibility

At every moment, individuals are confronted with decisions—how to act, how to speak, how to behave, and even how to think. These seemingly ordinary choices shape identity and consequence. For those cast in heroic roles, however, each decision carries heightened stakes. Imagine the internal landscape of a hero or heroine: the constant moral questioning, the tension between action and inaction, the awareness that every move could tip the balance between rescue and ruin.

In this heightened ethical terrain, decisions are rarely simple. The hero is compelled to act under immense pressure, often navigating uncertainty, competing loyalties, and unforeseen consequences. A single choice may define them—cast as either saviour or villain—not only in the eyes of their contemporaries but also through the lens of historical memory. The line between heroism and transgression is, at times, perilously thin, shaped as much by context and outcome as by intent.

The metaphor of the crossroad serves as a central interpretive tool in this paper. It represents the critical junctures where decisions must be made and where the ethical burden becomes most visible. At these crossroads, the weight of responsibility becomes immense—nations, communities, and families may rest upon the outcome. The greater the responsibility, the more potent the figure of the hero—or the villain—becomes in collective imagination.

Through this lens, we examine how heritage interpretation must grapple with these complex moral narratives. Interpreting the actions of historical figures, particularly those elevated to heroic status, requires a nuanced understanding of the ethical dilemmas they faced and the socio-political contexts in which they acted. This framing allows us to explore not only the construction of heroism but also the processes by which such identities are contested, re-evaluated, or reimagined over time.

Dismantling the dominant (hi)story: Epistemological shifts and the democratisation of heroism

The evolution of epistemological frameworks in the humanities and social sciences has significantly influenced how we conceptualise heroism. Thomas Kuhn's paradigm shift theory (1962), which challenged positivist and rationalist models of scientific progress, emphasised the importance of social and historical context in shaping knowledge production. This contextual turn has reverberated across disciplines, including hero studies.

Frisk (2018) offers a valuable typology for understanding the shifts within heroism research. He identifies a movement away from studying the lives and traits of historically "significant" individuals toward examining the sociocultural conditions that enable heroic actions. Where early theorists such as Thomas Carlyle emphasised the "submissive dimension of hero-worship," later scholarship explored common psychological traits (Midlarsky, Jones & Corley), motivations (Oliner), and even the banality of heroism (Zimbardo). Other contributions focused on emotional culture and socialisation (Lois), role theory (Blake & Butler), group dynamics (King), and social capital (Glazer & Glazer). These developments mark a paradigmatic shift: from mythologised, extraordinary figures toward everyday agents of change; from exceptional events to ordinary acts performed under extraordinary circumstances.

This shift parallels broader societal transformations brought about by the civil rights, feminist, and LGBTQ+ movements of the 1960s and 1970s. These struggles challenged dominant historical narratives by drawing attention to previously invisible actors. For example, mothers—once confined to domestic roles—began to be acknowledged as "super-heroines", balancing labour, caregiving, and emotional management. However, even within feminist discourses, hierarchies persist. Stories such as that of the two Syrian refugee sisters who swam through the Aegean Sea to save others often receive less recognition than those aligned with dominant narratives—typically white, middle-class maternal figures. Transgender and queer identities remain similarly underrepresented in the cultural

production of heroines, highlighting the persistence of exclusion in supposedly inclusive frameworks.

These examples illustrate how dismantling dominant discourses is both a product of and a response to sociopolitical change. They reflect an ongoing struggle for a more inclusive, democratic society—one that extends full citizenship and recognition to all, particularly those historically marginalised. At critical ethical and representational crossroads, some individuals and institutions have taken a utopian turn, envisioning broader participation and equity. Yet, much work remains to be done.
At this point, the attentive reader may rightly ask: What does any of this have to do with heritage interpretation? This is addressed in the next section

The experiment

The time has come to try to make connections on several layers of complexity.

- The museum where the experiment was held talks about the life of 'Great Men', the national leader and hero that expanded Greek territory into today's borders: Eleftherios Venizelos. Streets, statues and even Athen's International Airport are named after him. The foundation is funded by the Greek Parliament.
- Eleftherios Venizelos lived between two eras: the 19th and 20th centuries, without electricity and with electricity, between the Ottoman empire and the Greek national state, between Royalty and Republic, between east and west, between the role of a father and a national leader, between revolutions and wars. There were many crossroads at which a person with so many responsibilities had to face dilemmas in order to balance all these fluctuating social and political changes and attitudes.
- When trying to prepare an interpretive guided tour – one to make people reflect – I also faced several crossroads on how to interpret his political and social heritage-legacy while introducing aspects of his life that are not known or maybe just neglected because they don't match with his prestigious dominant image.
- As a woman in her 40s, Greek, middle class, white, not really known in local society, I was an outsider trying to implement heritage interpretation about one of the most significant political leaders of Greece in the 20th century. My family name doesn't even refer to a known Cretan family. (Crete is an island where still the traditional ethical system of families as tribes works. Also, clientelism and public relations are very important criteria in order to have a voice.)

The Museum-Residence of Eleftherios Venizelos

On the website of the foundation we can read its aims:

> "The mission of the Foundation is to define a national strategy for the systematic research and study of the era, work and life of Eleftherios Venizelos.
> Its objective is to constitute in a national level, a dynamic European research and education centre, which will be a central coordinating institution for the research and study of the work, the era and the life of the great statesman and of modern Greek history, an institution free from ideological restrictions and local limits. Its flexible administrative and financial structure provides for its independence and allows activities beyond administrative hierarchy and established universitary structures."

In order to achieve its goals, the Foundation aims at:

- creating an archive by collecting original material for the reproduction of archives of public and private, Greek and foreign collections.

- collecting, preserving and projecting photographic, audiovisual and museal material referring to the life and activity of Eleftherios Venizelos.
- establishing a specialised library and a collection of documents relating to the objectives of the Foundation.
- conducting research programmes and coordinated research projects, carrying out research infrastructure programmes and collaborating with universities and other Greek or foreign research institutes for the promotion of the Foundation's objectives.
- organising activities and special events within the context of educational programmes, writing informative books and producing audiovisual material.
- compiling bibliography and writings of Venizelos and publishing his work.
- awarding prizes to writings relating to the Foundation's objectives.
- awarding grants for research relating to the objectives of the Foundation.
- organising conferences, exhibitions, lectures and similar events, as well as producing documents of scientific, educational or commemorative character.
- collaborating with the state, local administration, universities, research institutes, museums and other Greek or foreign institutions for the promotion of the Foundation's objectives.
- establishing an international 'Eleftherios Venizelos' prize which will be awarded to institutes or persons whose contribution to the projection of the Greek history, the Greek language and the Greek civilisation has been outstanding. [15]

As for the museum:

> "The Residence–Museum 'Eleftherios K. Venizelos' is classified as an authentic (documentary) home, since it is recounting the life of a personage and it is preserving authentic items, most of them in their original position. The Residence-Museum is not just a building containing collections or the original furniture of a bygone era, but as a result of a collective and integrated museological project, has developed the ability to recall the past, which in turn gives to the monument great social and political significance."

We would like to underline the "ability to recall the past" and add: Yes, but with which objective?

We read on the website:

> "The power of a museum is to communicate with its guests. The whole of this effort is clearly aiming not only at gaining the maximum of knowledge one can drain from a place ground on its memories, but mainly on the essential and fecund interaction with the past. This objective becomes even more powerful to the extent that appeals to young people and students who are visiting the Venizelos residence while in contact with the Modern Greek history.
>
> The guests coming face to face with the past have the opportunity to create a strong link between collective and personal memory. A (historic) house is more than a memorial to update the lost past. It is a place where people lived their lives."

As far as we know, no research has been conducted or published to see if this objective is reached for individual visitors. Although the museum's policy doesn't provide guided tours, just a 10-minute introduction from certified guides at the entrance and then they let them with the digital QR codes to cross the museum exhibits, on the website we can see an intention of connection and interaction with the past even if it is not literally explained how and what for as WHIPIC (the International Center for the

[15] https://www.venizelos-foundation.gr/en/the-foundation/aims/

Interpretation and Presentation of World Heritage Sites)[16] draws:

> "Heritage Presentation is a range of methods of interpretation delivery for enhancing experience, raising awareness and understanding, and inspiring engagement with heritage."

The museum's discourse

The museum presents the following aspects of the 'Great man's' life: The Rebel, The Politician, The Diplomat, The Man, and The Myth.

Analysing these topics, we see that the content is mainly directed to the public image and roles (the politician, the rebel, the diplomat), to the hero's worship (the myth) and to the more private life of the man. Without analysing in more detail the underlying messages that the panels and virtual tour offer, we can assume on a surface level that introducing these topics in this way has silenced many other more private roles: the father, the son, the child, the brother, the journalist, the lawyer, the student, the widower, the husband, the friend, or even those traits more closely related to the public sphere: the enemy, the unwanted, the controversial, the demon …giving a voice to the other political sides.

The interpretive tour

I developed a guided tour for the museum as part of an interpretive initiative. The tour aimed to reframe the life of Venizelos through the lens of ethical complexity and civic responsibility. The interpretive general theme, Being responsible carries a big burden, positioned Venizelos not merely as a national hero, but as a historical figure navigating the moral and political dilemmas of living 'between two eras'—at the intersection of tradition and modernity, east and west, royalty and republic, national aspiration and global realignment.

The objective was twofold: first, to contextualise Venizelos's political choices within the rapidly changing socio-cultural and geopolitical environment of his time; and second, to prompt visitors to reflect on their own positions within similarly complex and shifting contexts today. As an interpretive innovation, the tour included newly designed content for the residence's garden—a space that, despite its symbolic resonance, remains otherwise unutilised in the current visitor experience.

The tour was initially approved for a pilot presentation to museum staff, during which our bibliographical references were submitted for review. However, following the first official guided tour with public visitors, collaboration with the museum was abruptly terminated. The stated reasons included the need for more "experiential methods", concerns over alleged historical inaccuracies, and deviation from guidelines supposedly agreed upon during the pilot. Rather than debating the veracity of these claims, this paper seeks to unpack the structural, institutional, and interpretive tensions at play in this breakdown—tensions emblematic of deeper questions in heritage interpretation.

Two incidents during that inaugural public tour are particularly revealing:

- Narrative authority and the role of the guide: A male visitor, estimated to be in his 60s, enthusiastically offered personal anecdotes about the neighborhood and the residence, having grown up nearby. His contribution could have enriched the collective narrative. Yet, before sharing, he remarked that he did not wish to "steal the glory of the guide"—implicitly reinforcing the traditional expectation that the guide holds exclusive narrative authority. This interaction exposed the entrenched hierarchies of storytelling in heritage settings, where lived memory and

[16] https://unesco-whipic.org/interpretation

informal knowledge are often subordinated to institutionalised expertise.

- Contested memory and institutional control: A second, more disruptive moment occurred when a visitor raised a difficult but pertinent question: "Why do some people still blame Venizelos for the Asia Minor Catastrophe?" Before the guide could engage this complex topic or open it to group dialogue, another man—later identified as a political scientist affiliated with the foundation—intervened. Speaking without introduction, he delivered a monologue that effectively closed the space for discussion. The dynamic of open interpretation was broken; silence descended, and no further dialogue ensued.

These moments illustrate the fragile nature of public interpretation when it involves contested histories and powerful institutional actors. They also underscore the ethical burdens placed on the interpretive guide—expected simultaneously to facilitate dialogue, embody institutional loyalty, and respond sensitively to divergent public memory. Within such crossroads, the guide, like the historical figures they interpret, must navigate shifting expectations, subtle surveillance, and the ongoing struggle over who gets to speak, remember, and represent.

The puzzle of roles

In figure 1 (below), we can only summarise the potential of crossroads and responsibilities that one guide has to face while thinking and designing the interpretive tour. In between the hero's past and recent representations, the museum's policy, image, narratives and status, the visitor's expectations, heterogenous background and knowledge, the guide's own status, background and expectations, their ethical system and professional interpretative ethics, guiding and designing mediating between all of these could be appreciated as an 'heroic' action!

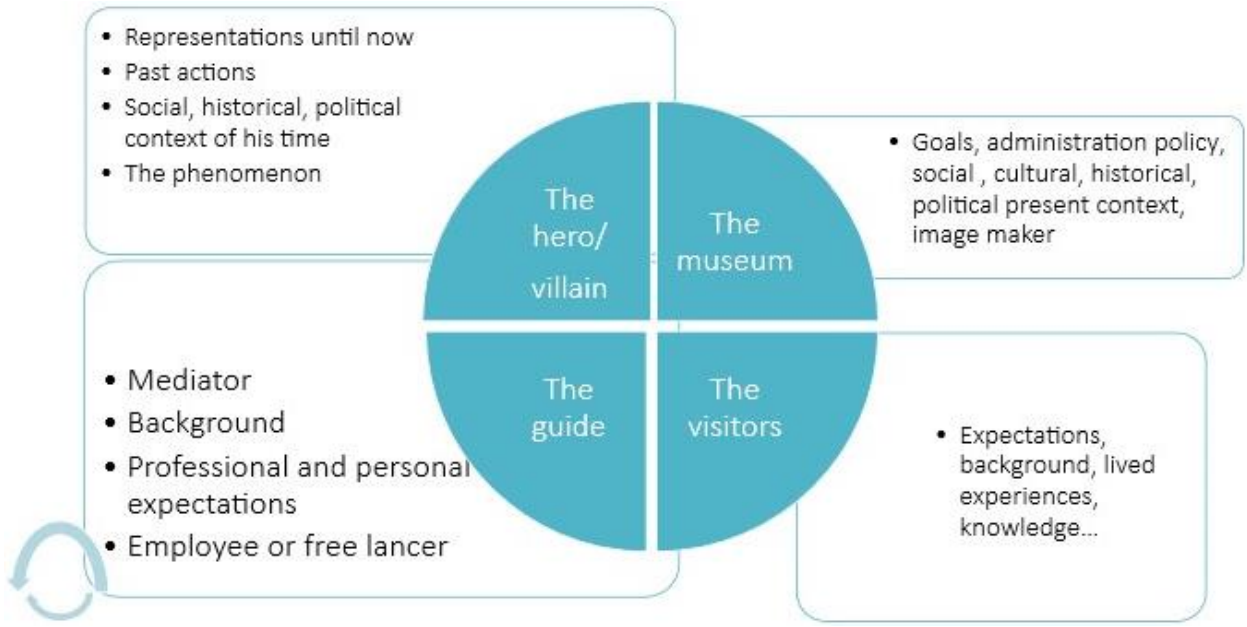

Figure 1. The complexity of roles in the heritage encounter (Penelope Gkini)

This is especially true when some of these factors are not moving in the same direction, when for example interpretation requires us to give space to all voices, to respect all opinions, to encourage dialogue and not just present the guide's authority and specialisation through monologues, and when the museum doesn't treat equally the hero or protagonist and the visitors' experiences, and doesn't want to engage with resilience, inclusivity, visitors' lived experiences, and doesn't want to (or doesn't understand the value of) raising heritage awareness as a priority over pure factual knowledge.

Towards a professional ethical approach of interpretation

So, who is this interpretive guide that wants to change priorities, giving visitors the space and time to question heritage and narratives? What are the values that interpretation stands up for and guides, planners, interpretive writers would defend or protect? The micro-activism concept that Dr. Jurn A.W. Buisman held in his keynote speech at this conference resonates with me more than ever.

Directions at the crossroad of heritage

Reflecting on early lessons in ancient Greek tragedy—particularly Sophocles' Antigone—we were taught that tragedy arises not from a conflict between good and evil, but from the collision of two valid yet incompatible ethical systems. Antigone's moral duty to her brother clashes with Creon's obligation to the state; both positions hold ethical legitimacy, and it is the fact that these worldviews cannot be reconciled that renders the situation tragic. This lens is deeply relevant to heritage interpretation today.

In this sense, interpretation is never neutral. It operates within, and actively reproduces, particular ethical systems. Interpreters, as cultural mediators, must be conscious of the value frameworks they are endorsing—whether intentionally or not. But the responsibility does not lie with individual interpreters alone. Museums and cultural institutions must also define the ethical stance underlying their interpretive strategies.

Do they aim to preserve an idealised, uncritical vision of the past, one that elevates heroic figures without acknowledging the full complexity of their legacies? Or do they aspire to function as discursive spaces—where the institution's own ideological commitments are made transparent and open to contestation, and where multiple narratives, including those of marginalised voices, are given room to coexist and interact?

This is not a simple curatorial or educational decision; it is an ethical one. Museums that choose to present a single, authoritative viewpoint risk reproducing systems of exclusion and silencing. In contrast, museums that position themselves as dialogic spaces embrace their potential as civic institutions—places where history is not simply transmitted, but questioned, negotiated, and reinterpreted by a diverse public.

Figure 2. Conflictual values in the museum's responsibility

Do interpreters want to encourage discussions and to create safe inclusive spaces during their tours? Under which limits or circumstances can they defend this if they are freelancers or employees? How can they strike a balance

between conflicting values if there is a difference between what interpretation inspires them and what the museum's policy is?

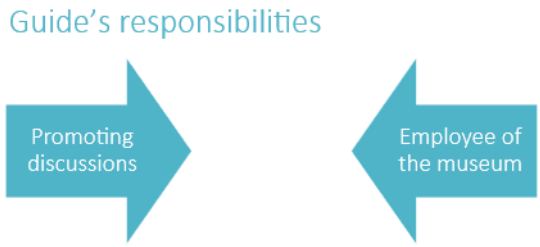

Figure 3. Conflictual values in the guide's responsibilities

Dismantling the traditional roles of museums, guides, visitors?

Responsibilities are inherently tied to social roles, which in turn vary in their degrees of power and in how they are perceived—whether positively or negatively. These perceptions are contingent upon who is making the judgement, as well as when, where, why, and according to which criteria or values such judgements are made. To illustrate this point, let us revisit the earlier example of the mother as a 'superheroine'.

Across different cultural and historical contexts, the role of the mother has been associated with a range of responsibilities: maintaining family cohesion, upholding ethical standards, managing the household, and overseeing the education and care of children. These expectations were largely imposed by men and children, and women were traditionally granted the power to fulfill these roles. However, it was only when these responsibilities were no longer considered natural or inherent, but rather socially constructed, that the maternal role began to be re-evaluated. With the rise of female emancipation, women were increasingly able to question or even reject these responsibilities. As a result, the role of the mother gained greater appreciation and value—but not universally. Individuals and communities with differing cultural values often continue to resist such reinterpretations, and may not view mothers as heroines. Furthermore, women who do not become mothers are sometimes still regarded as deviant or, at the very least, less worthy of societal recognition.

In this context, if we find ourselves at a crossroads between traditional representations of the roles of the museum, the guide, and the visitor, and the alternative dimensions that interpretive frameworks aim to promote, we must critically engage with the following questions:

- Can we accept traditional and innovative ways of doing things at the same time?
- Can we be more inclusive without 'cancelling' those who are not?
- How much of this to include, and how much of that?
- What is a good balance between feelings, senses and information?
- Neutrality, propaganda, parallel monologues or conversations?
- Idealism or ideology/ies?
- What level of importance to bestow on the differing roles of guides, teachers and facilitators?
- What kind of identity do we want to build? Relativism? Everything is allowed to be said but not done?
- How much should we be open or closed to historical and cultural changes?
- How much of the interactive, participatory and collectively produced meaning should be incorporated?
- Do we use heritage interpretation in order to think, to inspire - or in order to convince?

Conclusion

"You have your way. I have my way. As for the right way, the correct way, and the only way, it does not exist." (Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche)

Nietzsche, a philosopher renowned for his critical stance toward traditional metaphysics and religion—particularly his challenge to the role of God—famously asserted that "there are no facts, only interpretations". This provocative claim invites reflection on whether the dominance of interpretation signals the emergence of an era characterised by amorality or extreme relativism. Such concerns may be viewed as symptomatic fears that arise in the wake of the dissolution of established ethical frameworks.

In attempting to engage with the questions set out above, further enquiries naturally emerged, suggesting the complexity and generative nature of this philosophical investigation.

- Is learning an embodied process or just an intellectual one?
- Are visits and tours a learning or a cultural experience?
- Can it be both? Can it be learning a culture? What values does this culture have?
- What is knowledge?
- How do we answer to the cartesian division of body and mind?
- What is the truth?
- Where is meaning created?
- Are we ready to leave our power and authority as 'guides' and become 'facilitators'?
- How much of this to include, and how much of that?

Moreover, a multitude of additional philosophical questions arise—questions that cannot be adequately addressed by interpreters without first determining the direction, values, and assumptions they are willing to uphold. Embracing particular assumptions does not imply that one possesses absolute or universal truth, nor does it suggest the ability to provide universally satisfactory or rationally indisputable answers. Rather, it signifies a commitment to responsibility: the willingness to be accountable for one's choices, for the interpretive stance one adopts, and for the ethical and intellectual trajectory one chooses to pursue.

Will we have the power to do it? We are not heroines nor heroes, or are we (in a way)?

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The interpretive method in genocide education

Maria Bożena Kamińska (Poland)

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Abstract

On the experience of introducing the interpretive method in practice as a way of educating at the crime scene. This paper is a presentation of the results of observations of coping with recipients' emotions.

Keywords

World War II genocide, memory as heritage, the architecture of the museum as an access key, the role of nature in in situ interpretation, personal experience of the place of execution, risks and opportunities of interpretation in genocide education

I would like to share with you my experience in implementing and applying the method of heritage interpretation at a memorial site. Since many of you may not have had the opportunity to visit the Museum in Palmiry, I will provide some insights about it.

Understanding the context is particularly important in order to grasp the potential for applying the interpretive method in this unique and significant place.

The museum is situated near Warsaw, within Kampinos National Park, which is the second-largest national park in Poland, covering an area of 585 hectares. It was established in 1959; prior to that, the area was covered by a primaeval forest. Characteristic features of the Kampinos Forest landscape were – and, to some extent, still are – swamps, peat bogs and inland sand dunes. This terrain was shaped by the most recent glaciation, which occurred approximately 20,000 years ago. Kampinos National Park, along with its buffer zone, forms a Biosphere Reserve that is part of the World Network of Biosphere Reserves established under UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme.

Before the outbreak of World War II, this area housed a military depot with storage facilities for weapons and ammunition. It was a secured military zone, enclosed by a double fence and connected by a railway line built on specially constructed earthen embankments. The location of the ammunition depots in Palmiry held strategic importance – it lay along the defensive axis linking the Modlin Fortress with the capital city. In September 1939, during the defensive war of Poland, nearly 9,500 soldiers were killed in the Kampinos Forest area.

During the German occupation, the site of the former military depot was repurposed as an execution ground. These executions were part of a targeted operation aimed at eliminating the

Polish elite, including members of the intelligentsia and individuals involved in resistance activities against the Third Reich. This campaign was known as the AB-Aktion – Außerordentliche Befriedungsaktion (AB), i.e. the Extraordinary Pacification Operation. On the bombed-out grounds of the former depot, acts of genocide were committed on 21 separate occasions. More than 1,700 people were killed here. These individuals had previously been arrested based on prepared name lists, interrogated, and tortured in the Gestapo prison in Warsaw.

Among the victims of the AB were Marshal of the Sejm Maciej Rataj, Deputy Mayor of Warsaw Jan Pohoski, chess master Dawid Przepiórka, and Olympic gold medallist from the 1932 Los Angeles Games, track and field athlete Janusz Kusociński. Nearly 180 women were also killed – among them Alicja Bełcikowska (together with her husband and daughter), a publicist and author of a popular book on Marshal Józef Piłsudski; Helena Maria Jaroszewicz, a member of parliament and senator affiliated with Piłsudski's political camp; and the daughters of Polish generals – Maria Brodacka and Agnieszka Dowbor-Muśnicka. Agnieszka's sister, Janina Lewandowska, a pilot, was the only woman killed in the Katyn massacre – executed by the Soviets – alongside Polish military officers who were taken as prisoners of war.

The cemetery for the victims is situated close to the museum and was established three years after the end of the war. The exhumation of bodies began as early as November 1945.
These efforts were led by the Polish Red Cross, in cooperation with a forester who had, to the best of his ability, monitored the area of the former depot during the time when executions occurred. He marked the locations of the burial pits where the bodies of the victims had been buried. The perpetrators deliberately concealed these pits, sometimes covering them with newly planted trees. The executions were carried out partly in a clearing where the cemetery is located today. The sites of the former execution pits – known as 'death pits' – are found within a radius of 1.5 kilometres from the present-day cemetery. However, not all of these sites are located along the educational route that runs near the museum and through the cemetery grounds.

Before the museum was established, numerous commemorative ceremonies took place in Palmiry. In 1959, the cemetery was visited by Richard Nixon, then the U.S. Vice President under President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Today, commemorative events continue to take place here, often including guided tours of the museum exhibition as part of the programme. October 2025 will mark the 65th edition of the Central Youth Rally of the Polish Tourist and Sightseeing Society (PTTK) Palmiry. The event brings together scout groups primarily from the Mazovia region, as well as from across Poland, with total participation exceeding 1,000 individuals. The gathering concludes with an evening remembrance ceremony at the Cemetery-Mausoleum, illuminated by torches and candles placed on each of the more than 2,000 graves. To honour the memory of the athletes buried in the cemetery, many commemorative events take the form of sporting competitions. Palmiry also hosts the Little Peace Race, a cycling event for young riders.

Anniversary ceremonies are attended by church dignitaries, representatives of national and local authorities, and students from nearby schools. Pilgrimage groups regularly hold Stations of the Cross services at the site. Interestingly, the cross shown in the photograph is usually located in St. Anne's Church in Warsaw, near Castle Square (Plac Zamkowy). One could say it 'makes a pilgrimage' to Palmiry, symbolically retracing

the route taken by victims transported from Pawiak – the Gestapo prison – to the forest.

The idea of establishing a museum in Palmiry to commemorate the crime of genocide was conceived 60 years ago, while the first museum building was opened 45 years ago. Currently, the museum is located in a new building completed 14 years ago, constructed on the site of the previous one. The building was designed by architects from the WXCA studio. The building has attracted significant attention, as evidenced by the fact that architecture students from the Federal Republic of Germany have visited Palmiry, and by the presentation of photographs of the museum at an architectural exhibition in India. It has also won awards in various competitions, much like other projects developed by the mentioned studio. One notable example is the Polish History Museum located at the Warsaw Citadel.

The Palmiry Museum functions as a narrative museum, meaning that its architectural design plays a crucial role. The building's location, its form and the arrangement of the interior space are specifically designed to engage the visitor and stimulate multiple senses. The architectural form of the museum directly references the events it commemorates. The structure of the museum building is partially integrated into the former railway embankment, resembling a sandy dune. The building features a flat roof, with the crowns of four trees rising from within. The roof area is not accessible to the museum's visitors. The exterior facades are made of glass, creating a mirror effect on the outside and providing windows from the inside. Part of the facade is constructed from weathering Cor-ten steel. The concrete and steel surfaces, with marks from bullet impacts, form a distinctive representation of the Polish flag. The rusty colour of the Cor-ten steel evokes associations with blood congealed in the sand of a dune. This is symbolic and, therefore, holds significant interpretive potential. Inside, light plays a crucial role, contributing to the creation of an atmosphere appropriate to the theme of martyrdom. Birch trees grow within the exhibition space, and the exhibits are displayed in small vitrines illuminated by focused lighting, which gives the impression of individually placed candles. This effect is intensified in the final part of the exhibition, where a glass pane provides a view of the cemetery. The final part of the exhibition focuses on the cemetery and the exhumations.

Among the exhibits, the majority are personal items belonging to the victims. These are small objects: glasses, wallets, a gold wedding ring, a comb, a transport ticket, a fragment of a prayer, and a visiting card. Some of these items bear traces of gunshots and bloodstains. The latter have been carefully preserved, with copies made, and it is these replicas that are now displayed in the exhibition.

In our educational programme, we offer museum lessons for primary and secondary schools, as well as for adults. The topics of the lessons focus on historical events related to national liberation struggles: the January Uprising of 1863, when Poland was not present on the map of Europe and the Kampinos area was part of the Russian Empire; and the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, as partisans operating in the Kampinos Forest supported the insurgents in the capital. Allied aircraft conducted parachute drops in the forest area to supply those fighting in Warsaw. The primary reason for visiting Palmiry is to learn about the circumstances and victims of the executions carried out from December 1939 to July 1941, and to visit the cemetery.

We have been cautiously introducing the heritage interpretation method over the past two years. Interpretive walks are part of special events such as Museum Night or the European

Funds Open Days. Participation in these walks is free of charge, and they are aimed at adult audiences. In the event description, we emphasise that the experience is inclusive and interactive. We also inform participants that those particularly sensitive to emotions may experience heightened states of agitation. Our groups are small, with a maximum of 20 participants. Each person is free to decide on their level of active involvement, and in most cases, participants are eager to engage. As an interpreter, I make sure to leave space for individual choice. The walk takes place both in the museum exhibition and around the building – at the cemetery and in the forest. It is the forest – the landscape – that completes the selected phenomena in the narrative being told. Trees or sand can serve as props, but they also symbolise the role of nature in concealing crimes.

Scholars studying the extermination of landscapes emphasise that the Nazis deliberately chose areas of natural beauty as sites for genocide; the landscape was, in fact, idyllic. Viewing natural heritage from this perspective, as a hideout for crimes, compels us to ask questions that open discussion and encourages reflection. The nature in Palmiry comprises mainly forest, dominated by Scots pines and birches. The contemporary Palmiry forest – the one near the cemetery and museum – is not a forest that remembers the crime. After the war, during exhumation work, this area looked different. The Nazis deliberately chose a clearing in the forest and expanded it for the purpose of digging pits in which the bodies were buried. They also cut down trees growing nearby. The trunks of these trees were used as markers, reference points for identifying the locations of the crimes.

On the route from the museum to the cemetery, there is an oak tree, which I estimate to be around 120 years old. It was therefore 20-40 years old in 1940, when the largest execution of the AB took place on the death clearing, which is now the cemetery grounds. Over the course of two days, 362 people were murdered there. As we walk with the participants, we pass this oak tree, treating it as a phenomenon – one we access through the concept of animating the tree. A reflective and engaging exercise involves embracing its trunk. Right next to it are the trunks of other trees, felled several years ago. Similar trunks were also found near the execution pits. They were used by the forester – Adam Herbański – to mark these locations, which were deliberately concealed by the perpetrators. He did this in various ways. The original trunk from those times was in Palmiry, but it was later gifted to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., during an official visit to the U.S. by the then-President of Poland, Lech Wałęsa. We only have a photograph of it. The others were cleared and removed when the area was being prepared and organised for burials and the creation of the cemetery. I use these contemporary elements during interpretive walks. In this case, the props include not only tree trunks but also bullet casings. Participants who choose to do so are invited to insert the casings into the trunk. Through this exercise, which they perform on their own, the participants experience, in a sense, what it's like to be a witness to the crime, a guardian of memory responsible for bearing witness.

From this example, as well as from the example of sifting sand in the forest, I know that using the interpretive method at the crime site carries the risk of amplifying emotions, which are inherently quite intense. I manage this risk through voluntary participation. Some take part in this 'experiment' passively, but even as observers, the participants experience the emotions just as strongly. Beyond the risks, I also see opportunities and positive aspects of interpretive walks. These include, above all, the ability to reach the sensitivity of those (younger)

visitors who have not encountered the wartime stories of their grandparents or great-grandparents. Although we currently do not offer a typical interpretive walk for secondary schools, I incorporate elements of them during museum lessons or traditional guided tours. Their use yields results in the form of increased engagement, greater empathy, and a sense of responsibility.

We know that a key element of the interpretive method is referring to one's own experience. Thus, confronting one's emotions, observing and naming them fosters attentiveness and respect. Believe me, this is necessary. Reactions of boredom or fatigue related to the theme of martyrdom sometimes emerge. The conclusion is that there is a reason to keep working and that the shock felt during the application of the interpretive method can become a turning point in understanding the nature of evil in acts of genocide – understanding evil that is inherent to human nature, regardless of nationality. For older participants in interpretive walks, the multiplication of emotions may have a therapeutic effect in understanding and processing trauma related to wartime experiences or the memories of their parents. Independently reaching the hidden and not always consciously acknowledged layers of emotions, stirred by the participants' personal experience, can serve as a form of catharsis. This is evidenced by the conversations after the walk with its participants, who tell me that they felt they had been part of something extraordinary – almost like a performance or a mystery.

The guiding ideas behind the interpretive walks in Palmiry are memory and the symbiosis of nature with history in the context of memory and contemporary relevance: 'Memory and the past as contemporary experience' and 'Inland dunes, shared human memory'. One of the walks I titled simply 'Palmiry All Souls' Day', as it took place around the time of the All-Saints' Day, which further highlighted the meeting of the real and metaphysical worlds. Essentially, the guiding idea of the walk involves exploring the history of secret executions in Palmiry and subtly referencing contemporary events related to the war in Ukraine and the controversial situation at the Polish-Belarusian border, where a forested border zone is located. This provides another context that is important for today's audience and significant from the perspective of education's role (and the role of heritage interpretation) in preventing the escalation of armed conflicts.

During the tour and the interpretive walk:

- We work with objects (exhumed items) belonging to the murdered individuals;
- We analyse the form and architecture of the museum building;
- At the cemetery, we select the tomb of the Speaker of the Sejm as a phenomenon;
- We use elements of the landscape and nature – trees, sand, and the rustle of the forest. With closed eyes, the sense of hearing enhances the projection of historical events, unfolding at the subconscious level.

Whilst delivering the various elements of the walk's scenario, the starting point is access keys and personal experience – learning through the senses. A significant aspect here is the tactile sensation of the building's facade – the iron filings left on one's fingertips evoke associations with the touch of blood. While sifting sand in the forest, next to the crosses commemorating the execution sites, associations with touching time and memory are triggered. I have a prop here that further stimulates these associations. I use an hourglass, which is a common motif in sepulchral art and can be found in historic Catholic cemeteries. In this comparison participants discover a deeper meaning of nature and the contrast between 'civilised' death and 'wild', unauthorised (one might say, inhuman) death, inflicted through violence.

I mentioned earlier that participants in the walk may experience a form of catharsis – cleansing. Nature fosters this process. Although it bears the mark of the crime, it simultaneously has a beneficial effect on those who spend time within it. This has been medically proven and is used by organisers of forest bathing events.

In this interpretation, we use a costume prop. I want to clarify that no one embodies the figure of the woman depicted in the photograph from the moment of execution; instead, I work with a free association of the fabric's pattern, which is quite evident. I present the circumstances in which the photograph was taken, drawing attention to how and where it is displayed on the concrete wall.

The image is enlarged and multiplied, which adds a sense of dynamism to the situation depicted. It is presented next to a glass wall, which plays the role of an invisible boundary between the world of the living and the dead, between the interior of the museum and the forested area. The creators of the exhibition, who are professional set designers, arranged this part of the exhibition as a kind of mystery play. However, not everyone perceives this at first glance, which is where the interpreter's role becomes essential.

Finally, I want to share with you a study I conducted among the audience two years ago before I began introducing the interpretive method into education about crimes in Palmiry. In my opinion, the survey results demonstrate a great potential for applying this method at the memorial site, all while maintaining respect for the victims and their families who visit the cemetery. The survey was voluntary and conducted over two weekends. We receive the most visitors on weekends – sometimes as many as 500.

In the survey, I asked questions about the various elements of the exhibition and the architecture, the feelings associated with the exhibition, and the personal (family) connection to the site. The questions were mostly open-ended, and they were as follows:

- Which elements of the exhibition are the most interesting to you?
- What is the dominant feeling after seeing the exhibition?
- Do you feel a personal connection to this place? If so, why?
- Which architectural elements of the museum building arouse your greatest emotions?
- What stuck in your memory the most after seeing the exhibition, and what image comes to mind when you hear the name Palmiry?

The overwhelming majority of people who completed the anonymous survey expressed that the photographs, a film excerpt, and the personal belongings of the exhumed individuals were the most interesting elements. The dominant feelings for most participants were sadness, compassion, and a sense of mission in preserving memory. Most participants declared a personal connection to the memorial site, which stemmed from historical interests or a feeling of belonging to the national community.

All the narrative-laden elements of the building – the glass wall, the trees in tubular glass, the facade with imprints of bullet holes – evoked the same emotions. The most memorable motif related to the Palmiry Memorial Site was the personal belongings of the exhumed individuals, the view of the cemetery, and the motif of death inflicted through violence, described as a "brutal execution", depicted by images of individuals being led to their execution while blindfolded. Based on these results and the discussions with visitors to our museum, I conclude that there is space to point

out deeper meanings in various areas: examining the causes of genocide during armed conflicts, understanding the mechanisms of evil inherent in human nature, and how to prevent them from triumphing and thus leading to future acts of genocide.

Community development through interpretation of an ancient hero

Lisa Keys (UK)

Lisa Keys is an interpretation and heritage engagement specialist and consultant at Minerva Heritage.

Minerva Heritage Ltd is a heritage management consultancy and service provider based in Lancaster, United Kingdom. The company was set up by directors Chris Healey and Lisa Keys in 2007. Minerva Heritage specialises in development and delivery of interpretation strategies and plans for natural and cultural heritage projects.

Using over 20 years of experience and knowledge Lisa manages interpretation projects from inception, strategy and planning through to delivery, across Europe and the UK. Lisa is passionate about co-creation and audience-focussed heritage interpretation and engagement.

Minerva Heritage has worked extensively with Nigel Mills Heritage for over ten years to provide clients with interpretation solutions, strategies and plans. Recent joint projects include:

- Interpretation Framework for the Dacian Limes World Heritage Site in Romania
- Interpretation Framework for Augsburg and Kempten, Bavaria
- Interpretation Strategy for Kipfenberg and the LimesGemeinden, Bavaria

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Abstract

The Kemathen warrior, a fifth century AD Germanic (barbarian) chieftain, is the focus for an interpretation project in the six rural municipalities of the LimesGemeinden.

The remains of the Roman frontier, part of the Frontiers of the Roman Empire World Heritage Site, runs through the LimesGemeinden. Although not Roman, the Kemathen warrior provides a unique opportunity to discover and explore the landscape and identity of the communities of this World Heritage Site (WHS).

This 'hero' story is the catalyst for:

- a new community museum, a cultural hub for the LimesGemeinden, and a regional museum for the WHS.
- a unique perspective, looking back to the time of the Roman frontier and forward to its legacies and modern communities in their landscape.
- seeing the museum as a place that reveals and celebrates local connections with the cultural and physical landscape of the WHS, that local people see as part of their cultural life.
- challenging perceptions of regional identity, through scientific research to inform interpretation, and opens avenues for discussions on identity.
- initiatives across the landscape of the LimesGemeinden, celebrating the stories of the Limes and of the LimesGemeinden and driving economic and social benefit for local people.

Minerva Heritage was appointed with Nigel Mills Heritage and The Creative Core to develop an interpretive strategy for the project. A presentation of this project was delivered by Lisa Keys and Nigel Mills at the Interpret Europe Conference 2025.

Keywords

Kemarthen warrior, LimesGemeinden, Limes WHS, Frontiers of the Roman Empire WHS, Bavaria, community museum, co-creation

Background

In 2021 we were asked to support plans for an interpretation project in Bavaria, Germany. Plans were to be made for:
A museum that is a 'regional hub' for presenting the Raetian Limes to visitors, with a clear focus on the Romans and the archaeology of the Frontier;
And we were to
Propose initiatives across the landscape of the LimesGemeinden that celebrate the stories of the Limes and of the LimesGemeinden, driving economic and social benefit for local people.

The primarily Altmühl-Jura LEADER-funded project was an ambitious one that had to find a way to marry the needs and interests of six municipalities through interpretation of Roman heritage.

Key objectives for interpretation were for it to:

- Be developed for a new community museum, a cultural hub for the LimesGemeinden, and a regional museum for the Frontiers of the Roman Empire World Heritage Site
- Set new standards for local/regional museums in Bavaria
- Clearly link indoor interpretation of the Roman frontier with the outdoor experience of the physical remains
- Appeal to the education sector, both local and regional
- Appeal to recreational visitors to the Naturpark Altmühltal, adding value to the existing nature and outdoor offer

We had to find a way to use interpretation to be local and regional, inside and out, formal and informal, for communities and tourists. Interpretation had to support local people to recognise the benefits of the physical and cultural legacy of the Roman heritage, reveal and celebrate local connections with the Roman heritage, enable local people to see the Roman heritage as a benefit and part of their cultural life, and create an experience for visitors that was integrated and holistic. No mean feat!

The original intention for interpretation was that it should support understanding:

- What is the Limes?
- Where is the Limes? - The Limes in the landscape
- Why was the Limes built? A frontier for Rome rather than a frontier against the barbarians
- What happened to the Limes? Mercenaries, migration, change over time
- What does the Limes mean today?

Consultation and co-creation

In order to meet objectives and to propose solutions that were going to meet the brief's requirements we proposed a programme of consultation and co-creation that would ensure that local communities were involved, from the very beginning, with developing the interpretive strategy. Our programme included:

- Meetings and workshops with staff at the Romer und Bajuwaren museum in Kipfenberg. This was the location chosen to become the new community museum. The existing museum would need significant redevelopment, so we had to understand its current presentation, successes, challenges and opportunities for change.
- Visits to 'outdoor' Limes World Heritage Site locations in the LimesGemeinden with regional and local experts. We needed to do this to gain an understanding of the heritage assets, related stories for interpretation and to understand what existing on-site interpretation there was.
- Visits to other museums and local attractions in order to assess the existing interpretive offer of the region's heritage.
- Workshops with representatives of the six municipalities, including their Mayors, to understand perceptions of the Roman heritage, what they thought was important

for people to know or understand about it and to harness views on aims, expectations and perceived benefits from being involved with the project.
- Workshop with local education providers, including teachers, to gain insight into the local education context and understand the needs and interests of schools.
- Workshop with tourism professionals working in the six municipalities to understand what visitors to the region were looking for and interested in.
- Meetings with representatives of the LimesGemeinden at outdoor locations that were considered 'ripe' for new or revised interpretation, to hear, first hand, what the communities felt were important or significant about the Roman heritage and how it could be of benefit to them.
- Meeting and workshop with academics and archaeology specialists.

We wanted the process to be as inclusive as possible to ensure that our proposals would accommodate all stakeholder views and interests. So, what were the key findings from this process?

1. The existing approach to interpretation, as exemplified by our brief, is very top down, expert-led, focused on the specifics of the archaeological evidence from the Limes, and there was very little about its context, people and relevant stories.
2. Survival of the archaeology of the Limes is, in most places, fragmentary and almost invisible.
3. Local people wanted a genuine community museum, not just a Limes museum/interpretation centre.

But we did also find some interpretation gold…

The Kemathen warrior

The hero of our story, the Kemathen warrior, was a fifth century AD Germanic (barbarian) chieftain. His burial and mortal remains were found during excavations in 1990, on the boundary between two of the project's municipalities – Kipfenberg and Kinding.

His rich burial assemblage included a sword, shield, knife, belt buckle, firestone and striker, brooch, ring, glass beaker, pottery and a wooden box that probably contained textiles. Some of the objects indicate close links with the late Roman Empire to the south, along the Danube. The burial added to the small number of high-status individual burials from the wider region beyond the later Roman (post World Heritage Limes) frontier that have a distinctive character and funerary assemblage. Similar burials include a female, buried close to the Danube, similar in many respects to that of the Kemathen warrior.

He was initially interpreted and subsequently marketed as 'the first Bavarian', employed as a mercenary in the Late Roman Army. Recent academic insight[17], however, has provided new interpretations of him, changing his story. By comparison with other similar burials the objects in his funerary assemblage are better explained as a result of high-status trade and emulation, not as belongings of a mercenary. Furthermore, the burials seem to represent a distinctive 'frontier zone' in an area which was once Roman but from which Imperial Administration was withdrawn. This 'frontier zone' has a distinct identity that continues into the 6th and 7th centuries and can be detected while the Limes was active. So, from the 2nd – 7th centuries the area seems to develop a distinctive local character.

[17] Thanks to academic insights from Hubert Fehr and Vera Planert

He is no longer considered as 'the first Bavarian' or a mercenary, but as a Germanic tribesman, living in the area after the abandonment of the Roman Limes.

A local hero for our time

The Kemathen warrior was given a home in the Romer und Bajuwaren Museum in Kipfenberg, which is where he can be seen today. As the museum was identified for a new community museum, how could we work with our warrior to interpret Roman heritage, given his reinterpretation? How could we use him to meet the expectations of the funder, local communities and visitors?

- The Kemathen warrior was and still is a celebrated local hero.
- The Kemathen warrior could offer a different perspective on the story of the Raetian Limes, providing an intellectual route in to the subject, and to the understanding of communities today.
- The Kemathen warrior could be a focal point for the communities and act as a catalyst for a whole range of indoor and outdoor interpretive interventions that support sustainable tourism.

So, our approach? The Kemathen warrior would be our interpreter. He could:

- Be a vehicle through which to deliver stories – a centrepoint, a lynchpin for storytelling
- Look back to the time of the Roman frontier and forward to its legacies and modern communities in their landscape – the link between past and present
- Be 'just like us' – the Limes is already history for him, but the influence of the Limes is still there for him in the landscape, as it is for the LimesGemeinden today.
- Help to challenge perceptions and open discussions about regional identity, through scientific research
- Represent many different faces of the Limes – Roman, 'Barbarian', 'German', member of a community

Our interpretive strategy

Through our consultation and co-creation process it was crucial that we not only identified ways for the Kemathen warrior, his story and associated stories – the 'resource' – to be presented, but that we also collaborate and co-create the interpretive vision and aims – the 'management' what do we want to achieve and why – and identify the beneficiaries of the interpretation – the audiences.

Our three co-created aims were:

- Connection points in the LimesGeminden will raise awareness of the Limes World Heritage. These connection points will be a focus for events, activities and interpretive infrastructure such as panels and installations
- The museum will be a regional destination for the Limes World Heritage Site. It will have real 'wow' factor and attract tourists as well as educational visitors
- The museum will be a hub for the people of the LimesGemeinden. It will be a place that reveals and celebrates their connections with the Limes, that they see it as part of their cultural life

Principal audiences for the project, which were identified as the target 'receivers' of the interpretive content as well as potential participants, collaborators and co-creators of interpretive media and content (including events, activities and 'traditional' museum displays) were:

- People of the LimesGemeinden
- Visitors to the Altmuhl Naturpark
- School classes

The central concept that was developed, again through consultation and co-creation, that

would help us to frame the Kemathen warrior's story, develop the interpretive approach and deliver on our brief was:

Faces of the Limes – people and landscape of a Roman Frontier The Limes is a place of connections between past and present. This was, and is, a place of people, marked and affected by their association with the Limes. The Limes World Heritage Site is a monument to those people and communities who lived in this frontier zone - both along the Limes line and in its hinterland. It represents the stories of people and communities through time.

Supporting themes titles were:

- A frontier time zone
- Life in the frontier zone
- Identity and connections in a frontier zone
- Landscape of meaning and memory in a frontier zone

Once we had established the 'ground rules' for our interpretation strategy we were then able to work with the communities to develop a media framework, i.e. how and where were we going to tell the Kemathen warrior's story.

Working collaboratively, we identified specific indoor and outdoor opportunities.

Indoor:

- Museum interpretation – introducing audiences to the Kemathen warrior, stories of the Limes and the LimesGemeinden, and help those audiences to connect with and visit related sites 'outdoors' in the landscape.

Photo 1. Museum interpretation visual (Image: The Creative Core, UK Visitor Experience Design consultancy)

Outdoor:

- Self-guided trails (including physical media interventions) – themed, self-guided, circular trail that links in with the museum narratives and the Limes World Heritage Site
- Orientation points – draw attention to the World Heritage of the Limes and provide information about how visitors can access the Limes, places and points of interest, circular walks, Romer und Bajuwaren museum in Kipfenberg
- Live interpretation – themed interpretation delivered by people, e.g. guided walks, reenactment, activities, events, festivals
- Points of Interest (LIMES Mobil App) – locations where archaeological evidence of the Limes is visible, where there are features of particular interest or where it is appropriate to provide users with information that will enhance their experience of the Limes
- Community Reference Points – a connection point that will raise awareness of Limes World Heritage among the people of the LimesGemeinden, and support relevant installations, events and activities. Linking in with the tourism package
- Educational activities – opportunities to support educational visitors, especially

schools in the LimesGemeinden, to learn about the Limes.

We mapped the media touch-points in a visual way, using the five-stage visitor experience model as created by Lisa Brochu[18], so that the consultees and co-creators could see how their voice and the needs of communities were being included and served by the project. We gave a 'voice' to each of the stages of the visitor experience so that it was clear that the whole project approach was people-driven, in particular, driven by our Kemathen warror.

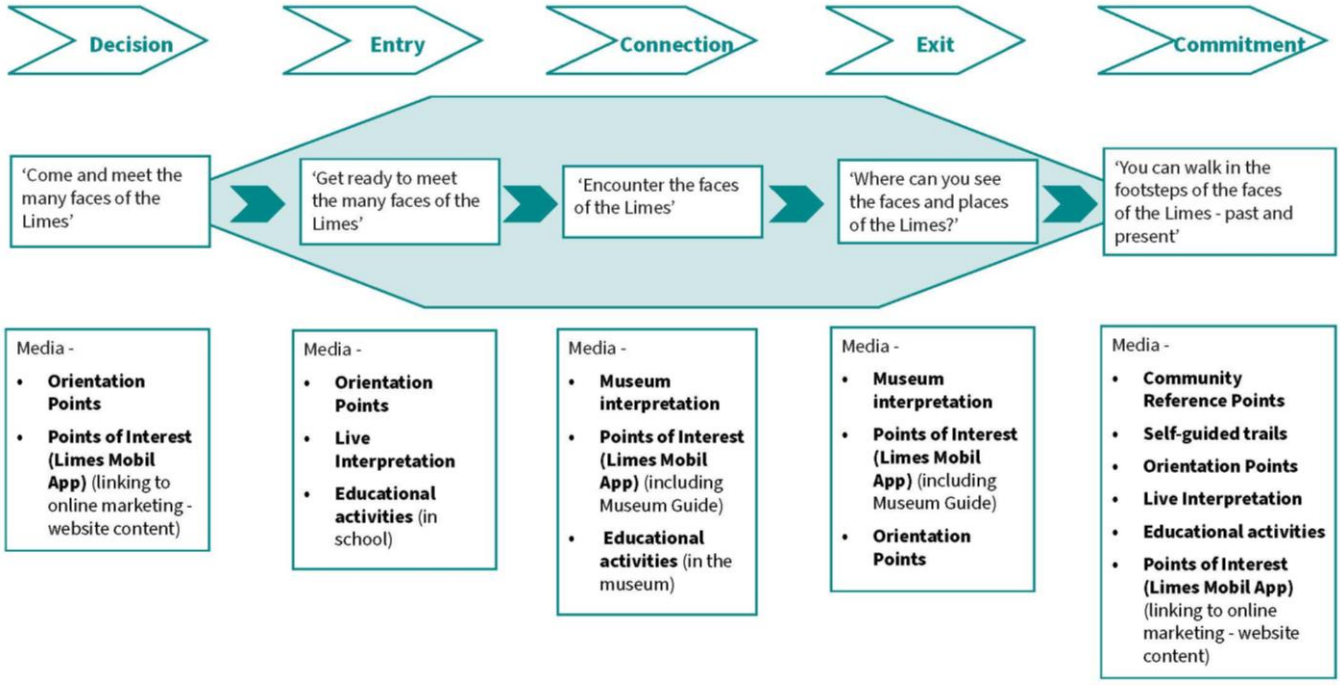

Figure 1. Media touch-points planned, arranged according to Lisa Brochou's visitor experience model (Minerva Heritage)

So how would the Kemathen warrior's story be used to help us to deliver all of this? Examples included:

- Using his voice to welcome visitors to the museum – "I am from the Limesregion. I am one of the many people who lived here after the Romans left and the Danube became their new frontier"
- Using his burial to introduce the subject of archaeological remains in the landscape – "We feel the influence of the Romans and can see the remains of their buildings in the landscape"
- Using his burial goods to explore what artefacts can tell us about Roman and contemporary life on the Limes, i.e. more than what can be seen at face value – "My burial was one of a few special burials that have been found here. You may never know all of our stories but by looking at our burials you might understand more about us and our people. You will also see how the Romans continued to have an influence on me and the people who live here today."

[18] Brochu, L. (2001) Interpretive Planning: The 5-M Model for Successful Planning Projects (National Association for Interpretation)

- Using his face and voice to provide a strong voice and brand identity for the outdoor opportunities.
- Identifying the location of his burial as one of the 'Community Reference Points'.

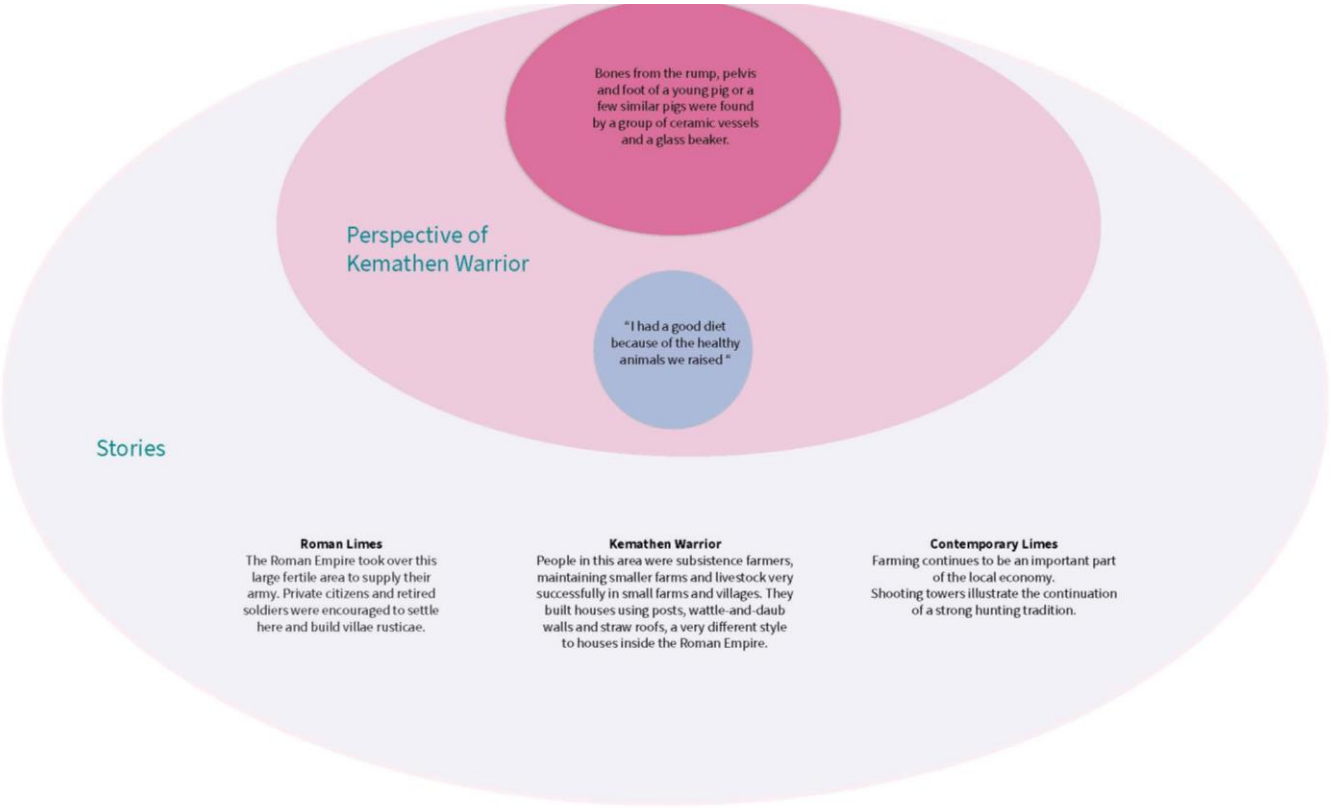

Figure 2. Finding the Kemathen warrior's voice within the wider stories (Minerva Heritage)

What did we learn?

There were of course many challenges to our work that we had to be aware of and overcome:

- It was important to bring people with different backgrounds together, but we had to ensure everyone had an equal say
- Municipalities were largely represented by their respective Mayors
- Community concerns, interests and priorities – other than the archaeology of the Limes – naturally 'got in the way'
- Perceptions and relationships to the Limes and to the museum in Kipfenberg have formed over decades
- Earlier narrative still colours perceptions – by challenging the deeply embedded beliefs that the Kemathen warrior was the 'first Bavarian' we could be seen to jeopardise the 'selling point' for the museum

But through a collaborative and participatory process, which involved both consultation and co-creation, we had the opportunity to:

- Tell a new and updated story
- Use the 'hero' to represent everyone
- Use the scientific findings within the new narrative to open up and question perceptions and beliefs
- Explore community perspectives within the 'Roman' story
- Strengthen the offer of the Kemathen warrior, who can attract visitors to the museum and then encourage them to explore the communities and the wider landscape

So, thanks to our local hero we:

- Explored new ways of working with the community, in particular consultation and co-creation, and understanding their values, beliefs and perceptions – shifting 'the way we do things'.
- Explored opportunities to tell stories in a different way, through understanding community beliefs, perceptions and values – broadening the narrative.
- Explored opportunities for understanding research and interpreting new research that provides an insight into the evolution of people and landscape – progressing the narrative.
- Still delivered on the brief!

Dr Jekyll / Mr Hyde? Construction of heroism and villainy in the context of a political media campaign. The case of Donald Tusk as the Schwarzcharakter in right-wing propaganda

Jacek H. Kołodziej (Poland)

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Abstract

The aim of this text is to examine how the figure of the protagonist is constructed in contemporary politics under the influence of the media. Drawing on an analysis of political propaganda disseminated by the Polish right-wing milieu between 2015 and 2025, and using categories drawn from narrative theory, the text poses the question of how this world appears when viewed through the lens of the tension between heroism and hostility. It emerges as a strikingly one-sided world, focused above all on the imaginative and multifaceted construction of a political enemy. Accordingly, the analysis turns to the figure of the villain and the process of villainisation, interpreted in the context of insights offered by scholars of heroism and villainy in literature and film.

The reflections and comparative observations regarding the mechanisms used by the most popular, right-leaning broadcaster TV Republika led the author to conclude that the propaganda model developed there – based on the consistent villainisation of the leader of the liberal opposition – draws heavily on patterns from popular culture. This, in turn, provides compelling evidence that in contemporary politics, the strategic focusing on a negative protagonist may possess multifaceted appeal, responding to the demands of a significant segment of society, and thus proving to be a highly useful instrument of contemporary politics.

Keywords

narrative theory, heroism and villainy, propaganda, politics as villainisation, mediatisation of politics, affective polarisation

Introduction: Three approaches to preserving stories of heroism

The preservation of the memory of heroism and villainy obeys its own internal logic: on the one hand, it exploits history wherever possible; on the other, it draws liberally from popular culture. History offers up real figures, battles, and defeats – events already thick with the threads of legend in the making. Popular culture, meanwhile, provides ready-made narrative frameworks and motifs, ideally suited for reconfiguring the message in a way most likely to secure public support. It is upon this narrative framework that political messaging is intricately

woven. It is spun from many threads – those of history, culture, and a homespun kind of marketing yarn – interwoven by spin doctors, ideologues, and pragmatically-minded political leaders. At the heart of this tapestry lies a single, central figure: the protagonist, the embodiment of whatever the story deems most essential.

Historical storytelling – particularly in its forms of public display and commemoration – is characterised by a pronounced emphasis on positive heroes, who are often subject to extensive idealisation. National museums tend to focus on heroism and, as a result, are compelled to downplay or altogether omit the flaws and transgressions of their central figures. At times, efforts to maintain the credibility of a biographical narrative lead to the acknowledgement of darker deeds – for example, the curators of the Józef Piłsudski Museum in Sulejówek weave into the narrative facts that expose that the Polish national hero was, in his early years, a would-be assassin and terrorist, and later the architect and leader of the 1926 coup d'état, which ushered in a period of authoritarian rule during the 1930s. Yet such revelations are typically framed in accordance with the ethics of the 'lesser evil', rationalised and incidentally reduced in memory as necessary wrongs committed in the name of a greater good.

When villains are represented in museums, they rarely feature as main characters. Instead, they tend to be diminished to one-dimensional, episodic roles. That said, popular exhibitions at the intersection of history and legend – such as wax figure cabinets, museums of torture and monstrosity (for instance, Tim Devlin's Monster Museum in Boulder City, Nevada, USA, or the Basilisk Museum in Warsaw, Poland) – thrive. The reason is likely straightforward: famous villains draw crowds. A prime example is the Dracula Bran Castle in Transylvania, a site marketed as the home of Vlad Tepes, despite the fact that he neither lived there nor was born there. In such cases, historical fact merges freely with promotional fantasy.

Popular culture, by contrast, preserves in its narratives the full complexity of human relationships – dramas, conflicts, emotions, twists and turns, suspense, surprises, and resolutions. One might say that while history serves as life's teacher, popular culture provides the interpretive framework through which those lessons are absorbed and made meaningful. If we limit ourselves – out of necessity – to the most prominent tendencies in literature and cinema, we may now venture an answer to a more general question: How are protagonists constructed within these cultural spheres? And what lesson might politics draw from the trajectory of protagonists' narratives in popular culture? Do these stories echo those of national heroes' exposition, or do they mark a distinct departure?

At the heart of what might be called Western cultural proto-story – a timeless narrative shaped by myth, religion, and classical literature – lies the notion that life itself is a story of heroes and villains, locked in perpetual entanglement. The dualistic tension between the hero and the villain forms the very essence of narrative structure. This dualism reaches deep into philosophical and ethical reasoning: after all, it is difficult to conceive of good without evil, of God without Satan, of light without shadow. Indeed, one of the cornerstones of ethical thought is the inquiry into the nature and origin of evil. The classical response – most famously first formulated by Saint Augustine – that evil arises from the absence of good remains a serious proposition to this day. Thus, one might conclude that heroes and villains, like good and evil, are simply two sides of the same coin. The duality of the hero and anti-hero provides the fabric of every primordial tale.

Yet this premise alone no longer suffices. Since the days of the Bible or Augustine's Civitas Dei, both societies and their stories have undergone significant evolution. Static dualism no longer suffices as the foundation of a compelling narrative. In literature – much earlier – and later in audiovisual arts, we witness a shift unfolding across at least three dimensions.

Firstly, characters initially cast as heroes often cease to be such, becoming villains instead: Dr Jekyll transforms into Mr Hyde; the war hero Macbeth turns into a corrupted regicide; the caring husband Walter White from Breaking Bad evolves into a ruthless kingpin of a drug empire. Secondly, it quickly becomes apparent that pure heroism is less engaging than heroism 'tainted by evil' – complex, contradictory, and morally ambivalent. Popular culture offers a wealth of examples focused on protagonists who are, in essence, anti-heroes: Captain Yossarian is a soldier-pacifist who would rather be a coward than die; Tony Soprano is both a devoted family man and a psychologically tormented mafia boss and murderer; Arthur Fleck, as Joker, is a failed everyman whose life strips him of illusion. What's more, anti-heroes, precisely because of their inner struggles, psychological burdens, troubled backstories and morally ambiguous contexts, become – paradoxically – sympathetic. It is they who now serve as the principal narrators of our popular tales. Rodion Raskolnikov is a villain introduced to us as a murderer plagued by conscience and moral anguish – deserving of punishment, yet also of understanding. Characters like Tony Soprano, Dexter, Nucky Thompson (Boardwalk Empire), and Jax Teller (Sons of Anarchy) are, without doubt, criminal and violent – and yet, undeniably sympathetic.

The internal evolution of main characters within a storyline is paired with the growing cultural fascination with the villain as such. This, inevitably, appears to be interlinked with the oversaturation of public consciousness by an unrelenting stream of information about new conflicts, acts of cruelty, and the daily manifestations of societal evil. It is only natural, then, that such a condition gives rise to a growing demand for 'equalisers', vigilantes, and all manner of righteous avengers. In my view, this phenomenon summarises the current trajectory in the evolution of hero and villain narratives: in contemporary visual culture, the villain has yet become more significant than any other figure.

Let us offer a few premises in support of this claim. First, villains apparently are the primary engine and point of origin for almost every story. This was observed by Vladimir Propp as far back as 1968 in his seminal analysis of narrative structure of a folk tale (Propp 1968: 27-34). Propp rightly notes that villainy initiates the action – it is the precondition for the emergence of the good. For this reason, in his schema of seven spheres of action associated with the protagonist, the very first domain is that of the villain – determined by the specific configuration of characters and their functions within the narrative This is how Propp announces a villain's emergence:

> "At this point, a new personage, who can be termed the villain, enters the tale. His role is to disturb the peace of a happy family, to cause some form of misfortune, damage, or harm. The villain(s) may be a dragon, a devil, bandits, a witch, or a stepmother, etc." (Propp 1968: 27).

It is the villain who sets the story in motion. The serpent's deceit – Satan's ruse – sets in motion the entire chain of evil in the Bible; Cain, in turn, gives tragic shape to the very idea of familial rupture. Thus, it is the villain who unsettles the world's order. Were it not for the actions of the villain, the hero would have remained at home – living a long, quiet life, untouched by adventure or emotional upheaval. The disruptive villain's

presence introduces the problem that the protagonist must resolve. The actions of Sauron, for instance, mobilise Frodo Baggins; similarly, most stories within the broad category of revenge narratives would simply not exist without the initiating villainy: The Count of Monte Cristo, Unforgiven, John Wick, Carrie, Kill Bill, Gladiator – each representing a different subgenre – are all fundamentally structured around a wrong that demands redress.

A second argument is that villainy (and anti-heroism) simply offers more narrative possibilities for constructing an appeal to attract the audience's attention (Schäfer 2014). One cannot help but reflect on the contemporary tendency to treat evil as a far more effective pretext for capturing the attention of readers and viewers. Scholars of the representation of evil in literature and film suggest that this strategy of narrative appeal offers, above all, a heightened sense of interpretive meaning: "If the villain weren't appealing, we wouldn't find the narrative as meaningful" (Heit 2011: 24). In seeking manifestations of this phenomenon, one might rhetorically ask: How much would Milton's Paradise Lost lose without the brilliantly drawn figure of Satan? And would we even go to see Star Wars if it lacked Darth Vader?

Last but not least, one could argue that villainy provides far more room than heroism for transgressive expansion of the reader's or viewer's imagination. Villainy can be constructed as a transformation toward a terminal state achieved by the protagonist (Michael Corleone); as an incarnation of monstrosity (Grendel, Sauron); or as the embodiment of evil itself (Hannibal Lecter, Jigsaw, or Pennywise) – to name only the most basic types, of which there are many more (Bergstrand & Jasper 2018; Campo 2017; Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 2019; Shafer & Raney 2012).

The final observation complements the previous three arguments and, in a sense, serves as their conclusion. The evident saturation of contemporary cultural narratives with elements of evil, the growing fascination with anti-heroes, and even with relatively straightforward core villains, is supported not only by research into the preferences of the audiences, but also by numerous statements from artists and creators themselves. And this should come as no surprise: what we are witnessing is a systemic shift – gradual yet consistent – the effects of which, visible in the evolving shape of cultural storytelling, stem from a broader transformation in social consciousness and the world around us. As film critic and journalist Eric Deggans aptly puts it:

> "Author Jeff Lindsay, who created Dexter in his crime novels, once told me he specifically built the character to draw an audience's sympathy. Dexter has a soft spot for kids, a strong moral code and a licence to do things the rest of us only dream about. That's the last lesson in creating a great antihero: he (or she) often protects the innocent, even when dealing drugs and killing people. But these characters (…) are also a statement on our times. In a world filled with war, recession and cynicism, straight-up heroes feel fake as a three-dollar bill. So the confused guy who does bad things for the right reason just might be the best reflection of where we are today" (Deggans 2011).

Mediated politics – the shift from heroism to villainy

This is not the place for a full scientific analysis of the socio-political transformations currently reshaping Central Europe or Poland. Let us simply enumerate a few specific factors that may prove useful for the argument at hand: polarisation (mainly affective), personalisation and mediatisaton of political campaign, and negativity as the dominant note in political storytelling.

Like any society observing the dynamics of public politics, we are witnessing rapid transformations in how the figures of the hero and the villain are employed in the struggle for power. The broader context for such political analysis includes the crisis of liberal democracy, what is perhaps most evident in countries lacking historical continuity and democratic stability: that once hopeful light has ceased to shine brightly (Krastev & Holmes 2019). And, both a cause and a consequence, the ascent of populism – all unfolding amidst growing international uncertainty, driven by Vladimir Putin's neo-imperialist war strategy and apparent shift of Donald Trump's administration towards American separationism. The form and intensity of political conflict are evolving, a development that must also be attributed to the role of digital entertainment platforms – especially those that fuel hostile social and political tribalism. One of the most crucial conceptual keys to interpreting these changes has become the notion of polarisation – particularly as it evolved from initial ideological dichotomies into a predatory and all-encompassing spectacle of deep social division. Almost everything has come to acquire a politically charged emotional significance (Iyengar and Westwood 2015), where the two major players care for constructing clear dichotomy between 'us' (good, beautiful, enlightened, morally upright) and 'them' (bad and corrupt, repugnant, foolish, and morally bankrupt). In effect the political meta-story has permeated and come to dominate the narratives shared in private. It has come to the point that even family members gathered around the table may no longer be willing to speak to one another – writes Anne Applebaum about Poland (2020).

The contextual level of political effects and emotions in Central Europe has been considered exceptionally high since 2005 – perhaps with the sole exception of Turkey, even surpassing that observed in the United States (Iyengar and Westwood 2015). It all goes hand in hand with very low levels of social trust, and an empirically confirmed high degree of electoral cynicism and volatility.

How does this relate to cultural narratives about heroes? It looks simple. Politics operates through the medium of a simple story, and contemporary political stories must adhere to three major and interconnected premises: personalisation, mediatisation, and negativity.

The fact that politics is subject to personalisation is as self-evident as the notion that political success is unattainable without a recognisable leader, against the backdrop of evolving technologies of electronic and digital representations, and the decline of traditional parties and participation. The real turning point is widely understood to be the revolution of the technologies promoting visuality and priming, thus the role of television as a dominant political medium. This shift is often traced to Dwight D. Eisenhower's 1952 presidential campaign, the four televised debates between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy in 1960, and similar developments across Europe and beyond a decade later on. The visualisation of politics through electronic media fundamentally redefined the criteria of political relevance and, on the other hand, imposed a promotional form that fused serious messaging with entertainment and sensationalism (Postman 2006).

Soon after Dwight D. Eisenhower's amusing 1952 campaign featuring Mickey Mouse, political spin doctors concluded – following in the footsteps of over 150 years of experience with word-and-argument-based campaigning – that the new medium could and should be adapted to the goal of discrediting one's opponent. Negative emotions quickly moved to the forefront of public televised politics.

American models of negative campaigning, drawing extensively on the techniques of advertising (perfectly exemplified by – evoking fear and collective anxiety towards the opponent – Lyndon B. Johnson's infamous 'Daisy Girl' ads, originally developed as a promotional campaign for the United Nations). That kind of a fusion of marketing's persuasive power, the emotional force of imagery, and the impact of negative emotion, set the tone for decades, establishing the dominant strategies for dismantling political rivals. In the current era of polarised populism, the system has evolved into unrestrained mudslinging, pursued per fas et nefas – which, regrettably, has become something of a dark emblem of political storytelling.

These processes ought to be interpreted with reference to the logic by which mainstream media operate, including virtual social platforms. The operational logic of news media, at least among those striving to play a serious role within democratic societies, is shaped by the tension between two often conflicting imperatives: the professional ethic of independent, objective journalism, and the commercial necessity of generating profit and maintaining advertising appeal. In practice, this balancing act takes various forms – sometimes successful, sometimes less so – ultimately landing somewhere between the pole of responsible reporting and commentary, and the tabloid-like play of sensational storytelling. And most of these narratives are precisely the ones politicians would like to influence.

At the heart of this discussion lies a fundamental question: What traits must a media protagonist possess, given the routine practices of news media? It turns out that the most media-penetrating events are those that can be subjected to a clear interpretation (Palczewski 2009) and that collectively – and in a balanced yet focused manner – fulfil such criteria as: intensity, unambiguity, cultural proximity, relevance, consonance with expectations or rarity and unexpectedness, continuity, compositional needs of the overall news bulletin, elite status in terms of nation and individual, as well as personalisation and negativity (Galtung & Ruge 1965: 68). This classical framework has since been repeatedly reinterpreted and adapted (Brighton & Foy 2007), including in the context of newer media formats. Of particular relevance are three key filters through which media process events: elitism, personalisation, and negativity.

These lead to the conclusion that the ideal media narrative about the world should be anchored in a recognisable human face and genuine human emotions. A suitable protagonist should be well-known, culturally resonant, or aligned with an established behavioural archetype. Their story should be dramatic, surprising, and – where possible – contain strong elements of negativity. A quarter of a century after the seminal papers by Galtung and Ruge, Allan Bell (1991) identified ten factors contributing to the most desirable content in news reporting. Notably, he placed negativity at the top of the list (meaning violence, war, disaster, tragedy, and deviance). Among factors related to the production of news and the properties of information itself, he emphasised prefabrication and facticity.

Admittedly, this conclusion does not in itself imply that the ideal protagonist of a political message must necessarily be a villain. But the other option is the idealisation of one's heroes – whether as part of propaganda of success or within the dichotomisation of political protagonists.

In light of these dynamics, and in the context of populism and polarisation, a rather compelling hypothesis emerges: that political heroes are gradually receding into a heroic past, taking

with them their complexity and nuance, and are being replaced by negative messaging of the simplest kind – political spinning that draws liberally on the full repertoire of popular culture narratives of villainy. And all of this is happening within a window of populism that has opened wide, at the expense of truth and the coherence of empirical reality.

Political storytelling by villainy – the case of the House of Free Word

This is the case story of a political milieu that gained institutional significance in Poland within the last ten years, when the right-wing coalition led by Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS), supported by the right-leaning President Lech Kaczyński, came to power. Initially, this group of activists was recognised primarily for the sharply combative tone of their commentary – consistently directed against leftist and liberal views – with quite non-significant position within public discourse. However, in 2015, the winners assigned them a mandate to take control of the entire output of public television and radio. And at this point, the window of opportunity was fully capitalised. Together with PiS and radical allies the group seized control over all public TV and radio channels, managing to frame a system of efficient and tightly orchestrated state propaganda. To paraphrase a famous political quotation: Never before have so few, with such sharply defined views, created such a dynamic propaganda institution, by drawing its strength from the public resources of state television.

After the political pendulum swung in the 2023 elections, the same group – growing like a snowball rolling downhill – were forced to leave the public institution, so they regrouped to the private TV Republika – a right-wing, niche outlet with strong personal and ideological affiliations with PiS. They had to submit to the realities of market competition and the challenges of rebuilding an institution of social control from scratch – yet they brought with them a valuable asset: well-known faces of presenters and anchors, propaganda know-how, a ready political message, and, most importantly, a loyal audience. Now in 2025, TV Republika is the main centre of anti-government and anti-liberal propaganda, a sharp voice of anti-governmental political opposition. It is quite devoted, drawing all powers from alt-right ideas, nationalistic pride and Catholic institutionalised moral ideology. Their promotional tagline, 'House of Free Word[19],' becomes meaningful for the whole consortium, which comprises a TV station, a couple of newspapers, YouTube channels and radio outlets. Their current share in the television market, when combined with the internet media reach, occasionally surpasses the audience share of competing mainstream media organisations.

The consistent propaganda message of the House is well refined over nine and a half years. It offers a textbook illustration of the mechanisms discussed earlier. It simultaneously exemplifies several key dynamics: the model of constructing a polarised political world populated by ever-friendly allies from the European right-wing groupings. As opposed to the EU, Donald Trump shines as the brightest star. In line with the previously outlined criteria of news attractiveness and the power of negativity in media and cultural storytelling, the narrative promoted by the House may be found as the paragon of excellence. For reasons that warrant explanation, it focuses almost exclusively on the figure of the villain – substantially reducing, or indeed altogether omitting, the presence of a structural positive hero.

[19] 'The House of Free Word' is the promotional slogan of TV Republika. Given that this self-definition not only accurately names the institution itself but also carries important connotations, it will henceforth be used – also as simply 'the House' – as the primary name for the entity in question.

The primary aim of this extensive case description is not to offer a moral judgment of the House's political communication, or to analyse its system of propaganda per se, but rather to draw on some empirical data from the systematic monitoring of the station between mid-2023 and April 2025. The goal was to collect meaningful and typical examples for the portrayal of heroism and villainy. In this respect, it is a depiction that is both intrinsically interesting and highly instructive, as is the political bias itself – seen as a phenomenon of political narrative culture.

The House broadcasts a set of specific news and discussion programmes (with a slogan of 'Truly Polish News') apparently anchored to the main liberal-democratic Polish politician – Donald Tusk. Tusk is the main protagonist of most stories told by the House, and he is constructed as the supervillain, a real *Schwarzcharakter*, the main point of reference for all political stories. The narrative constructed by the House around Tusk has both a political rationale – stemming from the goals of PiS and its allies, and a narratological one, which is arguably more intriguing here.

At its core lies a notable initial complication: the presence of two politically gifted twins, Jarosław and Lech Kaczyński, both equally suitable for the role of main protagonist and right-wing leaders. Yet the notion of a twin-hero protagonist is highly unusual and fraught with risks in political marketing and political memes. Apparently, it happened that the brothers divided roles. Lech, the 'better' brother, became president; Jarosław, the pragmatic political strategist, remained in the background. Tragically, the 2010 Smolensk plane crash, which claimed the life of President Lech Kaczyński, took away the more charismatic sibling, leaving Jarosław in a state of profound mourning. One of the consequences of this cruel event – partly spontaneous, partly politically orchestrated – was the immediate mythologisation of Lech Kaczyński. He became a national myth and symbol, a hero beyond criticism, a Polish martyr elevated to the political Olympus: the eternal point of reference for every political story. The consequences of such glorification are self-evident: the story of Lech – as the perfect hero – no longer needs to be told, for it has already been completed, regardless of what may happen.

Meanwhile, the 'lesser' brother, immersed in grief and focused on the strategic direction of his party, remained in the second plane of political life. In his case, it becomes impossible to construct heroic narratives around him, since the role he inhabits is that of an anti-hero: a mastermind, trickster, and strategist, a behind-the-scenes operator, a kind of real-life Professor Moriarty of Polish politics. Such a figure is ill-suited to play the part of a fully-fledged hero. The natural narrative complement was, quite clearly, to focus on the long-standing main opponent of both brothers, at least since 2005, the perfect candidate for a supervillain, Donald Tusk.

As previously noted, political storytelling within a media-saturated, networked, and highly visual environment follows a set of specific rules. These include, among others, an intense reliance on pop-cultural patterns of negativity, the market-driven standardisation of certain narrative frames, the merging of amusement and scandalisation, and the preference for a simple, clearly defined moral structure. The development of the House's practices has demonstrated that this can be a real mission – political spinning by one-sided storytelling with an unambiguous moral backdrop, and rooted in all possible narrative components. Opinion polls and analyses of political support for PiS and Donald Tusk, along with successive election results, indicate that the House's hard editorial line correlates with PiS voters. What may prove more valuable at this point is to examine how

these storytelling frameworks are constructed in detail. Specifically: Which narrative models have served as templates for constructing the figure of the 'evil Tusk'?

The villain in cultural storytelling can be portrayed according to the dominant trait of their construction: as emerging (e.g. Michael Corleone), as the core embodiment of evil – fully formed from the outset (Hannibal Lecter), or as *repellent* (such as Jigsaw) – as described by Samantha Schäfer (2014). It is telling that in this case, Tusk is fully constructed from the outset – as combining three core attributes: the pure incarnation of evil, an almost inconceivable degree of repellency, and at the same time representing a fully formed creature, appointed to the role of a supervillain without any amendments or modifications.

The communication process of affective villainisation is something others could study from the persuasion masters of the House. This narrative was carefully planned and masterfully crafted during the era of state-controlled public broadcaster TVP, a strong indication of what was the now-infamous 'targeting of Tusk' evidence[20]. He was also shown in front of his party's logo in a way that transformed elements of the design into horns. In other instances, his skin was tinted red. A clip in which Tusk 'thinks and speaks' in German – specifically the phrase 'für Deutschland' woven into informational broadcasts – was repeatedly aired, intended to imply that he is more aligned with German interests than with Polish ones.

A more systematic review of the recurring themes and visual motifs used to present Donald Tusk as a supervillain on TV Republika highlights two key aspects of the narrative: the construction of the character and the overarching narrative frame.

The character construction follows a model typical of the oldest stories about monsters, focusing on physical traits and physiognomy, the personality attributed to the figure, and the supposed attitude towards others. There is, therefore, some cultural rationale for constructing the villain in a disgusting physical form – as a repulsive, monstrous figure marked by animalistic traits. After all, the earliest monsters drew heavily on dangerous, real or imagined animals: the biblical Satan took the shape of a slimy serpent; the Greek Medusa had snakes for hair, boar-like (nomen-omen) tusks, and dragon scales; the Hydra had the body of a hound and regrowing snake heads… Compared to these figures, the portrayal of Tusk is more human, but with some repulsive animalistic traits. In one of them Tusk is said to have 'wolf eyes' – a trope easily illustrated with carefully selected still-frames of his face, seemingly chosen to convey the impression of hostility and cunning. However, such imagery may produce unintended effects, given the widely recognised associations of wolves with freedom, individuality, and deep loyalty to their pack – that is, their family. Nevertheless, the motif of Tusk's eyes has taken on a life of its own.

The focus on physical appearance continues the process of animalisation, and thus dehumanisation, of Tusk. A prominent motif in this context is that of the 'ginger crow' – a derogatory epithet referring to the allegedly reddish colour of the politician's hair. The avian

[20] Between July 6, 2021 and June 22, 2022, the main evening TVP news broadcast featured as many as 33 instances of subliminal imagery showing the politician speaking while surrounded by a red laser outline, overlaid with a crosshair resembling that of a military targeting scope. The editor responsible at the Television Information Agency reportedly denied this interpretation, claiming that 'the frame comes from a monitor view of a secondary camera' and that it is 'a popular technique used by many television stations when illustrating footage from press conferences featuring various politicians' (Jsx 2022).

metaphor invites a contrast between the Polish eagle, the proud national emblem, obviously intended for PiS, and the much smaller, less predatory urban bird, typically black in colour. At demonstrations held by PiS supporters, banners echo this narrative, bearing slogans such as: 'A ginger crow will never defeat an eagle'. The phrase carries negative emotional weight due to its historical resonance: during martial law (1981–1982), the communist Military Council of National Salvation (WRON), the institutional acronym was a widely detested word, associated with the communist regime's repressive apparatus.

So, Tusk may appear as a wolf or a crow, or any featured monster. Yet monstrous qualities are also ascribed to him by the House when it reaches for his personality. Instances of the macabre frequently appear in television tickers and breaking news banners on the screen. The editorial strategy often involves villainisation by moving banners which go beyond the modesty of providing simple information, introducing a lot of malicious remarks, value-laden commentary, and falsely attributed content. To give some examples – one of the tickers reading "Donald Tusk's ghastly thoughts", used in reference to some of Tusk's previous remarks taken out of context. These kinds of suggestions are skillfully composed with highly emotional pictures or movies, like one of the politician with a deliberately blurred face, seemingly to suggest personality disorder or blurred identity. It is important to note the recurring use of social protest imagery – unfortunately not uncommon – in which Tusk's face is transformed into that of Hitler, accompanied by captions featuring his surname stylised with SS lightning-bolt runes. In such instances, the TV Republika ticker reads: "[This is the] face of the EU and the Green Deal". In the lead-up to the European Parliament elections, this campaign of 'Hitlerisation' of Tusk's face (and his entire persona) became particularly visible, merging the visual tropes of two of the most negatively perceived figures in contemporary discourse: Hitler and, on the other side, Vladimir Putin. Tusk's face was positioned between them, symbolically uniting the two extremes in a single image and occupying the very centre of a constructed monstrosity of a traitor. Visual inspirations flow freely from images taken at political protests and anti-Tusk internet memes – forming a closed loop of propaganda circulating from the House to the street and back again. The underlying intent is mockery and public denigration.

The second aspect – the narrative framing – is also noteworthy in terms of its reference to cultural patterns of the villainisation. It is striking how the fundamental archetypes of literary and cinematic villains (Campo 2017; Schäfer 2014; Sīm 2018) converge in the narratives surrounding Donald Tusk. He is frequently depicted as a tyrant – grasping for absolute power and representing the 'corrupt, European elites'. His status as a despot is reinforced by repeated emphasis on his entourage of obedient subordinates – 'Tusk's team' (presumably referring to his government or political supporters). The screens broadcasting content from the House repeat messaging such as: "Putin's people in Tusk's government destroy Polish–US relations" or "The US missile base opened despite sabotage by Tusk's team". Tusk is portrayed as a dominant egotist, detached from ordinary people. Hence, it is frequently repeated that he shows contempt for Poles or that he never keeps his promises. This narrative frame is significant in the context of three core elements of any political story: we learn about the villain (Tusk), the heroic redeemer (the House), and the victim (the deceived people). Obviously, Tusk is also cast as a cynical trickster – a cunning manipulator and traitor sowing chaos and uncertainty. So, viewers are met with repeated headlines declaring: "The Polish economy is on the brink", "Tusk is destroying

Polish industry", "weakening the Polish state", and causing "yet another crisis", "disarming the Polish people", "record-breaking energy prices", and so on[21].

Recipients of such messages are given a strong impression that, through the political lens of the House, they are accessing true knowledge about a grotesque political monster who – like a mythical dragon – sows chaos, destroys everything around him, and cynically serves foreign interests at the expense of Polish society. The political objective is the long-term transformation of attitudes, which are meant to crystallise around narratives detached from reality, yet skillfully assembled from empirically observable fragments and symbols. The adhesive here is composed of banks of anger and resentment in the meaning described by Peter Sloterdijk (2012) – cultural grievances accumulated over time, such as anti-German memory from World War II in Poland. In this domain, the imagination and creative license of the narrative architects know no bounds.

History shows that the most effective propaganda must be flexible – capable of adapting to the changing context in which it is received. This is also true of the propaganda produced by the House of Free Word. A shift in the narrative frame became increasingly evident in 2024, the first year of Donald Tusk's latest government. The shift seemed inevitable, due to the growing gap between the propagandistic worldview and evaluation, and the reality outside clearly visible through any window. The two were at odds with each other and attempts to explain that might appear increasingly problematic. It was also significant that the worldview presented in public media became more balanced in return, without a bias in favour of PiS. Because of these circumstances, apparently, two strategies were implemented. First, the idea of defending the fortress – the House – as under siege by Tusk's people; second, the redirection of viewer attention from observable facts toward intentions and future hypothetical plans.

The first mechanism is as old as storytelling itself: audiences are easier to mobilise when they see angry attackers. So, on screen were shown 'Tusk militias attacking' the newsroom, allegedly trying to shut the station down. The motif of TV Republika reporters being attacked or persecuted became one of the central narrative elements. The second mechanism is brilliant in its simplicity: focus not on what has already happened, but on what Tusk is allegedly about to do. This conveniently circumvents any need to verify the truth of the claim. After all, how can one fact-check an intentionalist assertion such as, Tusk will invalidate future elections, will introduce censorship, or is planning to raise prices deliberately to weaken the Polish economy? The imagination and inventiveness of the editors from the House, reinforced by clear, party-driven messaging, shape the dynamics of one of the most bold and unscrupulous media narratives in the country at the centre of Europe.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of the villainisation of political leaders, typical for contemporary polarisation, illustrates a range of broader social and cultural processes that form the backdrop to this analysis. It focuses on one side of the political spectrum – the populist right – and on narratology, which sheds light on the construction of heroes and villains in literature and film. The examples provided are alarmingly realistic, and everyday life and the media centred around the Polish right continue to

[21] All expressions marked as quotations are taken from frames collected during the monitoring of TV Republika between late 2023 and early 2025.

generate new stories and motifs. The reflections offered and the material gathered lead to two conclusions.

Negative protagonists have always been necessary in art – and will likely continue to appear in reality. We may not commemorate them in museums as figures worthy of remembrance, but they live on in our memory – often disturbingly long – because we need them deeply. In art, they constitute a conditio sine qua non of compelling storytelling, in accordance with the principles of aesthetics and literature. In real life, the main protagonists of history are often complex and ambiguous, so they become either heroes or villains when and if their community decides. It can be based on their merits and perceived behaviour – that they are worth commemorating forever or stigmatising forever. But politics is about interventions into the living fabric of collective awareness, by any by means of all available tools that can serve to legitimise success, evolving in accordance with changing societal demands for knowledge, entertainment, and emotional engagement.

The success of negative narrative surrounding Tusk leads to another conclusion that, in the world of contemporary politics, it is remarkably easy to construct a political enemy as a monster – likely also because there is substantial social demand for negative emotions, and thus for creating socio-psychological division. One important factor underlying this trend is the inadequacy of the sharp binary opposition between good and evil when applied to the world of narrative politics. Here Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde are not opposites, but complements, and the positive heroes of one side are, in their eyes, permitted to commit the worst and most morally repugnant acts against their opponents – something that is increasingly perceived as justified despite its moral ambiguity (Krakowiak & Oliver 2012). Therefore, narrative theory meets reality, and philosophy intersects with psychology, in the form of the well-known paradox of tragedy, as formulated by David Hume. This great philosopher, by referring to Aristotelian reflections on the relationship between distress and pleasure in response to tragedy, observed, while commenting on our reactions to certain works of art, that:

> "It seems an unaccountable pleasure, which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other passions, that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy. The more they are touched and affected, the more are they delighted with the spectacle; and as soon as the uneasy passions cease to operate, the piece is at an end" (Hume, 1757/1987: 216, after: Gilmore 2025).

The two faces of Dr Jekyll illustrate this paradox, demonstrating how the line between fictionalised narratives – tending toward horror, the visualisation of evil, and the dehumanisation of the rival – and realistic politic description of facts and persons is increasingly blurred. Hume's paradox seems to offer insight into the popularity of the villainisation of political opponents – not only because it is, regrettably, the path of many victors, but also due to what is often described as the concept of 'hedonistic compensation' (Gilmore 2025). This view suggests that the experience of suffering and evil – though inherently harmful – is offset by the aesthetic pleasure derived from the narrative form itself. It is thus the narrative craft of constructing political villains – the 'art' of bringing the antagonist to life – that provides aesthetic satisfaction, rather than the substance of suffering per se. Aesthetics has overshadowed social responsibility for potential harm, particularly when politics is treated as a game or spectacle rather than the exercise of prudent decision-making.

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Turning a glacier into an athlete. How to explain complex phenomena through an exhibition character

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Abstract

The geomorphology of Poznań and its surrounding area. Sounds scary? Definitely. How then can we turn this subject, which only enthusiasts seem to find interesting, into a temporary exhibition that will not scare away ordinary visitors? How to approach difficult terms and explain complex processes that are outside the realms of human-scale understanding and make them digestible? And why did we decide to talk about geomorphological processes at a cultural institution located in the Poznań city centre in the first place?

What helped us face this challenge was adopting an interpretive approach and introducing a character into the story. This is how Sven the Continental Glacier was born. For the purpose of the exhibition we presented him as an athlete and set the exhibition in the sports context. Visitors were invited to participate actively and compete with the main character in various sports activities. This allowed us to link the subject to the visitors' personal experiences and facilitate better understanding of the presented issues.

Keywords

character interpretation, exhibition design, geomorphology, Poznań, landscape

Main text

Let's start at the beginning. We work at the Śluza Gallery in Poznań. It is a space where we hold temporary exhibitions about our city. We focus on three major themes. Our main focal point is the city. We want to present its history and we carefully analyse the space we live in. At the same time we bear in mind that it is always the people and their needs that are responsible for the way the city is being shaped and developed. We are interested in the heroes of the well-known history as well as ordinary city dwellers; in those who lived in the distant past and those from more recent times.

The third theme we focus on is the environment. We are inspired to raise this issue by the close proximity of the Cybina River. Through our exhibitions we have already presented the flora and fauna of the area by the river as well as Cybina's soundscape. Now it was time to focus on inanimate nature. This brings us to geomorphology.

We knew that in order to talk about the lie of the land in our city, we needed to go some 20,000 years back. It was then that the glaciation, which had the greatest impact on shaping the area of Poznań and its surrounding, took place. After that, rivers and people also brought about transformation but not as significant as the one caused by the continental glacier.

The exhibition needed to be based on reliable scientific research so we invited Dr Paweł Wolniewicz from the Faculty of Geographical and Geological Sciences of Adam Mickiewicz University to work with us. We wanted to work with someone who enjoys popularising science and knows how to do it. It was particularly important in the case of a subject such as geomorphology which can easily overwhelm people. Thanks to Paweł who understands that, we were immediately given texts written in a very visitor-friendly manner.

So we had our scientific background. Then, it was time for an exhibition arranger, Wojtek Luchowski, to join our team. To continue the work it was crucial that we found an idea for a metaphor which could help us explain in simple terms the processes we wanted to present and even identify with them. In a word, we asked ourselves a question: How do we tame a continental glacier?

We were fully aware that to solve this dilemma we needed to implement the tools used in interpretation. In particular we needed to find a way to relate the processes we wanted to discuss to the personal experiences of our visitors. Easier said than done. After all, which of our everyday experiences can resemble such large-scale, long-term and slow processes as the ones triggered by the continental glacier?

Finding this analogy was the hardest part of the whole process of making this exhibition.
It was our arranger Wojtek who first suggested using the sports metaphor. At first we were sceptical but we decided to give it a go. And it turned out to be just the thing we needed.

The sports analogy allowed us to refer to such values as strength and persistence. These are also the qualities which can be found in the natural processes connected to the activity of the continental glacier. Sport is a close and everyday subject for many of us. We either participate in it actively or as fans. Besides, it is a subject which evokes positive associations with free time, strong feelings, shared experience, growth, overcoming weaknesses and admiration for the abilities and achievements of other people. It became a great counterpoint to geomorphological subjects which for many people seem difficult, abstract or simply boring. It helped us add lightness to the exhibition. Additionally, such an unexpected fusion of sport and the lie of the land seemed intriguing and inspiring.

Following the sports convention, we needed a sportsman whose achievements could be recounted at the exhibition. This is how our protagonist, Sven the Continental Glacier, was born (Image 1). As already mentioned, the main factor contributing to the contemporary shape of Poznań and the surrounding area was Pleistocene glaciation, which is why we decided that the continental glacier should become our protagonist.

He is different from the protagonists mentioned in many other presentations delivered during the conference. The majority of speakers talked about real people from the distant and more recent past and about interpretive stories based on their biographies. Our protagonist is different: he is completely fictional. He personifies a very real force of nature. So by definition, he is a metaphor and a creation. He's something we agree upon. But it is thanks to him that we can tell this story in a brand new way.

What is more, even though he is fictional, Sven began to live a life of his own very quickly and won the hearts of our colleagues. Even of the people who were not personally involved in making this exhibition.

Huge credit for this goes to the graphic designer, Agata Kulczyk, who was responsible for the graphic design of the exhibition. She gave Sven his shape thanks to which we can now look him in the eyes.

Image 1. Looking Sven in the eyes (Image: Łukasz Gdak)

The exhibition's narration presented successive stages of shaping the landscape around Poznań. However, instead of describing them in a traditional way we know from geography textbooks, it talks about them as if they were sports competitions. Yet, adopting such an approach didn't mean that the science behind the story was compromised or trivialised. Quite the opposite. Using the sports metaphor and language typical for sports commentary allowed us to sneak in specialised knowledge and present it in a friendly way.

We can show this through a couple of examples. The first thing our visitors encountered was the protagonist's biography. The reasons for glaciation and its development were presented through the description of Sven's background, appearance and everyday activities. Here we should explain the name and surname of our protagonist. The surname is simply a scientific term describing this ice structure. The name, on the other hand, is Swedish because the continental glacier came from the Scandinavian Peninsula and in Polish scientific literature it is often called a Scandinavian continental glacier.

The next stages of glaciation and the landforms connected to them were demonstrated through a series of sports certificates for special achievements hanging on the wall. It looked as if our protagonist was displaying his trophies. Their design referred to old-fashioned sports diplomas. Their titles included made-up sports categories which referred to successive stages of glaciation. For example, there was a diploma for forming hills by accumulating and mounting and a diploma for taking part in the continental glaciers' competition in meltwater. These diplomas included a description of the grounds for awarding them, which in fact, was a description of the particular phenomena and their outcomes. They also provided information on the places within the area of the city where it is still possible to see the results of these phenomena.

Another example of a sports analogy is a description of a game between the continental glacier and the rivers. A very complex process of the transformation of the water system was presented as coverage of a football game. The area around Poznań was the football pitch. The two teams playing against each other were Sven the Continental Glacier and Team Warta River. In this case, the comparison to a game and using terminology known from sports coverage helped us explain how the process unfolded. Infographics referring to football provided additional visual aids.

We know that the solutions which allow visitors to engage personally in activities and experiment are particularly effective, which is why we based a large portion of the exhibition on them. We even created a whole glacial gym. In this part of the exhibition visitors had a chance to compete with our protagonist and take up glacial challenges. Particular exercises referred to the ways in which some chosen glacial landforms were created. We tried to compare the effort required from visitors to

complete physical exercises to the forces of nature shaping the landscape. Of course, these comparisons were symbolic but they emphasised the scale of the continental glacier's activity.

The first example is an exercise referring to the creation of the continental glacier's ice sheet. In this exercise we used a ring. We assumed that squeezing the ring ten times would amount to producing 1mm of ice. The accompanying text explained that the creation of an ice sheet is a long-term process, whereas an image presented the amount of ice produced thanks to a particular number of repetitions.

The next exercise you could try was carving a ribbon lake. Such lakes are created when the water flowing under the continental glacier cuts through the bed. They are long, narrow and deep. We compared them to the exercise shown in image 2. Here one repetition of the exercise represented creating a 1-metre deep lake. The exercise was accompanied by information on the depth of the nearby lakes.

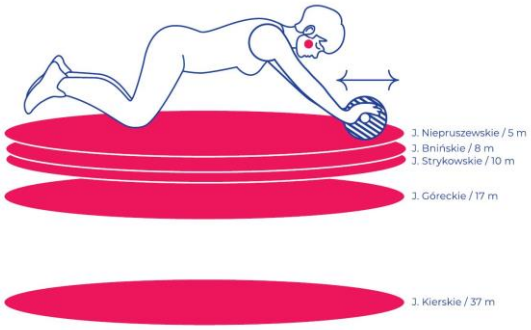

Image 2. Example exercise to demonstrate the effort in carving glacial lakes (Image: Agata Kulczyk)

Another exercise, which turned out to be the most popular, was an activity with a gym sledge. Pushing the sledge was compared to forming moraines by the moving glacier. An additional attraction in this exercise was the way in which you could change the level of difficulty. You could ask someone to sit on the sledge and thus make it more difficult for yourself to push it. At the same time, the exercise created an opportunity for groups visiting the exhibition to interact and cooperate.

To keep the story within the sports convention consistent, the whole arrangement of the exhibition referred to a school gym (image 3). The space included vaulting boxes, thick ropes hanging from the ceiling and some old sports equipment such as balls, ice skates and trainers. These elements additionally stimulated visitors' imagination. Most people associated them with PE classes at school. After opening the exhibition we even needed to introduce additional safety measures because the stunts performed by some visitors surpassed our expectations.

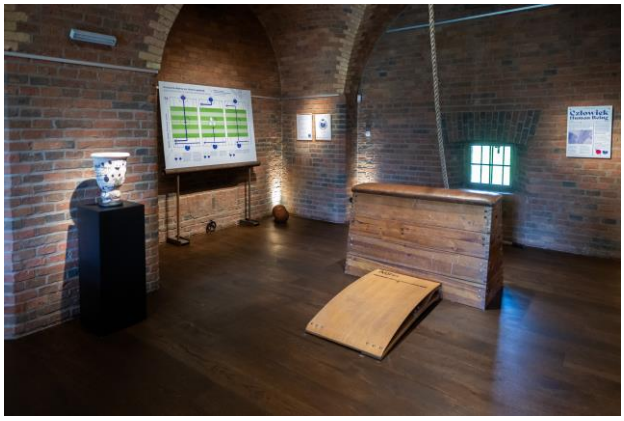

Image 3. The gym setting within the exhibition (Image: Łukasz Gdak)

The casual nature of our narration allowed us also to introduce additional, often humorous elements, which made the subject of the exhibition feel even more familiar and personal. For example, costumes allowed visitors to become a massive ice mountain. You could even take a photo with Sven himself, who was sitting gracefully on a pile of mattresses.

However, we felt that the story about the ice age would be incomplete without genuine ice itself. We spent long hours trying to find a way to

include it in the exhibition. What helped us was the personification of the continental glacier. Little Sven, created by trial and error, was placed in a small refrigerator, waiting patiently for surprised visitors. Seeing our frosty friend was always met with enormous enthusiasm.

We always want to encourage our visitors to visit the city on their own after seeing our exhibitions. This time was no different and we found a very friendly way to present the places in Poznań and its surroundings which were created as a result of the activity of the continental glacier. After all, who would turn down an offer from a glacial travel agency, 'Sven recommends'? The range of experiences offered was wide. Those who enjoy spending time by the lake as well as hiking enthusiasts found something to suit them. And those who preferred something 'heavier' learnt where in the city you could find huge glacial erratics.

The work on our exhibition was a wonderful adventure. Sven won our hearts. And not just ours. The visitors to the exhibition had a great time too in Sven's company. This was obvious not just from watching them enjoy the exhibition, but from seeing social media posts too. Regular visitors returned to the exhibition several times and it was most popular among families with children. We often saw people walking the corridors proudly wearing pins with Sven's face which were for sale in our souvenir store. Many people also decided to sew their own little Sven toy during our two sewing workshops. We are convinced that through our exhibition we managed to tame the continental glacier.

Remembering Sven's face, any further exploration of the mysteries of landscape formation will definitely be a lot more enjoyable. And we encourage you to delve into this subject and to explore fun ways of creating a hero character to help tell your stories.

Heroes in the changes of time: Kozina and Lomikar in a modern interpretation

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Abstract

Jan Sladký Kozina and Wolf Maxmilián Lamingen, known as Lomikar, provide an exemplary example of how the interpretation of heroism changes depending on the cultural, social and historical context of the time. This paper explores how these regional figures can serve as a means of understanding common issues and how their story can be interpreted in a way that resonates with contemporary audiences and opens up space for discussion of current social challenges. Through an analysis of the historical context, the changing image of both figures in collective memory, and modern interpretive tools, we offer a comprehensive view of this important story of Czech history.

Keywords

Public history, national identity, Chodsko region, collective memory

The historical context of the story of the Chods

In order to fully understand the significance of this story and its transformations in collective memory, it is necessary to know something about the different historical stages of its development. As early as the Middle Ages, the Chod people were granted the privileges of border guardians. These privileges were granted to them by the Czech kings as a reward for protecting the country's borders. They thus became a privileged group: they had the right to bear arms, were exempt from certain duties and taxes, and above all were guaranteed a certain degree of self-government. These privileges shaped their strong regional identity and self-confidence for centuries.

A major turning point came in the 17th century, after the Thirty Years' War. The Lamingen family took over the Domažlice estate in this period. There was a significant conflict between the traditional rights of the Chod family and the new system of farming promoted by the nobility. Lamingen sought more efficient administration of his estates, which inevitably led to a suppression of the old Chod privileges and a growth in tension between the nobility and the Chods.

The dispute came to a head in 1695 with the execution of Jan Sladký Kozina, who had been at the forefront of the Chod resistance to the curtailment of their traditional rights. Kozina became a symbol of the struggle for justice and the preservation of the identity of the entire region. His execution had a profound impact on the local community and gradually became the basis of the myth of the struggle for rights and freedom. The traditional narrative of Kozina's prophecy of Lomikar's death ('Within a year and a day') became an important part of the folk rendition of the story.

Transformations of Koznia's image in collective memory

The image of Jan Sladký Kozina has undergone a remarkable transformation over the centuries. His figure has been interpreted in different ways depending on the social and political context of each historical period. These changes reflect how the values, needs and ideals of Czech society have changed.

The fundamental change in the perception of the whole story came in the 19th century, when the conflict was taken up by the literature of the national revival. A key moment was the adaptation of the story by Alois Jirásek in his novel Psohlavci (The Dog-Headed Men). Thanks to this work, the local story became a symbol of the national struggle against Germanisation and national oppression. Jirásek places the Chod conflict in the context of the national struggle, creating a powerful narrative that shapes Czech national self-confidence. The regional dispute thus becomes a national symbol of resistance against foreign domination. Jirásek portrays Kozina as a morally pure, brave and principled man who is not afraid to stand up to the powerful in defence of the rights of his people. This image perfectly suited the needs of the newly-formed Czech nation, which was looking for historical examples of resistance against foreign domination. Kozina is presented as a martyr for national rights, which resonated with the feelings of an oppressed nation within the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

After the rise of the communist regime in the 1950s, the image of Kozina underwent a further ideological transformation. In this period, Kozina is presented primarily as a symbol of class struggle. His story is interpreted by communist propaganda as a struggle of the oppressed against the exploiters and serves the ideological goals of the regime. Kozina's simple origins are emphasised and his conflict with the feudal upper class is interpreted within the Marxist conception of history as an inevitable clash of class interests. Kozina is portrayed as the forerunner of the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat against capitalist oppression. This simplistic interpretation was part of the regime's broader effort to rewrite history in accordance with official ideology.

The present brings a more comprehensive view of the personality of Jan Sladky Kozina, based on a critical approach to historical sources. Contemporary historiography rejects simplistic black-and-white interpretations and seeks a balanced assessment of historical events in their contemporary context. The current approach emphasises that Kozina was above all a representative of a specific regional community fighting for its traditional rights in a changing world. At the same time, it recognises that his story has a universal overlap and can serve as an example of the conflict between tradition and modernisation, between old and new concepts of social organisation. This comprehensive approach allows us to understand Kozina's story in its multilayered nature and find parallels with contemporary social challenges.

Lomikar – Transforming the image of the 'villain'

Wolf Maximilian Lamingen, known in popular tradition as Lomikar, is a remarkable example of how the image of a historical figure in collective memory can change over time. From an unambiguously negative image of a cruel oppressor, we gradually move towards a more comprehensive view of a man who was significantly influenced by a number of turbulent economic and social changes.

In traditional folklore, and subsequently in 19th century literature, Lomikar was portrayed as the archetype of the cruel feudal lord without any positive qualities. In folk tales and works of art he is portrayed as a ruthless oppressor who

abuses his power against the common people and is greedy, unscrupulous and cruel.

This negative image was further reinforced by Jirásek's literary works, where Lomikar appears as a typical antagonist, the personification of foreign domination and oppression. Folk tradition attributes a supernatural end to him as punishment for his sins – according to legend, he died exactly one year and one day after Kozina's execution, as the condemned had predicted. This legend further reinforced the perception of Lomikar as a villain who received a just punishment.

The present offers a considerably more balanced view of the personality of Wolf Maximilian Lamingen. His actions are set in the context of the economic and social changes of the 17th century, when the administration of the manor was being modernised and the changes he advocated were part of the wider economic and administrative reforms taking place across central Europe. From this perspective, Lomikar was not motivated by personal grudges against the Chods, but by his economic interests and his desire for efficient estate management. The conflict with the Chods was not primarily a personal clash, but part of a wider process of centralisation of power and reorganisation of the feudal economy after the Thirty Years' War. This interpretation does not undermine Kozina's resistance, but places it in a more complex historical framework.

His figure illustrates the inevitable clash between progress and tradition, between the old and the new order of things, that has accompanied human history through the centuries. This interpretation does not defend Lomikar's methods or deny the suffering his policies caused the Chods. It does, however, offer a more comprehensive view that goes beyond the simplistic category of 'villain' and allows us to view historical events as a clash of legitimate but mutually incompatible interests and values. Lomikar thus becomes not only a historical figure but also a symbol of the inevitable conflicts that accompany the modernisation of society.

Values in the changes of time

The story of Jan Sladký Kozina and Wolf Maxmilián Lamingen is a valuable source for understanding how the perception of basic social values changes over time. The values that were at the heart of the 17th-century Chod dispute have taken on different meanings and interpretations in different historical periods, reflecting changes in society and its priorities.

Freedom

The concept of freedom has undergone a significant transformation in the context of the Chod story. For the Chods themselves in the 17th century, freedom meant, above all, the preservation of their specific rights and privileges that had shaped their collective identity for centuries. This freedom had a distinctly collective character – it was the freedom of an entire community defined by a set of privileges and obligations to the ruler.

In the 19th century, during the period of national revival, freedom took on a distinctly national dimension in the interpretation of the story. The freedom of Chod became a metaphor for the freedom of the entire Czech nation within the Habsburg monarchy. This shift reflected the growing national awareness and desire for national emancipation. During the communist period, freedom was interpreted primarily as liberation from class oppression and economic exploitation.

In contemporary society, in the context of the story of the Chods, freedom is seen in a much more individualistic way – as the right to personal freedom, self-determination and the preservation of cultural identity in a globalised

world. This shift reflects a broader societal emphasis on individual rights and plurality of identities in modern democratic societies.

Justice

The concept of justice has also changed significantly over the centuries. For the Chods, justice originally meant first and foremost respect for traditional rights and royal privileges – it was justice based on respect for the historically established legal framework and on keeping one's word.
In later interpretations, especially during the socialist period, justice in the story of the Chods was understood primarily as social justice – the fair distribution of wealth and the elimination of class distinctions. In contemporary interpretations, the concept of justice encompasses a much broader range of values, including issues of equal opportunity, respect for difference, and recognition of a plurality of legitimate interests.

Courage

Courage as a value has also undergone an interesting evolution. In the original context, the courage of Kozina and his comrades was seen primarily as physical bravery in the struggle for community rights – the ability to stand up to the odds and risk one's own life. In the national revival, this courage was extended sufficiently to stand up to oppression and defend national interests in the face of adversity.

Today, the concept of courage in the context of the Chod story includes the moral courage to publicly stand up for one's values in the face of social pressure, the ability to think critically and to challenge simplistic narratives. This shift reflects the growing emphasis on critical thinking and moral integrity in modern society.

Tradition

The relationship to tradition is another value that has undergone a significant transformation. For the Chods themselves, tradition was the basis of their collective identity – their privileges, customs and way of life set them apart from their surroundings and gave them a sense of belonging and pride. Over time, tradition took on a national dimension in the interpretation of the story and became part of a broader narrative of Czech national identity.

In contemporary society, the relationship to tradition is much more complex – tradition is being re-evaluated in the context of sustainable development. It is not static, but a dynamically evolving entity that can be a source of inspiration in the search for answers to contemporary challenges. At the same time, the emphasis is on critically reassessing tradition and distinguishing between its positive and problematic aspects.

Art as a tool for forming collective memory

Works of art play a key role in the formation and transmission of collective memory of historical events. In the case of the story of Jan Sladký Kozina and Wolf Maxmilián Lamingen, artistic representations had a major influence on how several generations of Czechs perceived this historical event and the values and messages they found in it.

Alois Jirásek's novel, Psohlavci (The Dog-Headed Men), published in 1884, played a crucial role in shaping the image of Kozina and Lomikar in collective memory. Driven by the needs of the national revival, Jirásek emphasised the national aspect of the dispute in the novel and made Kozina an archetypal figure of a martyr for national rights. In his work, Jirásek masterfully works with the motif of moral victory despite physical defeat. Even though Kozina is executed, his spirit and legacy live on and his prediction of Lomikar's death comes true. This concept resonated perfectly with the needs of the Czech nation in the 19th century, which sought historical examples of resistance to

oppression. The novel became part of compulsory school reading, shaping perceptions of this historical event for more than a century. Significantly, Jirásek worked very loosely with historical sources, romanticising or adapting many aspects of the story to suit his narrative. In effect, he created a new, literary reality, but one that was accepted by the general public as historical truth. This phenomenon shows how powerful a tool literature can be in shaping collective memory.

The opera Psohlavci (The Dog-Headed Men) by J. B. Foerster, which premiered in 1898, contributed significantly to the further consolidation of Kozina's heroic image. This musical work, based on Jirásek's novel, further strengthened the emotional impact of the story and its national dimension. The connection between music, drama and the national story created an extremely powerful emotional experience that further cemented Kozina's place in the national pantheon of heroes.

The artworks inspired by the story of the Chods also contributed to the formation of collective memory. Illustrations of Jirásek's novel, the Kozina memorial in Újezd, and other artistic elaborations visualised the story and further consolidated its place in regional and national identity. These visual representations created concrete images and symbols that became part of cultural memory and allowed the general public to 'see' historical events that had taken place centuries before.

Folk tales and songs about the 'evil Lomikar' and his supernatural punishment also played an important role, shaping popular consciousness even before literary adaptation. These elements persist in regional folklore to this day and are an important part of local identity. Folk tradition thus provided a channel through which the story was spread among the common people, and at the same time created a foundation on which artists like Jirásek could build.

Modern interpretive tools: Thematic routes

Modern approaches to the interpretation of cultural heritage offer new ways to bring the historical story of Jan Sladký Kozina and Wolf Maximilian Lamingen to a contemporary audience. Thematic trails are one of the most effective tools to connect authentic places with the interpretation of historical events in a way that actively engages visitors and encourages critical thinking.

An educational trail in a mobile app, 'In the footsteps of Kozina and Lomikar', represents an innovative approach to the interpretation of this historical story. The trail physically connects authentic places associated with the story – from Kozina's farm in Újezd, to Trhanov, where Lomikar was based, to the sites of important clashes and negotiations. At each stop, different perspectives of the story are presented, including contemporary contexts and alternative interpretations of events.

A key aspect of this educational trail is that the visitor is encouraged to think actively about the story, rather than passively accepting a single 'official' version. The texts contain thought-provoking questions about different aspects of the conflict and offer different perspectives of historical figures from the same events. This linking of past and present includes topics such as the clash between tradition and modernisation, the conflict between individual and collective rights, the tension between economic development and the protection of cultural heritage, and questions of justice and legitimate authority. The interpretation shows that although the historical context has changed, many of the values and dilemmas that were central to the Chod dispute remain relevant to contemporary society.

Conclusion: The past as inspiration for the present

The story of Jan Sladký Kozina and Wolf Maximilian Lamingen (Lomikar) shows us that history is never black and white. A modern interpretation of this story helps us to understand the complexity of historical processes and offers a space to reflect on our own values and beliefs. Through innovative interpretive approaches, we can use this story as a tool to cultivate critical thinking and a deeper understanding of the conflicts of values in contemporary society.

An important aspect of this reflection is recognising the legitimacy of different perspectives and interests. Modern interpretation recognises that both Kozina and Lomikar acted in the context of their times and in accordance with what they considered right and legitimate. This recognition of the complexity of historical conflicts teaches us greater empathy and the ability to view contemporary social conflicts from different perspectives, a key skill for functioning in a pluralistic democratic society.

The story of the Chods, which took place more than three centuries ago, still contains themes and values that can inspire us in our search for answers to contemporary social challenges. Kozina's struggle to preserve cultural identity in a changing world resonates with today's issues of globalisation and cultural diversity. The conflict between economic efficiency, as represented by Lomikar, and traditional rights and ways of life, has parallels in contemporary debates on sustainable development and social justice.

The value of the courage to stand up for one's convictions in the face of adversity and the ability to seek moral victory in defeat is also an important message of the story. These values can be an inspiration to activists, reform movements, and individuals who seek positive change in their communities and society. The story shows us that even seemingly futile resistance can have a lasting impact and become a catalyst for future change.

A modern interpretation of the Chod story creates a space for dialogue about values across generations and different social groups. This dialogue allows us to explore how our understanding of core values – such as freedom, justice, courage and respect for tradition – change over time and in different social contexts. At the same time, it helps us to find common value foundations on which we can build mutual understanding despite our differences.

This dialogue of values is of particular importance in today's polarised society, where there is often no space for constructive discussion of value issues. Historical narrative can serve as a neutral ground on which we can explore different value perspectives without directly confronting the political conflicts of the day, and thus build bridges of understanding and empathy.

A fundamental contribution of the modern approach to the story of Kozina and Lomikar is the rejection of simplistic narratives in favour of a multifaceted view that recognises the legitimacy of different perspectives and the complexity of historical processes. This approach teaches us that history is not a simple story of heroes and villains, but a complex web of interrelated causes, decisions, and consequences that can only be fully understood when examined from multiple perspectives.

In this way, historical figures can transcend time and become guides in our search for answers to the eternal questions of justice, freedom and responsibility. Their story reminds us that these questions do not have simple and definitive

answers, but require constant reflection, dialogue and a willingness to see beyond simplistic categories of right and wrong. In this sense, the story of the Chods can not only act as a window into the past, but also a mirror in which we can better see ourselves and the society in which we live.

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The Romanian peasant symbolically immortalised in the traditional/ national costume

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Abstract

In Romania, as in many other European countries, especially those born from the experience of WWI, the peasant remains an almost mythological figure, often incarnating an ideal of purity and resilience. The peasant portrayed as national hero is a common rhetoric and is encountered quite frequently in Europe. For a range of historical circumstances, villagers used to be in close relation to tradition, making them a sort of repository of national identity and creating the perfect hero prototype, especially in times of transition (such as the aftermath of conflicts or political changes). However, the evocative power of this discourse and its enormous capacity for legitimisation also makes it subject to abuse and vulgarisation when used for political gain. Nonetheless, peasant is a word filled not only with glory and virtue, but also burdened with negative connotations more typical for villains than heroes. Often it is used as an insult bringing to mind misery, poverty, ignorance and illiteracy, lack of manners, scarcity and filth. Therefore, how do we cope with this tricky legacy in the post-heroic age?

Keywords

Romanian peasants, identity, national costume, culture, rhetoric, myth, heroes, post-heroic age

Main text

Engaging with the historical invention and recreation of heroes and villains, both with regard to the same character or antithetic heroic binaries, sheds light on the mythical figure of the Romanian peasant. The traditional costume as symbol of the Romanian peasant highlights how "heritage is inevitably more intangible a phenomenon than tangible, and yet that its intangibility needs to attach to something tangible in order to exist at all" (Carman 2009: 193). The process of content abstraction and transfer to the symbolical material culture that represents its essence showcases the transfer of value from real people to the character and from the character to the material and back to the people. This raises the question of why we still resort to the heroic/anti-heroic language in the post-heroic age? What kind of discourse does the heroic speech still legitimise and why do we still need such narrative? In the following pages we shall see how the heroic discourse can be used to create and give legitimacy to both social cohesion and dissonance.

The role of identity keeper attributed to the peasant is also a burden born from the metamorphosis of the contemporary European states and the currently trending international mentality. James J. Sheehan (Sheehan 2009: 248) states that Europe has become a non-war community whose citizens live in what Edward Luttwak has defined as the post-heroic age, motivated by private ambitions and individualistic desires. At the beginning of the 21st century, national defense (materially speaking) ceased to be a citizen's duty,

becoming a job reserved for professionals. However, these professional figures, although extremely necessary and even admirable, lacked that heroic dimension so marked in the rhetoric of the heroic age when the national master narratives were built.

In addition, the proliferation of the global mentality with its multiplication of identities, the promotion of pluralism and relativism brought along a marked need for an identity anchor leading once more straight to the peasant. For with this hero figure, at first glance, things were simple: it was sufficiently vast to gather consensus, sufficiently humble to avoid apologetic implications and sufficiently symbolic to gather scattered perceptions of national identity. That is because the peasant is mythical enough so as not to conflict with what we call memory, although at times the concept itself might conflict with history. Charles Maier warned about the excessiveness of collective self-indulgent memory that is likely to bring along inauthenticity, risking substituting the memory industry to history itself in the struggle to answer the great demand of memory legitimisation in contemporary times (Pavone 2009: 85).

In Romania, as in many other European countries, especially those born from the experience of WWI, the peasant remains an almost mythological figure often incarnating an ideal of purity and resilience. The peasant portrayed as national hero is a common rhetoric and appears quite frequently in identitarian discourses. The cause of this phenomenon lies in a series of historical circumstances that portrayed villagers as being in close relation to tradition, making them a sort of repository of national identity and creating the perfect hero prototype especially in times of transition, such as the aftermath of conflicts or political changes. However, when talking about the Romanian peasant in abstract terms, as an idealised figure, we must keep in mind the fact that this is the product of some mixed ideas and narratives, regardless of whether they are provided in the public discourse or if presented as a projection of the collective mind (Vasiliu 2021: 13). The Romanian peasant thus regarded as a common place of the national and social narrative simultaneously opened the door to interpretation, negotiation and re-creation.

When constructing the national rhetoric, every nation also builds its national ethos rooting its identity in the great deeds of its founding heroes. This brings forth a practice that is closely related not only to the need of remembering but also of interrogating the past in view of creating meaning in and for the present (Harvey 1989). For the largely rural countries that gained their independence at the end of World War I after the falling of the great empires, the peasant became an iconic figure, the prototype of ingenuity, purity of heart, faith, resilience, patriotism, hospitality, honor – becoming a legendary incarnation of the nation itself.

The epicentre of the Romanian national master narrative resides in the Great Romanian Union. As summarised in Roman (2020): "A hundred years ago most East European nations were agrarian societies and, as such, their whole existence revolved around the land. Romanian peasants conducted their lives in such communion with the land that, when conquered, they did not lose simply a means of existence but were deprived of a fundamental part of who they were. Ethnographic studies reveal the existence of a profound bound between rural communities and their lands, which made almost every activity they conducted a form of ritual that sacralised the work of the peasantry. The land, perceived as pater patriae, was a part of the nation alongside the people. Such aspects were faithfully reflected in all the declarations and resolutions adopted in occurrence of the Great Union and

were amongst the primary reasons that made the peasants of Transylvania reluctant to abandon their lands to join the Romanian Army and which animated the Romanian Army to fight to the death to defend national territory instead of adopting modern war techniques focused on the annihilation of the enemy's human resources. Despite the general tendency to filter history through the lens of present knowledge and beliefs when engaged in reading the past, it is worth remembering that at the time of the Great War people knew nothing about rights as we today perceive them. If it is true that the Romanians fought the war in the name of freedom and national rights, it is also true that for them all these notions became condensed in the re-appropriation of their ancestral land. In this regard it can be argued that, for countries such as Romania, WWI was truly the last land war as its most intimate cause appears to have been the land in itself, not as a resource but as a semi-personified entity that stood as a guarantor of what they deemed to be rightfully theirs: it personified their rights" (Roman 2020: 49).

Henceforth the peasant became the guardian of the land, incarnating the very identity of the nation. "In the life of other nations, the peasantry could have, and had, a secondary, erased role; for us, however, it is the source of Romanianism ... For us, the only permanent, unalterable reality was and remains the peasant. The word itself is of urban origin... The peasant never calls himself a peasant. ... But the peasants call the peasants, simply, people. In fact, the peasant has no name because he is neither a class, nor a guild, nor a function, but the people themselves. [...] The peasant does not leave either willingly or out of necessity. He has nowhere to move his poverty, because, torn from his land, he would be condemned to perish ... He feels conceived and born from this land ... Thus, the destiny of the land that gave birth and raised us also had to command the destiny of the development of our nation" (Rebreanu 1940).

From the dawn of time every known community has been building its identity starting from the heroes-villains dichotomy. For it was the praising of one's qualities in contrast to the peculiarities of the utterly other that instilled in the people the sense of identity, of their own value and unicity to such a degree as to become persuasive of being worth fighting and dying for. Heroes, who ought to be remembered, are a socio-cultural creation, whose valences derive from the purpose they serve in the socio-political discourse of various regimes. George L. Mosse states that every revolution creates new political features, new myths and rites and knows how to adapt old traditions to new purposes by inventing new celebrations, new customs and cults meant to become the new tradition (Mosse, 1975). Therefore, the evocative power of this discourse and its enormous capacity for legitimisation also makes it potentially open to abuse and vulgarisation when used for political gain. "The mythical symbolism conducts to an objectification of feelings; myth objectifies and organizes human hopes and fears and metamorphosizes them into persistent and durable" (Bidney, 1958: 14). And so it follows that 'peasant' is a word filled not only with glory and virtue, but also burdened with negative connotations more typical for villains than heroes. When used as opposed to the condition of the urban man it mainly functions as an insult bringing to mind misery, poverty, ignorance and illiteracy, lack of manners, scarcity and filth. Therefore, we need to question how to cope with this tricky legacy in the world of the self-made man, where we take responsibility for what we are, we carry the burden of constantly constructing the best versions of ourselves and where destiny is nothing more than a series of self-operated choices.

Factually, the mythical peasant and his world are long gone since social evolution happened in rural areas as well, leaving behind only its legacy, symbolically immortalised in the traditional costume. In a way, the peasantry virtues gained further social relevance once the traditional lifestyle centered on community and tradition became a nostalgically romanticised snapshot of the past. However, the "data of the current world send, not infrequently, the Romanian peasant into anachronism. In a kind of out-of-dateness that makes us represent the idea of a peasant as meaningless in the contemporary world. A stray of history, a remnant of a peasant culture that is on the way to extinction" (Vasiliu 2021: 16). The peasant and his world mutated into cultural heritage as inheritance of a past world that narrates a story about socio-political contexts, cultural identity and ways of living, belonging and resilience. The conversion of social into cultural shifts the discourse from being to meaning, hence overshadowing the need to know what the material culture is in favor of what it means, nuancing the significance of the things we now call heritage.

"The assignment of roles and statuses for the peasant had, at the level of representation, a deep symbolic charge. In other words, we are facing a whole process of symbolic falsification of the peasant and the rural man. And contemporaneity is the one that fully feels this process of misappropriation of representation, especially since […] the conflict between tradition and modernization is felt more and more acutely. Thus, we perceive the farmer as the keeper par excellence of traditions and traditional values. A living museum, as we like to say, of country life. Symbolically oversized, the rural world becomes a kind of chest in which concepts, ideas, values, discourses, images, desires, and objects related to our traditional identity are kept forever and ever, with significant effects on our idea of patrimonialization of the Romanian national identity and culture" (Vasiliu 2021: 28).

Nationalistic master narratives were engaged to ideate, shape and authorise public interpretations of historical features perceived to be of such great importance as to be mass celebrated (Anderson, 1983: 116). By rethinking the assessment of meanings and values the memory phenomenon became a catalyst of social and cultural movements, bringing about the advent of the memory boom and of the memory industry in the last decade of the 20th century (Rosenfeld 2009: 124-125). The first notion refers to the multiplication of public narratives of the past, while the second iterates the study of the controversies raised by the claim of appropriation and interpretation of the past. In response to the proliferation of modern life's sense of loss and of the assets of globalisation, which dangerously impended upon people by threatening to silence forever their yet unspoken accounts of the past, the "upsurge of memory" prospered (Nora 2002).

As a consequence, concurrent histories amounted to "unmastered pasts" (Rosenfeld 2009: 126-127) struggling to mirror plural identities even if at times they also brought about conflict instigation, by surfacing irreconcilable stories and highlighting rivalry legacies within society or amongst societies, in a vivid display of memory and counter-memory (Legg, 2005).

However, such issues manifested more in urban settings leaving the rural world, where tradition ruled sovereign, mostly untouched for a long time. That is because pluralism in terms of identity is more common in urban settings than in the rural world, often nuancing the connotations of nationalism. "In counter tendency, the fact of being quintessentially Romanian finds a favorable space especially in the rural worlds, where […] the identity is felt

more culturally than politically or socially. And it is strengthened by certain cognitive reports such as: the feeling of property possession (much more meaningful for the rural man), the feeling of community belonging, the feeling of integration in a religious denomination, the feeling of belonging to a certain history or to certain traditions. And here a very important problem arises. At the level of representation, the idea of Romanianism, understood especially in its cultural dimension, is projected on the image of the rural man. And especially on the image of the Romanian peasant, imbued with authenticity, goodness, exceptionality and originality. We often bring very close together ideas such as those of homeland, patriotism, people, **peasant**, country" (Vasiliu 2021: 51).

The contemporary battle over meaning not only relates to heritage, identity, justifications of power or authority at different levels, briefly with the creation of present value systems designed to shape the future, but also with the re-creation of the past to fit such aims. Mario Isnenghi tackles the delicate task of dealing with the invention of traditions by means of politics. He highlights how the state control of the memory process has the power to manage the perception and representation of the past or better of some of the versions of the past in an interplay of remembrance and oblivion. The delicate balance of remembering and forgetting instills the measure of the public usage of memory. At different times, this memory highlights different aspects of our identity—who we are, where we come from, and hence where we are going (Isnenghi 2010). From this perspective, we can better understand the identity discussions during the age of the -isms (such as nationalism, socialism, fascism) and understand the social motivations that enabled these movements to emerge. For instance, "nationalism had promised to re-establish order and respect for immutable values and to establish clear distinctions between what is acceptable and inacceptable, instituting conduct lines based on which man and woman could model their existence to escape confusion" (Mosse 1980). But in the world of the traditional village, guidelines were always in place and there was never space for confusion. The world of traditional communities was populated with myths, legends, faith and beliefs which defined the very being of the peasant.

This dimension of the beliefs systems that founded the very basis of tradition were often translated into the symbols that used to adorn the traditional costume. Hence, the traditional costume becomes more than an object amounting to a veritable place of remembrance and heritage. The symbols were not just ornaments; they were embellishments of body and soul, omens, identity brands, status markers. The people of old rural communities might have been uneducated according to today's standards but they had a rich, vibrant spiritual and cultural universe filled with wisdom, imagination, a sense of belonging, creative genius and social resilience. And it was that specific kind of cultural identity that gave birth to the traditional costume, that traditional costume in time became the very symbol of the long-past Romanian peasant – the brave, the faithful, the just, the virtuous – the national hero.

As all modern superheroes, this superhero is also not just aided by his costume but in the post-heroic age he is actually built by it, for it is the costume that instills power to the character. It is like the magical costume has the power to embed virtue into whoever wears it, rendering them alike the mythical peasant it portrays. This brings otherwise widely forgotten features of the past to life and makes them actively matter in the present (Gillis 1994). The costume evokes the hero, making the wearer inhabit the virtues of the ancestor. The costume is like a magical portal that ties together people through the ages, like a charmed thread that courses

through time from generation to generation in a dance of belonging, recreating the essence of the pure and the wise – the peasant. The mighty shadow of the Romanian peasant transforms the wearer into a thing/being of beauty, a bearer of value, a perennial treasure of the past. The costume is always just right for the wearer, be it young, old, short, tall, thin or plump, it forever fits all shapes, all forms, all ages, all genders, rendering whoever wears it simply remarkable.

The traditional costume is one of the most important manifestations of traditional culture, the result of the creative effort of a whole community and a real identity brand. In traditional spirituality, the ornaments that used to decorate the costumes are not just decorative signs, but they have a much deeper spiritual meaning and play a protective role for the person wearing the clothing item. The symbols embroidered on traditional costumes embody the identity of the people in a mixture of sacred and mundane, faith and superstitions, creative genius and practical functions. They reflect a way of living marked by wisdom and efficiency that relied on making the best out of what one has, narrating a tale of resilience, continuance and survival, love, faith, strong intergenerational bonds and profound communion with nature. The costume embodies the legacy of the peasant, a legacy that is often the very core of the national master narrative.

"The Romanian peasant preserved and shaped in his image and likeness, the faith in God. From old superstitions, from remnants of ancient beliefs transformed and adapted, from dogmas and Christian precepts, he made a specific religion, a deep amalgam of Christianity and paganism. This religion, like a supreme Romanian law is unique for our entire nation, beyond all theological controversies. It summarizes the Romanian peasant's conception of life, his resignation and trust in divine justice. As strange and sad as it may seem, adapting to poverty, along with all its consequences, was a vital necessity for the Romanian people. Otherwise they would not have been able to endure life and would have crumbled and melted among the other nations. Locking himself in poverty as in an indestructible cage, the peasant singularized himself and was able to develop his specific qualities, to acquire a special national physiognomy. Poor life does not exclude spiritual wealth. The poor is closer to his soul than the rich and has more need for beauty, which, transfiguring reality becomes a source of hope and comfort. Our folklore, in all its manifestations, is the creation of poor people, which does not prevent it from being more valuable and richer than that of many nations living in abundance" (Rebreanu 1940).

Collective memory raised a shield against alienation of the past and, with it, alienation of identity, by acting to make the past count in the present (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 40). The lieux de mémoire operate to fill a void created by the absence of the social environments of memory in order to regain access to a past world out of which we were banished by time (Nora, 1996, p.12). The collective memories were relegated as a phenomenon of national level, cultivated by states so as to sustain internal cohesion (Benedict, 1991) due to the fact that they were heavily dependent upon memory and myth as pillars of collective identity (Smith, 1986, p.2). The same discourse applies to other scales as well, such as that of universal level, which like nationalism requires cohesion to be built with the aid of a master narrative. Casey argues that the main source of memory is not primarily found within the binaries of body and mind but rather in an intersubjective core dimension of social, collective, cultural and public consciousness (Casey, 2000). Hence social and cultural mechanisms exercise a marked influence on memory holding a remarkable capacity of memory stimulation or inhibition (Kirmayer, 1996). The various remembrance

trends are indicative of such capacity and can be easily spotted in the creation of historical self-awareness, which is subject to a process of filtration of a past that established who, what and how it is remembered. However, what is remembered and how is a particularly marked prerogative of cultural heritage. Approaching heritage from a value based interpretive perspective fosters the understanding of how the past can empower the present but this also brings about critiques which call into question the servitude of heritage to the empowerment and justification of social regimes and identity claims (Dirks 1990; Harvey, 2000; Waterton, 2010).

The decline of the great -isms of modernity created an empty space in identity discourses. The subsequent depreciation of national master narratives left room for fragmentation, plurality, difference, multiplication, polymorphism and, above all, for instability (Janowitz 1991). Henceforth the essence of the post-modern condition is precisely the denial of ultimate, universal and eternal values. Societies today lack unitary goals, and social structures have plural beliefs systems, aspirations and ideals. And this is exactly why heroic narratives still absolve a fundamental social function. The creation of value systems in the present, to underpin forging the future, requires a re-creation of the past in line with the characteristics of today's societies. In such circumstances the memory phenomenon becomes a catalyst of social and cultural movements. Re-invention of the past is characteristic of all power structures, be they national or supranational, because such structures need to sustain a viable master narrative to assure social cohesion.

In response, and through their battles over meaning, societies and communities have mobilised memory to protect identity, which can otherwise be so easily eroded as the past is forgotten and local culture is lost in the multiple re-tellings of history. Nonetheless, the heroic image of the peasant still helps capture the heart of the national narrative, while the costume - as its symbol - still brings together scattered identities and helps unite dissonant memories.

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Heritage interpretation for biodiversity – Time for a European knowledge boost for nature

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Abstract

At the conference, the Swedish Centre for Nature Interpretation presented the 'Nature boost' – a broad national collaboration initiative to gather and strengthen actors who communicate the value of nature and biological diversity. To develop together, develop communication together and create more and better initiatives to increase knowledge, engagement and activity for nature in all sectors of society – contributing to the goals of the Global Biodiversity Framework.

In a workshop, we discussed how collaborative and collegial learning can strengthen interpreters to communicate the value of biodiversity, and how heritage interpretation can contribute and offer arenas for biodiversity communication. We shared examples and discussed opportunities and challenges for Interpret Europe to work on this together.

Keywords

Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, nature interpretation, heritage interpretation, global rescue plan for biodiversity, Convention on Biological Diversity, EU nature restoration law, nature boost, human-nature relationships, Sustainable Development Goals, Swedish Centre for Nature Interpretation

Right now, in the spring of 2025, all European countries are preparing national plans on how to halt the escalating loss of biodiversity, AKA the nature crisis. This is part of a very ambitious but also encouraging plan. A plan that gives hope, in contrast to the large-scale bad news when it comes to climate change, war and conflict of our time. According to the UN rescue plan for biodiversity (The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework from 2022): By 2030, 30% of degraded land and water areas globally must be restored and another 30% will be formally protected. The mission is that in 2050 humankind will live in harmony with nature again. This is maybe also one of the most important missions for heritage interpretation of our time.

All the sites that heritage interpreters invite visitors to discover are in some way connected to the surrounding landscape. No matter if the site is a wetland centre or an art museum. The stories of human-nature relationships and how we are dependent on healthy ecosystems and a just transition to sustainable lives (in line with Agenda 2030 and the Global rescue plan for biodiversity) are relevant and can be told and discussed everywhere. Especially change and solutions that can be observed first-hand in our landscapes are good starters for conversation.

The rescue plan for biodiversity – and humanity – has 23 targets. To reach the targets, communication is key. Target 21 reads, "Ensure that data and knowledge are available and accessible to guide biodiversity action". An important task waiting for all heritage interpreters. To communicate broadly in society, what is happening when species, genetic

diversity and ecosystems disappear, explain the contexts, reasons, what needs to be done, and what measures can be taken.

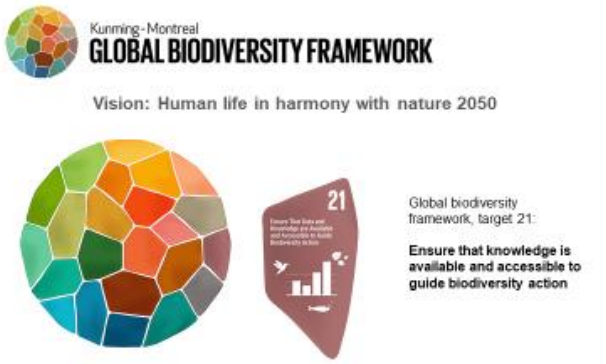

Image 1. "Ensure That Data and Knowledge are Available and Accessible to Guide Biodiversity Action" (Target 21 – The Biodiversity Plan – For Life on Earth. The New Division for CBD/UNEP-www.biodiversityplan.org/target-21)

Each single panel telling the stories of protected nature in a national park, every guided tour in a UNSECO Geopark, or dialogue between stakeholders in a wetland restoration project, might attract limited attention and impact from participants. However, we know that the communication that happens really can make a difference and lead to conversations around dinner tables, in schools, companies and in parliaments. The voices and actions of nature interpreters in combination with first-hand experiences are more important than ever in a time with an increasing sense of insecurity and escalating human conflicts in combination with the threat of climate change and our impact on the natural world.

How can you support the Global Action Plan for Biodiversity? With communication!

- Get informed – What is happening in your area? How can your site communicate the human-nature relationship? How has your landscape changed with climate change? Site-specific historic data, for example when migrating birds arrive or when flowers bloom, can be used and compared with the situation today.
- Use the Global Biodiversity plan logo, brand your local activity and contribute to the global movement from the experiences in the landscape you live in Targets — The Biodiversity Plan - For Life on Earth (www.biodiversityplan.org/targets).
- Talk about the EU nature restoration law, and the action following from that.
- Develop how you work with communication on biodiversity with the help of colleagues.
- Support and share what others do to increase the accessibility of all of our work.
- Get inspired – There are many good examples, such as collaboration with artists and citizen science that contributes with data and experiences.

Image 2. 'Count on change' – an outdoor exhibition in Tåkern Naturum Visitor Centre based on historic and current observations. The numbers as seen in this picture represent change. In this case, how many days earlier on average the crane arrives to the area compared to one hundred years ago. (Image: Naturum Tåkern)

Heritage interpretation can be part of an international movement to put focus on the effect of long-time exploitation of our landscapes at the cost of fellow species, ecosystems, ecosystem services (as we call the benefits of all life-supporting systems that surround us and which we often take for granted), and the future of coming generations. We can explain how we are connected with the natural world and what is happening now, both in our everyday surroundings and far away. We can be representatives of hope and good examples of action and not least how to take positive action.

Heritage interpreters from cultural and natural heritage sites can work together and develop our means of communication of the diverse perspectives of human nature connection, traditional knowledge and biodiversity loss. Activities and programmes on this theme are urgently needed to contribute to the vision of humanity living in harmony with nature 2050. That plan and that vision can be a lighthouse for the action needed. Interpretation can make a difference both locally and globally.

The search for the universal 'mothering soul' through the story of one motherless mother – An interpretation of motherhood at Bokrijk Open-Air Museum

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Abstract

The open-air museum Bokrijk is re-inventing its way to connect with visitors. In a new permanent exhibition, we challenge visitors to explore the meaning of the 'mothering soul.' We take as our starting point the microhistory of Magda Horvath's life story. Motherhood was a central theme in Magda's life, a topic that resonates with everyone. At the very least, we all have a mother who brought us into this world. The museum faces several challenging questions: Magda was a person with admirable traits but also shortcomings. How do we place her at the centre without turning her into a hero? Conversely, how do we portray her difficult relationship with her stepchildren without making her a villain? And how do we ensure that today's visitors can identify with the story and be touched by its universal theme? Even for visitors for whom the connection with the concept of motherhood is not easy: men, childless women, people with a strained relationship with their own mother.

Keywords

heritage interpretation, mothering soul, motherhood, reflection, dialogue

Background

At Bokrijk Open-Air Museum, interpretation is not only about the past—it's also about the universal themes that continue to shape our human experience. In this article, we share how the story of Magda Horváth inspired a new exhibition, 'Mothering Soul', which opened on 11 May 2025. The project invites reflection on caregiving, resilience, and the complexity of human relationships, through the lens of one woman's extraordinary yet deeply relatable life.

A farmhouse, a life, and the birth of a universal theme

Bokrijk Open-Air Museum houses a unique mix of heritage: 124 historical buildings (built heritage), approximately 40,000 objects (movable heritage), crafts and rituals (intangible heritage), natural heritage (trees and plants), and living heritage (historic animal breeds). Over the past ten years, all 124 buildings have been carefully restored. After restoration, we assess for each building how it might be reimagined. Some are historically furnished to reflect a certain time period; others serve as spaces for contemporary exhibitions. Craft locations offer room for demonstrations and workshops.

One of the buildings we aimed to reinterpret by spring 2025 is the long-gabled farmhouse from Helchteren, which was relocated to Bokrijk in 1955. As always, our first step was to dive into

the building's residential history. That led us to the remarkable story of Magda Horváth.

Magda lived in the farmhouse from 1936 until 1945, aged 22 to 31. Her life reads like a dramatic film—one marked by hardship and adversity. In 1927, at nearly 13, Magda came from Hungary to Belgium to regain her strength. Hungary was suffering from post-WWI poverty and famine, and Magda's family was severely affected.

Image 1. Magda's original passport from 1914 when she came from Hungary to Belgium with one of the Hungarian Children's trains (Document in private collection of the Hermans family)

Shortly after her departure, her mother passed away. Magda remained in Belgium. After years in a foster family where she faced exploitation and harsh treatment, she eventually married the love of her life, Toon Lemmens. She moved in with him—into the very farmhouse now standing in Bokrijk. They soon had two children. When Magda was pregnant with their second child, Toon died in a workplace accident. She was left alone with two small children and the care of Toon's mother and uncle, who lived with them. In 1939, her youngest sister joined the household, as their father in Hungary could no longer care for her.

Image 2. Magda Horvath (wearing glasses) with her mother-in-law Roos, the uncle of her first husband Helm, her sister Margrit and her two oldest sons, Henri and Toon, in front of the long gable farmhouse (Photograph in private collection of the Hermans family)

In 1940, Belgium was caught in the turmoil of WWII, and Magda faced grim years. In 1945, she remarried at the urging of the village priest—this time to local baker Eugène Hermans, a widower with three children. He needed a mother for his children; she was a single mother without income. It was a practical solution. Together, they had five more children and many grandchildren. Magda lived to a ripe old age.

Magda's youth was harsh and her life full of trials. Yet one theme stood out to us in her story: motherhood.

- She lost her mother at age 12
- She had a close bond with her grandmother
- She grew up in a foster family
- She was a single mother and a widow
- She cared for her elderly in-laws
- She took responsibility for her younger sister
- She lived in a blended family with three 'types' of children—ten in total
- Her strength, she once said in testimony to her son at age 75, came from being a mother
- Her sons have become ambassadors for her story—writing books, plays, and urging Bokrijk to share it

Motherhood was clearly the *file rouge* in Magda's story. But this universal theme—one everyone can relate to in some way, even if only because we all come into the world through a mother—posed a challenge for us.

How could we ensure the theme resonated broadly? Some visitors may experience motherhood as a painful subject. Others may feel disconnected from it—men, people without children, those who have lost a child or their mother, or those who had difficult maternal relationships.

We felt the need to broaden the theme and make it more meaningful. That's how we landed on the Dutch expression 'moederziel alleen'—meaning utterly alone, so alone you don't even have a mother. The expression inspired our focus on mothering soul.

The term mothering soul evokes feelings and a caring posture. We deliberately chose the word mothering soul over a mother's soul, inspired by feminist scholar Sara Ruddick, who argued that anyone can 'mother'. According to her, mothering involves three core actions:

- Preservative love – protecting and preserving someone
- Fostering growth – nurturing development
- Social training – helping someone become part of society

You don't need to be a biological mother to have a mothering soul.

Having taken the mothering soul as our universal theme, a lot of questions arose: How did Magda Horváth embody her own mothering soul? How did she develop it without having had a warm mother figure herself? Does everyone have a mothering soul? What happens if you grow up without mothering souls around you? What does it mean for someone with a mothering soul to be unable to have children? How can we nourish our mothering souls—within ourselves and within our communities?

And then, in the process of making the exhibition, the project team decided: what if, instead of offering answers, we simply let visitors reflect?

A layered exhibition that resonates deeply with both visitors and staff

In the grounds around the farmhouse, visitors first encounter evocative elements to help set the tone. Historic photos of Magda and her children are paired with reflective questions, such as:

"Being cared for or caring for someone—what does that feel like?"
"How do you nourish a mothering soul?"
"Happy parents, happy children?"
"Mothers offer comfort—can a pet do the same?"

Inside the house, the exhibition unfolds in three parts.

1. In search of Magda's mothering soul

In the old living quarters, we explore Magda's mothering soul. You might wonder if she was a saint? She seemed to be a guardian angel to many: her sons, in-laws, sister, stepchildren, grandchildren. Her sons' eagerness to share her story borders on devotion.

But history is more layered. From interviews with her sons and one of her stepdaughters, we also heard:

"Magda was extremely strict and treated her stepchildren very harshly at times."
"She was a very anxious mother—we weren't allowed anything."
"There was a lot of tension at home. I was glad to return to boarding school on Sundays."

Reality, as always, is complex. Magda was a strict, anxious mother who could be hard at

times for the children in her care. Yet her sons also expressed deep understanding:

"She was just being overprotective because of her own childhood."

"She ran the household without help, worked incredibly hard. Still, we had hot meals and clean clothes every day. It's amazing how she managed."

Image 3. The timeline of Magda's life in the space, 'In search of Magda's mothering soul' (Image: Bokrijk Open-Air Museum)

Magda was neither saint nor tyrant. She was a woman of flesh and blood with a heavy burden. Human lives are layered. The human experience is layered. Relationships are layered. And our exhibition creates space for this complexity. We also recognise that perceptions of motherhood have changed over time—what it meant in 1927, 1945 or 1955 is not what it means in 2025. We must avoid interpreting Magda's life solely through today's lens.

That's why we offer context and perspective. In short videos and audio fragments, experts reflect on Magda's story: child psychiatrist and trauma expert Peter Adriaenssens, cultural psychologist Joanna Wojtkowiak, and historian Vera Hajto. They dwell on questions like:
What can we learn from Magda's story today? Why is it important to know what our ancestors lived through? What does mothering look like in blended families and is it different from mothering in nuclear families? How does childhood trauma affect one's own mothering? How has our view of motherhood changed throughout the 20th and 21st centuries?

2. The Mothering Soul Triptych

In the barn of the farmhouse, we created an video installation in collaboration with renowned human-interest photographer Lieve Blancquaert. We called it the Mothering Soul Triptych. The visitor sees three portraits side by side, all of the same person. The middle portrait rotates, alternating with other images of that same individual. As the image changes, the visitor hears a short monologue, spoken by the person they see in the middle, lasting between one and three minutes, in which that person shares their personal story connected with the theme mothering soul. When the story ends, the portraits shift: the right portrait disappears, the middle moves to the right, the left becomes the new centre and a new portrait appears on the right screen.

Image 4. The Mothering Soul Triptych in the exhibition Mothering Soul (Image: Bokrijk Open-Air Museum)

A total of 54 stories can be heard; stories from women, men, young and old, people from across Flanders, and those with migration backgrounds. They speak not in facts, but in meaning.

- Djamila speaks of how her children's love gave her strength during cancer treatment.

- Helmine processed her grandson's illness through volunteer work in a refugee camp.
- Hassan fled Gaza and does not know if he'll see his mother again.
- Jens is raising his son alone and battles stereotypes about male caregivers.
- Heidi says her husband Timo has a greater mothering soul than she does.
- Luna found warmth in a foster family.
- Brigitte supported her daughter through end-of-life care after choosing euthanasia due to unbearable suffering.
- Frank recalls how his grandmother's love gave him strength.
- Lutgarde, now 83, fostered over 150 children in her lifetime.
- and many more…

Three minutes reveals one story. Ten minutes gives you four. In half an hour, you've heard ten. Visitors tend to stay longer—and leave touched.

Image 5. 54 witnesses share their story (Image: Bokrijk Open-Air Museum)

3. The Participatory Space

The final section of the exhibition is an invitation. On the wall of that space, the question:
"What does mothering soul mean to you?"

Visitors can write or draw their response on paper hands and hang them in an installation for others to read. They may share a message for the mothers in their lives, for their children, or simply reflect on the main question. Those needing inspiration can listen to our three experts share what the term mothering soul means to them, personally.

Image 6. The participatory space in the exhibition – the experts give their answer to the question, What does mothering soul mean to you? (Image: Bokrijk Open-Air Museum)

Image 7. Messages from visitors in the participatory space of the exhibition (Image: Bokrijk Open-Air Museum)

Mothering soul as a lens for reflection and connection

The story of Magda Horváth is both extraordinary and deeply human. She was no villain, but neither was she a saint. She was a complex person shaped by hardship, love, and duty—like so many of us. Through her life, the exhibition explores not only what it means to care, to endure, and to carry others, but also how the instinct to 'mother' lives in many forms. Mothering soul becomes a lens through which we can reflect on relationships, resilience, and belonging. A starting point for meeting each other and dialogue. This is not an exhibition that hands you the answers. It creates space—for doubt, for emotion, for complexity.

The exhibition will run for a couple of years in Bokrijk. If you are able to visit, I would love to hear what the visit means to you, what you take away from it. For now, let's just end with a single, open-ended question: What does mothering soul mean to you?

The dead are very near – Stories of Irish heroes, anti-heroes and villains

Teresa Josephine Sweeney Meade (Ireland)

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Abstract

A number of almost-forgotten stories of the dead and their resting places are explored through their association with significant historical settings in Ireland. This paper is a review of selected sites and a consideration of associated characters, all deceased, who are either buried, or commemorated there. The aim is to understand them in the context of heroism, anti-heroism and villainy and consider opportunities for presentation of their stories in different ways today. By reviewing the site itself as the key to unlocking a more tangible experience, an intensified, sensory interpretation is asserted to be possible. Five case studies will be examined to review the narratives constructed about them by the public, site custodians, educators, popular culture, and academics. Unseen and unsung elements of their heroic, anti-heroic or villainous stories will be presented, in order to re-evaluate them within the context of their societal collective memory. This paper asserts that these sites and characters demand a reinterpretation of their past heroes, anti-heroes and villains, which here presents an argument and opportunity to view them differently.

Keywords

boundary work, collective memory, collective remembering, new cultural history, cosmology, genius loci, diachronic integrity

Introduction

This paper focuses on five diverse, culturally significant case studies, exploring their multi-layered, heroic, anti-heroic and villainous stories. All the considered sites are in Ireland, but have links to other countries across Europe (see Figure 1 overleaf).

The first and last sites considered are connected by the River Boyne, which act as bookends to frame these stories. These places are local to and known by the author. By taking these two very different historic sites, the Brú na Bóinne funerary landscape and the Duke of Wellington Monument, there was an opportunity to rethink how sites and heroes, anti-heroes and villains are sometimes connected by shared elements bridging across wide spans of time. The statue of the Duke of Wellington is located prominently in the town of Trim, through which the River Boyne flows. The five featured case studies are located at Brú na Bóinne, County Meath, St. Mary's Collegiate Church, Gowran, County Kilkenny, two Glasnevin Cemetery Sites, located in Dublin City and a final one in Trim, County Meath.

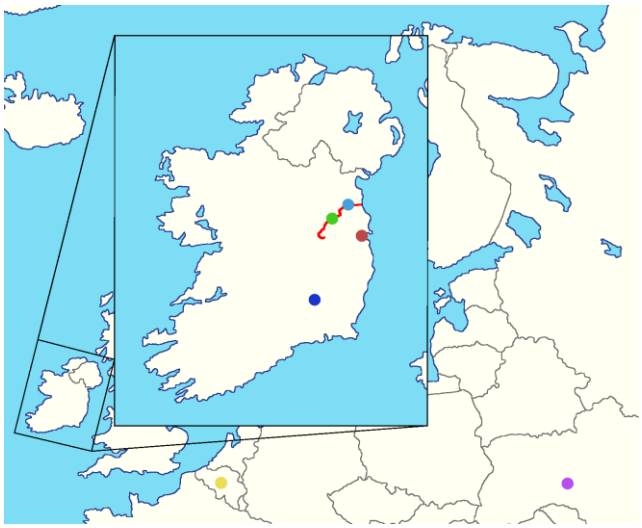

Figure 1. Ireland and Europe: Locations of sites mentioned in this paper (Not to scale) (Map design: Cormac Sweeney Meade)

Key
In Ireland:
Green dot - Trim
Light Blue dot - World Heritage Site of Brú na Bóinne
Dark Red dot - Glasnevin, Dublin
Dark Blue Dot - Gowran, Co. Kilkenny
Red line - River Boyne, Co. Meath, Ireland

In Continental Europe:
Yellow Dot - Battle of Waterloo Site, Belgium
Purple Dot - Zywotow, Malpolska Province [now located in Ukraine]

Two National Monuments[22] sites in Ireland, as well as two case studies at the National Cemetery at Glasnevin, Dublin and a Corinthian Column in Trim are the main subject sites of this paper. Interpretative aspects are considered briefly in the context of the study of the heroes, anti-heroes and villains of the past and how we might rethink the way we perceive them. The timeframe across these sites ranges from 3,200 BC to the early 1900s. The first site is the resting place of the ancient dead at Brú na Bóinne, the second is the Knight's Mensa tomb at Gowran, witness to the Cromwellian conquest in the 17th century. The third and fourth sites are very contrasting burial plots at Glasnevin, and the fifth is a Corinthian column featuring a statue of the Duke of Wellington[23] on top. Two of them are under the care of the Office of Public Works[24] and for the third one, the Office of Public Works provided the burial plots.[25] The fourth one is located in a grave among celebrated political heroes. The last site is on a corner of a crossroads in Trim town and maintained by the local municipal authority.

- Case Study Site No. 1: Brú na Bóinne, World Heritage Site.
- Case Study Site No. 2: The Single Knight Mensa Effigial Tomb at Gowran, St. Mary's Collegiate Church, Co. Kilkenny.
- Case Study Site No.3: Glasnevin Cemetery, Dublin, the story of 'The Forgotten Ten' also called The Mountjoy Martyrs.
- Case Study Site No. 4: Glasnevin Cemetery, Dublin, final resting place of a revolutionary Anglo-Irish woman who married a Polish Count.
- Case Study Site No. 5: The Wellington Monument, Trim, Co. Meath.

22 There are over 1,000 National Monuments in Ireland spanning 740 sites. The term 'National Monument' is defined in Section 2 of the National Monuments Acts (1930-2014) as a monument 'the preservation of which is a matter of national importance by reason of the historical, architectural, traditional, artistic or archaeological interest attaching thereto'.

23 The Duke of Wellington is buried in St. Paul's Cathedral, London, United Kingdom (French: 1992).

24 The Office of Public Works are in partnership with Dublin Cemeteries Trust regarding grave and headstone works within the historic sections of the cemetery, as part of their multi-annual cemetery conservation programme. They also organise State Funerals on behalf of the government.

25 This was arranged for the official State re-interment of nine of the 'Forgotten Ten' executed participants in the War of Independence.

Part 1. Literature review

Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945), in his ground-breaking work, asserted that collective memory is always selective and that societies form different collective memories resulting in different behavioural outcomes (Halbwachs, 1925, 1992). Memories find new meanings when the context changes (Kealy, 2022:89). They find new purpose as the basis for action in the future as well as being "a reference point" for the here and now. Wertsch, J. V., & Roediger, H. L. (2008) identified three definitions of collective memory: firstly, collective memory as opposed to collective remembering; secondly, historical accounts as opposed to the collective memory; and thirdly, individual memory in contrast to collective remembering. According to J. Ebejer (2014), a sense of place or *genius loci*, translated literally from Latin as the protective spirit of a place, is often associated with events that have taken place there, and that have grown in significance over time (Ebejer, J. 2014). Interpreting the significance of buildings and of place is subjective. This also applies to artefacts (Ebejer, J. 2014). Culturally, people will respond to a place or building or artefact in different ways (Ebejer, J. 2014). The anthology, A Research Companion to Heritage and Identity (Howard and Graham eds. 2008), explores key relationships between site and story. It also examines the influence of memory and traditions of the past as conveyed onto the present day. Gölz (2019) places the hero and/or villain in the 'collective memory' (Halbwachs, 1925, 1992) of a society (Gölz 2019: 27). Wang, Z. (2018) argues that understanding a society's collective memory assists in better appreciation of its national interests and political standpoints. Collective memory can become the platform of a society where heroes and villains are reassessed and reconsidered over a period of time.

One has to ask, is it a case of collective memory or collective remembering? (Wertsch, J. V., & Roediger, H. L. 2008). Collective remembering is defined by Wertsch, J. V., & Roediger, H. L. (2008) as an active process where society debates the issues rather than seeing them as something that is fixed back in that moment in time. Heroes and villains are represented in various formats, including written accounts and against the backdrop of the buildings and the places, subsequently classified as monuments or historic landmarks. Some characters are obscure and hard to access, in contrast to the more popular or celebrated ones. They often disappear from the memory of a society, only to be re-discovered when some major event or turmoil brings them back to the forefront again (Gölz 2019: 27).

Gölz (2019) sets out the difference between heroes and villains as being the fact that they are on opposite sides of the same story, set apart from each other by interpretation, itself formed by the collective memory of that society. Gölz then focuses on the relationship between heroes and villains, framed within the concept of 'boundary work' (Gölz 2019: 27). He describes his understanding of boundary work in the context of heroes and villains' stories as the labelling of being as either good or bad. This then sets up moral codes and establishes the basis of the symbols, characters and practices that act as building blocks of societies (Lamont/Molnár 2002:168 in Gölz 2019: 27). This boundary-making creates the setting for the cosmology of a story.

O. E. Klapp (1954) stated that there were three generic stereotypes represented in society occurring in popular fiction, common parlance and folklore: the hero, the villain and the fool. His argument was that they hold the function of communicating group judgements, commonly felt consensus by the population, illustrate role definition and even contribute to social control.

Hanke K, et al. (2015), in their extensive survey[26], sought to find out who were the most admired figures or heroes in world history. They concluded that their method of applying profiles, representative across countries rather than across nationality or religious grounds, resulted in a global survey reflecting an emerging political culture. This was counter-pointed by various historical events, coming from different cultural sources (Hanke K, et al. 2015:19). [27] In relation to the case study of the country of Georgia, (Gugushvili, A., Kabachnik, P. & Kirvalidze, A. 2017), the population was surveyed as to who embodied their heroes and villains of the 20th century. The results of the survey found that there were two main clusters in attitude, reflecting Georgian national identity. Heroes and villains were identified depending on whether one was civically biased or ethnically biased. In terms of the Georgian collective memory, national identity was influenced by nationalism and this was reflected by who they named as heroes or as villains, or both in some cases. R. Vargas Lopez (2019) in his review of the conference proceedings, Villains! Constructing Narratives of Evil, reported that different narrative genres, like film, political studies, literature and memory are used to understand how a villain is created in a cultural context. From his overall perspective, having reviewed all the conference contributions, Vargas Lopez (2019) noted that villains are the vehicle for feelings of anxiety or worry. Even more compellingly, he suggested that strategies have been used to portray minority groups as villainous when they are not evil *per se*, but victims of unfair circumstances or having fallen on hard times.

In her anthology of poems, Heroes and Villains, author Ana Sampson (2024) sets out to bring together a wide range of verse about heroes and villains together in one source book. This allows the reader to compare settings and landscapes within the poetry itself, which acts as a backdrop to the legendary characters portrayed. These characters range from King Arthur and his queen, Guinevere, to Joan of Arc, and from warriors to mythical creatures and legendary characters like Robin Hood and mythical dragons and birds. Although it is classified as a children's book, it is a rich source of material for any age group, for the interpretation of heroes and villains in the way they are here brought to life by language.

Part 2. Memories, collective memory, boundary-making, heroes, anti-heroes, villains and place

The assemblage of buildings, orthostats, artefacts, statuary and ruins at Brú na Bóinne, Gowran, Glasnevin and Trim represent a poignant portal into the past where invasion, loss and grief have left their mark. This reminds the visitor that place and setting resonate long after the harsh and brutal events have ended, leaving a transience behind that is hard to explain. Heritage sites offer the opportunity to experience a visceral link with a hero, a villain or an event or story, allowing the visitor to picture them either by physically being there or assisted by a narrative offering interpretation of the past (Ebejer, J. 2014) or experiencing both. Kealy describes this link anecdotally where he describes the visit of a tourist to the Great Blasket Island[28] to explore: "the remnants of the village and walk the windswept hillside, finding

[26] The results indicated that scientists were the most consensually considered heroes across diverse cultures, along with religious or humanitarian figures associated with campaigning or ambassadors for peace (Hanke K., et al. 2015:6). Albert Einstein was No.1 followed by Mother Theresa in that poll (Hanke K., et al. 2015: 7).

[27] Their survey results are compelling. See Tables 1 and 2 in their research paper (Hanke K., et al. 2015)

[28] The Great Blasket Island (In Irish: An Blascaod Mór) was abandoned in 1953 (Moreton, 2001). Situated off the coast of County Kerry, Ireland, it was home to a small Irish-speaking fishing community who wrote about their way of life as it was about to disappear. The deserted village buildings are still visible there. Their accounts and recollections kept the legends and myths alive and were published widely, in many languages. These stories had

in that empty space some contact with the immensity of sky and sea, with the immeasurable" (Kealy, 2022:98). He goes on to ask an important question, "Is it the power of the imagination that will generate the future for emptied, apparently abandoned places?" (Kealy, 2022:98)

Max Jones has a different perspective on heroes and argues that they themselves are the site (Jones, 2007). He suggests that heroes, specifically focusing on British heroes of the 19th and 20th century in his paper, embody a belief system of the time coupled with contemporaneous social and political norms. Seeing heroes and heroines in modern times as vehicles for imperialist or patriotic ideologies has been superseded by "broader analyses of the range of gendered meanings" (Jones, 2007:1) represented by the hero and their actions. Studying and interpreting them leads to new insights for researchers, leading to more nuanced concepts of masculinity and femininity. This does not in any way limit the possibilities for further re-evaluation. Re-examination of the primary sources, photographs, written material, contemporary accounts and "on the reception rather than the representation of heroic icons" (Jones, 2007:1) within the New Cultural History (Hunt, 1989) is the key to understanding re-evaluation.

In the Irish context, a seminal work: Ireland's Heritages: Critical Perspectives on Memory and Identity (McCarthy ed. 2005, 2017) linked Ireland's heritage sites with a re-aligned perspective, to people who might be considered anti-heroes and even villains in the nation's collective memory and cultural identity up to that point. This represented a comprehensive review of the complex relationships between place, memorialisation, commemoration and cultural identity in the Irish context. Irish anti-heroes feature and are categorised as 'A Lost Heritage' in Chapter 4, written about the Connaught Rangers (Morrissey, in McCarthy ed. 2005, 2017). These soldiers of Irish Regiments were marginalised, most almost erased from the Irish collective memory. John Morrissey asserts that there is an opportunity now to remember the past differently; that the diversity of Irish voices from the past can be re-imagined and explored. He argues that the ambiguities that are the Irish experience under British colonial rule represent 'lost voices' (Morrissey, in McCarthy ed. 2005, 2017). It could be suggested that these 18th, 19th and early 20th century Irish regiments of the British Crown Forces are part of the Irish anti-hero narrative. These 'marginalised voices' can be revisited as part of the re-evaluation of what constitutes a hero or an anti-hero in the Irish context. In addition, Hugh Maguire (Maguire, in McCarthy ed. 2005, 2017) in Chapter 8, 'Ireland and the House of Invented Memory', focuses on the problem of the architectural patrimony of the 'Big House in Ireland', associated with the landlords, colonialism, villainy, in some cases, and oppression. Maura Cronin's Chapter 9 (Cronin, in McCarthy ed. 2005, 2017) is perhaps the most poignant, shining a light on a part of history that includes this author's family – where maternal and paternal grandfathers were both Creamery Managers at that time. [29] These hidden heroes and heroines of the early 20th century in rural Ireland have been all but forgotten. Fox & Breathnach (2014) illustrate the link between the dairy industry, gender relations and the interwoven societal connections that the Creamery Community forged in rural parishes in

been passed down by successive generations through the oral tradition, in both song and spoken narratives, before being committed to paper.

[29] Patrick O'Donovan and William Sweeney were my maternal and paternal grandfathers respectively. My mother Mary (née O'Donovan) also worked in the Creamery in Cononagh, West Cork, as a young woman; only doing so until she got married in 1947.

the late 19th and early 20th century. Many were the lifeline of the community and a vital service to those who depended on them. Creameries became a target for the British Crown Forces for reprisals during the War of Independence, until the truce was negotiated on 11th July 1921, putting an end to that particular campaign of terror and destruction.

Part 3. Five case studies

Case study site 1 – Brú na Bóinne and the Newgrange Burial Mound[30]

Brú na Bóinne is located within a funerary landscape in the Boyne River valley. It is one of the most significant ancient burial grounds in Ireland. The Neolithic Passage Tombs where the dead were placed, is reached from a purpose-built visitor centre. Newgrange Burial Mound was built around 3200 BC and features 97 giant kerbstones around its perimeter; each weighing between one and 12 tons (Elwell, 2006:448). A guided tour is provided to explain the context of the rituals associated with these ancient people. Were they heroes, anti-heroes or villains? It is only possible to speculate as to who they were. It is said that the High Kings of Ireland were buried there, most having been cremated first, as well as others of noble birth (Sheridan, 2020). Myths and Legends are also associated with this site (Elwell, 2006:451). [31]

Heroes of Brú na Bóinne

The contemporary heroes of the site are more recent stakeholders, including the 19th and 20th century custodians, archaeologists, architects, farmers and antiquarians who realised its significance as an important archaeological property as well as the team who brought it to be inscribed in 1993 as a World Heritage Site as the Brú na Bóinne – Archaeological Ensemble of the Bend of the Boyne.

Brú na Bóinne Visitor Centre is a reception centre and exhibition area. It is the stepping stone to a unique neolithic cultural landscape. It includes digital displays, interactive touchscreens, sound effects and a full-scale replica of the Newgrange chamber within the monument. There lighting effects simulate the sunrise as it aligns to enter the chamber through a roof box, on the morning of the Winter Solstice. Visitors listen to a recording of the voice of Professor M. J. O'Kelly (1915-1982), who discovered this feature at the Newgrange earth mound in 1967, while experiencing the simulation of the chamber solstice. Visitors can also enter the actual chamber on a guided tour.

The valley is also the location of Knowth and Dowth Passage Tombs and features the largest assemblage of megalithic art in Europe. In his essay, David C. Harvey in Chapter 6, states that the Brú na Bóinne Centre is the conduit for the presentation of the Newgrange monument as an element within the wider sacred landscape (Harvey, in McCarthy ed. 2005, 2017). The dead of Newgrange are underneath one's feet when entering into the chamber of the passage tomb, as remains were thought to have been cremated. Their spirits are all around when one walks in their world. The other world is represented too in folk tales and myths associated with the Neolithic cultural landscape and make it more meaningful, if that is what one seeks when visiting there.

In relation to the Visitor Centre at Brú na Bóinne, does the replica passage grave chamber spoil the sense of wonder of the genuine experience

30 This is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

31 The father God of the ancient tribe of the Tuatha dé Danann, the Dagda, was deemed to have lived at the mound of Newgrange. Here he kept his magic harp, Uaithne, which would come to him if commanded (Elwell, 2006:451). The Tuatha dé Danann were a magical race who were defeated by the Celts and driven into the underworld to become the Sidhe or spirits of nature, and in Ireland the burial mounds are seen as portals to the otherworld, the realm of the supernatural (Croker, 2001).

of the monument? The concept of duplicating monuments is not a new one. There is educational value in doing this, as argued by Darlington (2020:88) referencing the Victoria and Albert Museum Cast Courts in London, designed by Henry Scott. Taking that idea a step further, he tells of other full-scale replicas of Stonehenge Stone Circle[32], across the globe, including one located at Esperance, Western Australia, and another at Maryhill, Washington State[33], as noted by Darlington (2020:78 Fig. 52). The inscription on the plaque (Maryhill Museum of Modern Art Website, 2025) reads:

> "In memory of the soldiers and sailors of Klickitat County who gave their lives in defense of their country. This monument is erected in the hope that others inspired by the example of their valor and their heroism may share in that love of liberty and burn with that fire of patriotism which death alone can quench."

Two important issues are to be found in the Maryhill example. Firstly, it was built in an urban site but the town of Maryhill soon after burned down around it. Now the monument is to be found, fully restored but in isolation in an open landscape museum site. Secondly, although a replica of the original Stonehenge, it was sited so that the altar stone aligns with the astronomical horizon rather than the actual midsummer sunrise on the summer solstice. It was constructed of concrete rather than stone (Stonehenge Memorial Maryhill Museum of Art, Maryhill WA. website).[34] The point here is: although it is a replica, Maryhill became something more than simply that. It was significantly impacted by subsequent events, ie, the town around it is no longer there and the alignment with the altar had to be adapted to the site as the horizon would not otherwise be visible topographically (Stonehenge Memorial Maryhill Museum of Art, Maryhill WA. website). It is a memorial to the heroic, as stated on the original plaque, but the heroes inscribed there have sadly grown in number as terrible sacrifices in wars continue to the present day. The replica at the Brú na Bóinne centre facilitates those who, for some reason, cannot go to the actual site. This does not mean that they cannot get meaning and significance from the facsimile, it just means that this might not be limited by what the original designers anticipated in terms of its impact or significance to visitors to the exhibition.

Case study site 2 – Heroes and villains on the same site: The Knight's Mensa Effigial Tomb at Gowran[35], St. Mary's Collegiate Church, Co. Kilkenny, the siege of 1650 by Oliver Cromwell and the New Model Army, and , the stained-glass window commemorating 2nd Lieutenant Aubrey Cecil White, of nearby Gowran House

Gowran[36] Castle was the residence of the ancient Kings of Ossory before the Anglo Norman invasion (Drennan, 1965). Following the arrival of the Anglo Normans, Gowran was given to Theobald Fitzwalter, Chief Butler of Ireland. A series of catastrophes followed over the centuries. The town was burnt down in 1415. In 1604 a plague killed many of the town's inhabitants (Kilkenny Archaeological Society, 2020) and in 1608 Gowran was a parliamentary

32 Stonehenge Monument is located on the Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire, England, and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

33 Maryhill Stone Circle is a reinforced concrete-built memorial built between 1918 to 1929 to honour US soldiers and sailors of the American Expeditionary Force who died in World War I, and were from Klickitat County, WA. (Stonehenge Memorial Maryhill Museum of Art, Maryhill WA.)

34 Darlington (2020:77) also mentions Stonehenge replicas made from alternative materials and these include Carhenge, located in Alliance, Nebraska, USA, and Foamhenge, made entirely from Styrofoam, located in Bull Run, Virginia, USA.

35 National Monument No.214.

36 The name is thought to mean 'the place of steeds' or horses (Drennan, 1965). In the Gaelic language it is spelt *Gabhran*.

borough and had two members of parliament elected until the Act of Union brought an end to that in 1800. The nave was in ruins following the capture of Gowran when it was attacked by Cromwell and his army in March of 1650 (Drennan, 1965).

"The Hero is the Site" (Jones 2007:1), but by that reasoning is not the villain the site too?

The spectre of a villain was unleashed in the events surrounding Oliver Cromwell and his New Model Army's nine months in Ireland from 1649. Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) was an invader who is justified in being classed as a villain and who is renowned in Irish history for his crushing campaign in Ireland. He was responsible for ethnic cleansing, religious persecution and heinous war crimes (O'Siochrú 2008). The campaign he led was aimed at removing any resistance to the new English Commonwealth (O'Siochrú 2008). In Ireland for only a total of nine months, Cromwell was still able to order some of the worst deeds and atrocities committed in modern times as part of his offensive. He ordered the massacre of thousands of civilians and military personnel in Drogheda and Wexford in 1649 and laid siege to Gowran in 1650, as Commander in Chief of the New Model Army (O'Siochrú 2008). His heinous actions are documented, and records exist of his own writings regarding orders given at Gowran in 1650 (Drennan, 1965).

A Knight sculpted as a heroic figure and a soldier depicted in stained glass

There are two artefacts of great significance located in St. Mary's Collegiate Church Gowran, Co. Kilkenny. The first is the Single Knight mensa effigial tomb. Gowran was a seat and burial place for the Butler family before they relocated to Kilkenny Castle. The Church was built in the late 13th century as a collegiate church where clerics lived in a community without being under monastic rule. An effigial limestone tomb (Length 2.16m; Width 1.06m; Height 1.2m) was commissioned with a Butler knight carved in high relief. Rae (1970, 10-11) states that this tomb may be a cenotaph to James MacEdmond MacRichard Butler (d. 1487) who is reputedly buried at the Callan Augustinian Friary[37]. James' descendant Piers Butler and his wife Margaret Fitzgerald were creating a story of heroism in commissioning these elaborate carved tomb monuments to Piers' dead relatives by the O'Tunney sculptors of Callan. [38] It is fascinating that with the passage of time, the role of monumental sculptural works was key to building up the prestige of the Butler family. In this case, it was being used as a statement of prestige in their claim to the Earldom of Ormond (Moss 2014, 502).[39] The castle and church at Gowran were burnt down by Oliver Cromwell, villain and figure of great dread and notoriety, together with his New Model Army, more than 100 years later. All this time the Knight's Effigial Tomb remained intact, surviving to bear witness

[37] Rae (in Rae, 1970) suggests that James' brother Walter (d. 1506) is the subject of the tomb, noting that the lion rampant could be a reference to Walter's mother, Giles O'Carroll, a detail that also applies for James. Piers Butler and his wife Margaret FitzGerald (d. 1542) are believed to have arranged for these early 16th-century Butler tombs to be carved, in memory of past members of their family (Moss 2014, 502).

[38] By the mid-1990s, the church itself had deteriorated to the extent that it needed a new roof. Following that, the inside space was reorganised so that the effigial tombs were moved from the tower and sited in their present location in the chancel. The tower dates from the 14th or 15th century. In 2001, the building was re-opened, by the Office of Public Works, for the public to experience for the first time. It will be opening again for the summer season from May to August 2025 with free guided tours. The overall site itself still bears the brutal scars of the past turmoil with a large portion of the aisled nave in ruins since the siege and destruction in 1650. The nave is believed to be mid-13th century (circa 1275), replacing a 12th century simpler structure.

[39] The tomb is in the style of the O'Tunney Sculpture School. These renowned stone carvers were based in Callan, Co. Kilkenny and patronised by wealthy local families of the 15th and 16th centuries.

to the destruction and its aftermath. The medieval chancel was rebuilt 176 years later to the designs of William Robertson in 1826 and again by T.H. Wyatt in 1872, when funds were available, following the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in 1869 (Rae, 1970) [40].

The second artefact located in St. Mary's Collegiate Church Gowran is a memorial to an officer who died in World War I. A stained glass window is dedicated to a fallen soldier, just like at Maryhill, but in a different medium (Caron, 2023:160-161)[41] and on a different continent. Installed in 1918 in St. Mary's, then a Church of Ireland Church, the window commemorates 2nd Lieutenant Aubrey Cecil White, of nearby Gowran House (Caron, 2023:160-161), who died on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, 1 July 1916, during the First World War (Heritage Ireland.ie). However unlikely at first glance, St. Mary's Collegiate Church at Gowran has parallels to the Maryhill Monument in Washington State, USA.

Case study 3 – Glasnevin Cemetery, Dublin: The 'Forgotten Ten'

In October 2001 the remains of ten men, court marshalled, executed and buried in unmarked prisoner plots in Mountjoy Gaol during the Irish War of Independence[42], were exhumed. Following a State Funeral, with military honours, nine of the ten men were buried in prominent State-owned plots[43]. The tenth man was buried in Co. Limerick, at the request of his descendants. In studying the biographies of these men, it is apparent that the idea of a hero, anti-hero or villain is sometimes an interchangeable term, depending on whose side of the conflict one finds oneself (Dodd, 2023: 94-138). The irony is that some participants[44] in the War of Independence expressed, in heart breaking correspondence that survives, an expectation and hope that they would be remembered as heroes, following their execution (Dodd, 2023: 96). For a myriad of reasons, this did not result in re-interment until 80 years later. This refers back to the point made earlier about the importance of the collective memory (Gölz 2019: 27) or collective remembering (Wertsch, J. V., & Roediger, H. L. 2008). If there is no collective memory or remembering regarding heroes, anti-heroes or villains in a society, then eventually, it is as if they are erased from the shared consciousness.

In the case of the Forgotten Ten, the possibility of ever having been seen as heroes faded fast in the aftermath of the War of Independence, as the Irish Civil War commenced soon after, in June 1922. But they could not have foreseen that. Being relocated from graves that no-one could visit for 80 years, following their execution, is a poignant reminder of the realities and savagery of war. Gölz (2019: 27) focuses on that platform of a society where heroes and villains are reassessed and reconsidered over a period of time. Heroes and anti-heroes are represented in various formats, including, in this case, last written testimonials by these ten men to their loved ones (Dodd:96). These records were recently brought together in Conor Dodd's book (Dodd, 2023). Against the backdrop of the cold dark streets of Dublin and at the place of their executions, the ground of Mountjoy Gaol offered up their sparse and battered remains to the dignity and poignancy of their final resting

40 The chancel served as the church of Ireland for the congregation of Gowran until 1970. It remained a place of worship until it closed, after which time it was given as a gift to the Irish State. It then remained closed to the public for 31 years.

41 It was designed by Michael Healy (1873-1941), Stained Glass Artist (Caron: 2023).

42 January 1919 - July 1921.

43 These plots are in a prestigious location and vested in the Office of Public Works on behalf of the Irish Government.

44 Patrick Doyle, one of the Forgotten Ten, wrote letters to his loved ones, just before his execution.

places in Glasnevin. A hero's ceremonial burial granted at last for all of them with military honours (Dodd:97). In Glasnevin, and Co. Limerick, visitors pay their respects every day and some place flowers or wreaths[45].

Case study 4 – Glasnevin Cemetery, final resting place of Constance Georgine Markievicz[46], a revolutionary Irish woman who married a Polish Count

Constance Georgine Markievicz[47] is also buried in Glasnevin Cemetery but under conditions of stark contrast to the Forgotten Ten. Constance Gore Booth was born in London into an Anglo-Irish protestant ascendancy family. She was the daughter of an Arctic explorer, Sir Henry Gore Booth, whose adventurous spirit had a strong influence on her (Lissadell Papers, n.d.). Moving to London, then Paris to study to become a landscape painter, she met and married Count Casimir Dunin de Markievicz of Zywotow, Malopolska Province. He was a Polish playwright, theatre director and painter. She was also a suffragist, a tireless worker with the poor, a campaigner for women's and workers' rights, a mother and a landscape painter. She was the first woman elected to the Parliament of the United Kingdom (Haverty, 2016, 2025). She played a pivotal role in the 1916 Rising, as a Lieutenant of the Irish Citizen Army for which she was subsequently sentenced to death[48]. Countess Markievicz died in July 1927, having been cast in the role of anti-hero by political circumstances and finding herself on the losing side ideologically (Haverty, 2016, 2025:241). Haverty (2016, 2025) notes that the Countess' journey to her final resting place featured a public funeral of great significance "which Dublin gives her champions and to those she feels she has failed" (Haverty, 2016, 2025:253). Countess Markievicz was buried in Glasnevin, having died of infection following appendicitis (Haverty, 2016, 2025:253). Thousands lined the streets of Dublin and attended her funeral to pay tribute to her (Haverty, 2016, 2025). The graveside oration was given by Éamon de Valera T.D. (Lissadell House Online, n.d.), himself a revolutionary figure; hero to many, anti-hero to others, and villain to some. Dublin did not judge her to be villainous in the end, but as a hero and friend (Haverty, 2016, 2025). Constance Markievicz speaks her own truth through recently published primary sources from the Gore Booth family archive papers; there her letters to her sister, Eva Selina Laura Gore Booth, show her courage, resilience and her dedication to the cause of Irish freedom (Lissadell House Online, n.d.).

Case study 5 – The Wellington Column, Trim, Co. Meath

In reviewing the concept of a hero and a site, it is important to also note the curious or exceptional cases. In the case of the 1st Duke of Wellington, Arthur Wellesley, being commemorated by his own people it is not so strange. It does hold some controversy, and this comes up time and time again. To some he is a hero, to others, an anti-hero and to the rest, a villain. Often there have been calls for the statue and column to be taken down (French 1992). He was born in Dublin and spent his childhood in Dangan Castle and attended school in St. Mary's Abbey, Trim, originally an Augustinian monastery. His illustrious career was to take him across Europe fighting wars, and he became a hero, having defeated Napoleon and his army at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. He was also the Prime Minister of England two separate times after the column had been erected in his honour. The inscription at the base of the plinth reads: "This column was erected in the year 1817

45 This author has seen this activity first-hand from time to time during visits to the cemetery in Glasnevin.

46 Constance was the Irish revolutionary (Haverty, 2016, 2025).

47 She was born Constance Gore Booth (1868-1927).

48 This was commuted to penal servitude for life, because of her gender (Haverty, 2016, 2025).

in honour of the illustrious Duke of Wellington by the grateful contributions of the people of County Meath".

The Wellington Monument is of note as it was erected to the illustrious Arthur Wellesley, who had grown up near Trim and was considered their hero. In the 208 years since the 23-metre-high Corinthian Column was installed in a prominent position in the town, this monument has been a silent witness. It has presided over the later achievements of the Duke as Prime Minister of England, his stance as a supporter of the Roman Catholic Relief Act (1829) that resulted in Catholics having new rights[49] and ironically, his embodiment as an imperialist symbol of the British dominance over Ireland. From time to time, subsequent historically significant events and controversies that followed the initial installation of the statue have raised the question: Should the 1st Duke of Wellington be still celebrated in a stone statue overlooking the town? This is what an Irish story looks like: an 'illustrious[50] hero, an anti-hero to some and a villain to others…all represented here by the same man, and of even more significance, was that he was one of their own (French 1992). That is what matters most to the people of Trim, it seems, and explains why the statue was left there. It is an incredible example of a monument as a catalyst, where almost as soon as it was in place, the stage was set for another story to begin about Arthur Wellesley. But because it was already there, subsequent events gave it a significance and resonance in a way that could never have been anticipated by 'the grateful people of County Meath[51] in the year 1817.

Conclusion: The concept of diachronic integrity and genius loci

What do these five case studies considered together tell us about interpretation of the dead and their relationship with place? They remind us that in any corner of Ireland, the dead are near to us. We just have to look closely. As described by Loughlin Kealy (2022:98), "this mysterious interlocking of the tangible with the intangible has been expressed as the spirit of the place, its *genius loci*". It is in this interstitial space that the heroes and villains still resonate. Genius loci, as argued by Isis Brook (2000:141), is a place inhabited by gods or goddesses, or mythical characters, associated with Grecian and Roman origins, mostly found in the form of a sacred grotto or grove.

Transcendence as a concept is also very relevant here, in these five cases, as sites transcend the mundane and become something more meaningful by association with heroes, anti-heroes or villains. The word 'transcend' means 'to go beyond' in Latin. It has come to mean anything that is harder to access than is achievable by normal human endeavour (Alsford, 2006:24).

Interpretation is subject to the power of the collective memory (Halbwachs, 1925, 1992) or the collective remembering of the past (Wertsch, J. V., & Roediger, H. L., 2008). It is intrinsically linked to site, but as in the case of the Forgotten Ten, for instance, is it not preferable that site can change and the dead can be celebrated in their new place of rest with dignity and in peaceful reverence? Did exhuming their mortal remains affect the integrity of the telling of their stories?

[49] This Act was the *Roman Catholic Relief Act 1829*, which removed many restrictions on Roman Catholics up to that time throughout Great Britain and Ireland in place since the *Act of Settlement, 1701* (Source: https://www.historyhome.co.uk/c-eight/constitu/settlemt.htm).

[50] This is how he, Arthur Wellesley, is described on the inscription located at the base of the Wellington column in Trim (National Built Heritage Service (2002).

[51] Quotation from the Inscription on the Wellington Monument, Trim, Co. Meath (National Built Heritage Service (2002).

Professor Kealy writes about memory and love not being passive (Kealy, 2022:89); where memories gain meaning in a new setting. Here they become the "foundation for future action as well as being a reference point for the present" (Kealy, 2022:89). Darlington (2020:197) suggests that the first impression a visitor gets from a translocated building is not to imagine the place from which it came, but within the context of where it is now. Again, in the case of the Forgotten Ten, it is often the very first thing one might imagine; the misery, the despair and the knowing before they died, that they were to be executed as common criminals[52]. Their new place of rest is just inside the main entrance to the cemetery. It is not within a crypt, but under a series of granite grave slabs laid flat in a row, that they are reinterred. No one could visit their graves for the 80 years before they were exhumed from Mountjoy Gaol[53]. Most of their close relatives would have been dead by 2001. This was why they were considered 'forgotten' while located within the prison walls. Isis Brook (2000:142), asserts that where the history of a place is known, but not, as she states, 'consciously preserved', it has the characteristics of a 'spirit of place'. She explains that even where changes have occurred in that location, the present contemporary layout still represents connectivity to the past in an authentic way. It is even more strongly asserted by Holland and O'Neill (1996), who argue that a place has a story or a dialogue that connects it to its history, as well as to what it is like now. This dialogue might also inform what it looks like in years to come. This is called 'diachronic integrity' (Holland, A. & O'Neill, J. 1996).

Heritage needs to be understood, using a wide range of disciplinary lenses, from the fields of geography, history, archaeology, architecture, anthropology and media studies, among many others (Howard and Graham eds. 2008). This is perhaps the key to authentic, sensitive and meaningful interpretation of sites and the stories of their heroes, anti-heroes and villains. Other themes can be similarly explored, to connect stories of the dead, across diverse histories and timeframes. This story-to-site relationship can apply in genius loci across the world; across diverse cultures, connecting historical events, physical features and their associated characters. This concept only has lasting significance if there is a value placed on the "coherence of the story" (Brook, I. 2000:143) associated with that place and how it is connected to its site, monument or building. 'History' and 'place' together perform a key role in the way a society sees itself whereby these two elements: story and site, are symbiotically interdependent. It is our responsibility, in interpreting their time spent in this world, to protect their authenticity and truthfully represent these heroes, anti-heroes and villains. In acknowledging sites, in tandem with the narratives of their dead, we can better interpret their histories and acknowledge how they are very near to us, as intangible but precious links to our past.

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[52] The Forgotten Ten, also known as the Mountjoy Martyrs (National Graves Association, 2001), were executed on the scaffold and then buried in un-consecrated and unmarked prison-yard graves.

[53] Mountjoy Gaol, Dublin, is still in use as a detention facility.

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Abstracts of other presentations

The good, the bad, and the graffitied: How we (re-)interpret monuments to heroes

Elisa Bailey (Spain)

This paper draws on case studies from across Europe to consider the re-interpretation of heroism in art in three different ways: 1. The villainisation of monumental state infrastructure by graffiti and other types of adornment (such as the monuments to the République in Paris, and Dos de mayo in Madrid; and the dismantled monuments to the Red Army in Sofia, and Mykola Shchors in Kyiv); 2. Popular interpretations of the anti-hero in celebratory and commemorative public art, and whether the artist themself is one (with examples from Prishtina, London, Belfast, Yekaterinburg and beyond); and 3. How dismantled monuments celebrating heroes-turned-villains across the continent might risk 'coming good' by forming the basis of interpretive strategies for teaching (art) history, tolerance, and more.

Elisa Bailey is a multilingual curator, interpreter, heritage travel consultant with the motto 'Curating is Caring'. Elisa has lived in nine countries for work with the V&A, BFI, Dubai Expo 2020, Guggenheim, Oman Across Ages Museum, Carabinieri Cultural Heritage, Sotheby's, universities, media and cinema. She founded Rise-Rosa-Rage Socio-Political Graphics Archive, researches and publishes on memorials, solidarity, protest and the artist's role in fighting oppression. She studied at University of Cambridge, Courtauld Institute of Art, and Harvard University Centre for Hellenic Studies.

The author and the anti-hero: Telling a new story of the Wild Witch of the East

Katia Dianina (USA)

The European Fairy Tale Route is one of the most recent cultural initiatives of the Council of Europe, certified in 2022. The proclaimed aim of the EFTR, which links imaginary and real places across 19 countries, is to highlight the value of folklore heritage that extends beyond the national borders and nourishes a broader European perspective. How do we use fictional heroes for the purposes of heritage interpretation? My presentation focuses on one notorious border-crossing character of Slavic folklore, known in different languages as Baba Yaga/ Baba Roga/ jędza baba/ ježibaba. In recent decades, this proverbial anti-hero has undergone radical changes, as can be seen in the book, 'Baba Yaga Laid an Egg' by Dubravka Ugrešić, an author turned heritage interpreter. This literary exercise is not only a useful paradigm for today's interpreters of culture; it also offers a conceptual framework for heritage interpretation as storytelling.

Katia Dianina's experience with heritage interpretation ranges from guided tours to academic publications. The topic of safeguarding and negotiating heritage has a long history, and studying how different communities in the past and present have approached the issue provides invaluable insights into understanding of our common future. It also offers pathways into practical steps that we can undertake today, when the preservation of heritage as a sustainable tradition is more urgent than ever.

Mihajlo Pupin: About the time before and after great discoveries

Marija Dragišić (Serbia)

Idvor – a small village in the north of Serbia, is the birthplace of the world-famous scientist, inventor, university professor, publicist, academic, and philanthropist – Mihajlo Pupin. The central area of the settlement, which includes Pupin's birthplace, the school he attended, the People's House of Mihajlo Pupin foundation, and the church where he was baptized, is protected by the state as a cultural monument. These sites are associated with various stages of Mihajlo Pupin's life and activities, and their protection is aimed at preserving the memory of the character and work of this renowned scientist and inventor in the fields of physics and electrical engineering.

Certainly, Idvor is the right place to talk about Pupin's discoveries that have contributed to humanity. However, it is also a place where much more should be learned about his life before and after his brilliant inventions, which often remain overshadowed by his scientific work. This idea forms the foundation of a new plan for interpreting the cultural heritage, especially considering that students are the most frequent visitors of Idvor.

Guided by Pupin's autobiography, 'From Immigrant to Inventor', an interpretive plan is being developed that dedicates much more space to his early childhood and the period when, as a rural boy, he first encountered the knowledge of the world that would later form the basis of his scientific and research work. In other words, the parental home and the rural environment in which he grew up will be presented as the place where the great ideas that would lead Pupin to scientific heights were born.

At the same time, the interpretation plan aims to provide visitors with a clear picture of Mihajlo Pupin as a great patriot and philanthropist. As an already accomplished scientist and inventor, Pupin had both the need and the material resources to help his country and people in various ways, as best evidenced by the People's House in Idvor. He built this building with the intention of creating a 'national' university, or a horticultural and fruit-growing school, and the rich archival material opens up the possibility not only to present this but also, in accordance with modern circumstances, realise Pupin's wish, which was not completed before his death.

Marija Dragišić is an ethnologist and anthropologist and works as a conservator-researcher at the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Serbia in Belgrade. She is professionally oriented towards the protection of vernacular architecture, with a special interest in its interpretation and presentation. She designs and organises educational programmes for children and teachers and believes that, with a clear interpretation and presentation and good cooperation with the local population, this is the only way to sustainable preservation of heritage. She is the author of several published articles in domestic and foreign magazines and a documentary film, co-author and collaborator at several exhibitions. She is a member of ICOMOS Serbia and Interpret Europe.

Makarios III. A political animal in vestments

Maria Fotia (Greece)

(Accepted by the conference review committee but unable to present)

The setting of the story is Cyprus, the third largest island of the Mediterranean Sea. The central character of the story is Archbishop and Ethnarch Makarios III. A historical albeit controversial personality, considered a hero by some, a villain by others. The Greek-Cypriot community has been divided over him. The Turkish-Cypriot community considered him an enemy. Heads of State and politicians of European countries, the United States and the Soviet Union were divided in their views on him, whereas the statesmen of the non-aligned nations considered him not only a hero, but also their leader. Whatever people think of him, 48 years after his death, Makarios remains an iconic figure who made a lasting impact on the cause of the independence of his country. The presentation is set around the premise that the responsibility of heritage interpreters towards narratives that concern the biography of a historical figure, lies within the realm of objective historical presentation.

Maria Fotia has a first degree in Archaeology & History of Art, an MA in Prehistoric Archaeology – Excavation Methods & Techniques at the Late Cycladic City of Akrotiri, Thera, and an MA in Applied Strategy and International Security. She is an IE Certified Interpretive Guide (CIG) having attended the course at the Heritage Management Organisation, Eleusis, Greece. Maria is interested in the interpretation of heritage, its uses, the means to interpret it, to what end, the purpose and underlying meanings one can give it.

Szymon Kluger: A local hero and the creation of community myths

Kinga Anna Gajda (Poland)

Heroes, both historical and contemporary, play a key role in the formation of community myths and narratives that shape group identity. Whether they are extraordinary or ordinary figures, in the eyes of the local community, they become symbols representing values, traditions, and heritage. Szymon Kluger, the last Jewish resident of Oświęcim, is an example of a hero whose story transcends the traditional image of a heroic figure, becoming a symbol of survival and memory of the Jewish community that had existed in the city for centuries. His life, although not filled with spectacular deeds, still represents a narrative of resilience and the preservation of identity.

The purpose of my presentation is to analyse the role of such 'micro-histories', like the story of Szymon Kluger, in the creation of local myths. I focus on the mechanisms behind the creation of hero figures in social narratives and how such individuals become carriers of values and identity. I explore why communities are so eager to tell stories of individuals, elevating them to the status of heroes, and what social needs underlie this process. What significance do these stories hold in shaping collective memory, a sense of belonging, and our understanding of the past? Drawing on the example of Szymon Kluger, I show how micro-level narratives can influence larger social and cultural processes, helping to create community identity and reinterpret its history.

Kinga Anna Gajda is Director of the Institute of European Studies and the Acting Head of the Department of Politics and Culture of Mediterranean Countries. She is an assistant professor at the Department of Society and

Cultural Heritage of Central and Eastern Europe at the Jagiellonian University. She holds a habilitation in cultural studies and a doctorate in literary studies. Her research interests include studies on memory, heritage, identity, citizenship and intercultural competences, with particular emphasis on Central and Eastern Europe. She is a visiting professor at various European research institutions, a member of Scientific Councils, as well as serving on the editorial boards of numerous interdisciplinary journals, and is the editor of numerous books on Central and Eastern Europe, heritage, memory and identity.

The challenges of interpreting heroism at sites of memory: Can we find a balance between thought provocation and commemoration?

Charlotte Giraudo & Lucy Taylor (France)

This paper discusses the challenges faced by The American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) when interpreting heroism at commemorative sites. The ABMC manages 26 American military cemeteries in 11 countries, which honour Americans who served and died overseas, mostly during the First and Second World Wars. We will first explore why heroism can be a difficult topic at a commemorative site. For some audiences, military memory is associated with heroic memory and such commemorative sites are spaces to preserve or celebrate such narratives linked to national identity and beliefs. Interpretation of heroism is therefore sensitive.

We will present the ABMC's interpretive approach and provide an overview of the guidance and resources available to support interpreters. Finally, focusing on a case study from the Luxemburg American Cemetery we shall examine techniques to interpret the famous and infamous war hero: General Patton, considering how ABMC presents respectful 'hot interpretation'.

Charlotte Giraudo worked for ten years as a guide for diverse heritage sites before joining the American Battle Monuments Commission. As the Interpretation Program Manager, she's been coordinating and managing agencywide planning efforts and interpretive projects while also providing interpretive support to the field. Charlotte holds a Master's Degree in Archaeology and a professional Guide License.

Lucy Taylor has been employed as an interpretive guide at the American Battle Monuments Commission since 2021. Originally, Lucy has a background in education. She is a certified high school teacher and taught in the UK and international schools in Switzerland, Malawi and Indonesia.

The man who envied the birds. Interpreting the story of Jan Wnęk – a mid-19th century aviation pioneer

Małgorzata Hordyniec & Mateusz Tomaszczyk (Poland)

The Whitsunday fair, in the tiny village of Odporyszów in Lesser Poland, June 10, 1866. Crowds of festively dressed people flock to the church. High above them, at the top of the bell tower… Is that a man with huge wings strapped to his body? For a few seconds everything stands still… Suddenly a leap, gasps, and then just a gliding shape in the sky. Imagine, how

must the people of Odporyszów have felt, when they first saw their neighbour, Jan Wnęk, flying above their heads?

If this story had been confirmed in written sources, Jan Wnęk – a self-taught carpenter, sculptor and constructor – would have gone down in history as the first aviator (25 years before Otto Lilienthal, the recognised 'Flying Man' pioneer of heavier-than-air aviation). Nevertheless, to this day, he remains a hero of the collective imagination and a source of pride for the local community.

How to interpret a story that straddles the line between myth and history? How to make a story about a forgotten local hero meaningful to wider audiences? How to tell a compelling story using very few facts, material traces in the landscape and loads of imagination? How can new technologies help us? And finally, what is the significance of an interpreter's authority in reinforcing and redistributing local myths? We joined forces to interpret the story of Jan Wnęk during 26 Malopolska Days of Cultural Heritage (2024) and we will answer these questions from our perspective.

Małgorzata Hordyniec is a social anthropologist by education (University of Warsaw, Poland) and vocation. She is an IE certified interpretive guide (CIG) and certified interpretive writer (CIW). At Malopolska Institute of Culture in Krakow, she acts as a field worker, cooperating with local communities and cultural institutions on heritage interpretation. When not in the field, she fiddles with words, writing audio descriptions for museums.

Mateusz Tomaszczyk is a licensed tourist guide, licenced tour manager and certified business trainer working in the tourism industry. In the area of training, he specialises in developing the competencies (especially soft skills) of tourist guides. He is an IE trainer and also a WFTGA trainer with the rank of Lead International Trainer. In the World Federation of Tourist Guide Associations (WFTGA), he works in the training committee in the position of Experienced Trainer. He is a participant in the Facilitator School and will soon complete his Facilitator Certification.

How to use the potential of biographies of local heroes for exhibitions that engage the community

Piotr Idziak & Małgorzata Hordyniec (Poland)

Stories and memories about local heroes can create identity landscapes. Interpreting such stories in local museums has the potential to strengthen the sense of belonging to a place and can be engaging for local communities. However, presenting biographies in museums can be demanding (or even dull!).

In a workshop with active group work and moderated discussion, we ask the following questions and use interpretive tools to find some answers.

- How to tell stories about local heroes in a way that makes them interesting and meaningful for visitors?
- How to strengthen local stories and biographies?
- How to engage local communities with exhibitions of local heroes?
- How to avoid boring and derivative museum presentations?

We will discuss how to implement participatory strategies to engage the community in the exhibition creation process. We will also confront these challenges with case studies of

two recent exhibitions supported by the Małopolska Institute of Culture (MIK) in local museums in Małopolska: 'Pharmacy under the star' in the Museum in Rabka Zdrój; and 'Discovering the Mountains' in the Municipal Museum in Kęty. Each of these exhibitions has a different approach to presenting local heroes and follows a different participatory strategy.

Piotr Idziak is a graduate of the European Rural Development Policy at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, the Academy of Social Innovators of the ASHOKA association and ethnology at the Jagiellonian University. He is an advisor for exhibitions and heritage presentations in museums, cultural heritage sites and cultural routes. He is an IE certified trainer for certified interpretive guides (CIG) and works on strategic development in cultural institutions. Piotr is an actor of the Figur Theatre in Krakow, and is also a shadow theatre animator, juggler, unicyclist, and he researches games and plays.

Małgorzata Hordyniec is an ethnologist. She is an IE Certified Interpretive Guide (CIG) and Certified Interpretive Writer (CIW). At the Małopolska Institute of Culture (MIK), she deals with heritage interpretation in the Heritage Days and Exhibition Dynamics team and conducts interpretative writing workshops. She collects local stories, snapshots from micro-travels and conversations over coffee.

Between controversy and experience: Interpreting heritage of the first Croatian president

Luka Jakopčić (Croatia)

The presentation exhibits the recent case study of developing and implementing a self-guided interpretive walk in the small Croatian town of Veliko Trgovišće, the birthplace of Franjo Tuđman (1922-1999), the first president of independent Croatia. This historical figure that sharply divides Croatian society (while some worship him, others dislike him) had to be interpreted in a way that would not irritate dominant political structures. At the same time – for the sake of scientific and interpretive integrity – losing a critical and intriguing approach was not an option. The solution we came up with, and the visitors' reactions, will be the main focal point of the presentation.

Luka Jakopčić is from Zagreb and runs a storytelling and experience studio/ travel agency specialised in designing tailor-made and value-for-money tours, routes, and itineraries. He is also a PhD student at Zagreb University, researching early forms of experience economy and its relevance in the context of future tourism development. He is an active member of the Croation network within Interpret Europe.

Her or his story? – The case of the Warsaw Ghetto Fighters memorial

Katarzyna Jankowska (Poland)

The presentation explores the dynamic concepts of hero, anti-hero, and villain through the lens of the Warsaw Ghetto Fighters memorial. This case study delves into what constitutes heroic deeds and traits across diverse cultural interpretations. By analysing the memorial's depiction of resistance during the Holocaust, we examine the balance between idealisation and critical reflection in portraying historical figures. Lessons from this site highlight the evolution of heroism narratives and offer insights into universal and culturally specific notions of heroism. The presentation aims to foster a nuanced understanding of heroism, encouraging dialogue on its fluidity and contextual sensitivity in commemorative practices worldwide.

Katarzyna Jankowska is a chief education specialist. She has been a Polin museum guide for over ten years and a licensed Warsaw city guide since 2011. She has completed an IE course.

Non-human heroes and villains: River personhood in Polish heritage discourse since 2022

Michal Kepski (Poland)

Every river has its own story, and the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Rivers asserts that "all rivers are living entities that possess legal standing". The concept of environmental personhood for rivers means that they have the same rights, privileges, protections, responsibilities, and liabilities of a person. Consequently, rivers may be regarded as non-human heroes or villains.

The presentation analyses the contemporary trend within blue humanities that focuses on river personhood from the perspective of heritage interpretation. It offers critical inquiry into the following questions: Is the personhood of rivers represented within museum and exhibition discourse? What potential impacts might this concept exert on systems of heritage protection and interpretation? The discussion will feature several exhibitions and artistic projects developed in Poland since 2022, marking a pivotal year for revitalising environmental consciousness in the wake of the Odra River disaster.

Michal Kepski is a historian, curator and producer of exhibitions. At the Doctoral School of Humanities at Adam Mickiewicz University he is preparing a work on the history of the Warta River in Poznan in the 19th and 20th centuries. He has been an employee of the Poznan Heritage Centre since 2014 and is co-editor of the first Polish translation of Freeman Tilden's book, 'Interpreting Our Heritage' (2019).

Female (anti)heroes in Serbia and the Balkans – Fairies and witches, women's processions and rituals

Dragana Kojičić (Serbia)

Since history has been largely written by men, a huge number of women's topics remain unexplored or completely misinterpreted.

The attitude towards women in our culture was ambivalent, just as the attitude towards ancestors and all ancient deities – they were

both good and bad. The few privileged women were only those from higher social classes, women in female monasteries, and the only truly free ones – the fairies.

However, there are numerous cracks, an entire subversive subculture that women developed within the patriarchal system, despite all the limitations. If we consider all those small deviations from the order (such as: female property, menstrual houses, female magic, chanting, mourning, ritual laughter, stories about fairies, vampires, and witches), as well as a large number of individual female gatherings (revena, rusalje, kraljice, lazarice, koledarke, kobile), it seems that women have conquered numerous small spaces of freedom in which exclusively female rules prevailed.

Dragana Kojičić has been engaged in the (re)use of raw earth as a material in architecture, as well as in other fields – in the arts and community work – by organising numerous workshops and training. In Almaš quarter in Novi Sad in 2023, she led the project Almaški lep – using results of 11 workshops as a walking exhibition through private and public spaces. For 2025, she is involved in two projects for the town of Zrenjanin: in one, she focuses on the use of earth as a material in the beliefs and customs of Serbs, and in the other proposes walks through the town's architectural heritage, with both experts and celebrities, which will result in creation of different town maps.

Dragana is also currently awaiting the defence of her doctoral dissertation in Scene Architecture, on the topic 'Creating Relationship to Inherited Female Patterns'. Some of the research results will be presented at this conference.

Heritage interpretation re-defined as a 'meaning-making' process: What does this mean in practice?

Patrick Lehnes (Germany)

A new understanding of interpretation as a 'meaning-making process' appears to replace older notions of 'heritage interpretation'. It is based on criticism of previous expert-driven top-down approaches.

But the new concept is still vague. Who 'makes' meanings in the interpretation process? What is the outcome of interpretive 'meaning-making', i.e. what are 'meanings' after all? And how are they processed in self-interpretation, interpretive dialogue or group discussions?

This workshop aims to ground our understanding of interpretive 'meaning-making' in practical experience. Short exercises and thought experiments provide first-hand experience. We discuss instances of everyday interpretation and advanced heritage interpretation linked to heroes. We explore various processes and dimensions that play a role in meaningful heritage interpretation. Can we grasp the essential idea of 'meaning-making' in a way that is useful for interpretive practice?

Patrick Lehnes has worked as a researcher and freelancer in heritage interpretation since the 1990s. From 2010 to 2015 he served as director of Interpret Europe. In 2018, he was invited to the Structured Dialogue between the European Commission and the cultural sector on social inclusion. Patrick is currently Interpret Europe's Cultural Heritage Coordinator.

Joys and challenges of co-creating a learning landscape

Thorsten Ludwig (Germany), Lucija Gudlin (Germany), Valya Stergioti (Greece) & Vanessa Vaio (Italy)

'Creating learning landscapes through heritage interpretation' was the title of the IE conference in 2023. The idea was to co-create interpretive strategies around UNESCO designated sites, and to use IE's refreshed training programme to show how to make heritage more meaningful to people and people more mindful of our common future.

Over the past year, UNESCO and IE have trained IE's certified trainers to address this challenge and interpretive agents to facilitate the development of interpretive strategies in pilot areas across Europe. It was an exciting undertaking that was characterised by many first-time experiences.

Now that we have covered a good part of the journey, it is time to share some lessons learnt and to collect ideas for further work. We will play through some 'interesting' situations, familiarise you with our approaches through active experience, and explore what is needed for co-creative and value-based heritage interpretation to make them successful in practice.

Thorsten Ludwig (MSc Interpretation) studied archaeology and worked at a German national park until 1993, when he founded Bildungswerk interpretation. For 12 years, he was on the Board of the German Association for Natural and Environmental Education (ANU). He also chaired the Board of a foundation running a medieval castle for some years and was Director of Interpret Europe from 2015-2021.

Lucija Gudlin (MA Art History/Pedagogy, Croatia; MA World Heritage Studies, Germany) formerly worked as curator, programme and event organiser (fairy tale festivals, intangible culture of storytelling), and project coordinator (production and implementation of educational materials for working with refugees). She approved and monitored cultural investment projects funded by the German post-pandemic crisis fund and supports Interpret Europe as financial officer and RadioTeater as administrative officer. She is employed as a consultant of sociocultural centres and initiatives.

Valya Stergioti (MSc Environmental Decision Making) is the founder of Alli Meria, an interpretive consultancy agency. As an interpretive planner, writer and a certified IE trainer she works in different countries around the world, empowering local communities so they can create their own interpretive content and services. She was Interpret Europe's first training coordinator, a position she served for eight years.

Vanessa Vaio is a heritage interpretation consultant with over 30 years of experience and owner of Studio PAN, an interpretive planning and consultancy company based in Como, Italy. She specialises in interpretive planning but also trains interpretive guides, manages the development of interpretive panels and creates management plans for heritage sites. Vanessa is IE's Country Coordinator Italy.

Emotion Networking as a method to work with controversial heritage

Monika Michałek (Poland)

During the workshop I will encourage participants to find an insight into their feelings and emotions when we talk about controversial heritage. Can we understand each other expressing our feelings and accept the feelings of other people? Can the perspectives of others change our point of view?

The concepts of heroes and anti-heroes have been crucial to storytelling across cultures, serving as a lens through which societies examine values, ethics, and human behaviour. That is why they are such vulnerable subjects to talk about. What does it mean to the interpreter?

Emotion Networking is a Dutch method of conversation developed by Reinwardt Academy and Imagine IC, focused on understanding others and accepting alternative points of view. It emerged from the practice of heritage work. If heritage tells who we are and who we want to be, everyone should have a voice in the meanings and choices within. Emotion Networking around heritage subjects develops heritage wisdom. It includes the recognition that heritage is not given, it is a choice.

Monika Michałek is a museum educator, interpretive guide and Warsaw guide. She is deputy head of the Education Department in the Museum of Warsaw where she implements and designates educational programmes and organises city games and events. She is author of the award-winning museum programme for teenagers, 'The Art of Storytelling'. She is specialised in the history of Polish Jews. Monika is professionally involved in the education of children and adults, seeking interesting and alternative forms of storytelling and guiding.

National heroes, empires and nation states in Europe

Nigel Mills (UK)

Vercingetorix, Gaius Julius Civilis, Arminius, Boudica, Decebalus are national heroes of France, the Netherlands, Germany, Britain and Romania, respectively. They are all heroes for the same reason – they led their people in revolts against the Roman Empire and in several cases became icons for building their respective nation states. Yet, at the same time, those nation states, especially France, Britain and Germany, eulogised many aspects of the Roman Empire, seeing it as an example to emulate in the construction of their own empires.

The exploits of these heroes have been and continue to be mythologised and politicised as has the Roman Empire. In Romania under communism, the story of Decebalus and the Emperor Trajan was deliberately softened to portray former rivals joining together in friendship, creating a foundation myth for native and Roman strands of modern Romanian identity. Disinformation and 'fake news' are perhaps nothing new. Yet these national heroes remain at the heart of national identities.

What challenges do these subjects represent for heritage interpreters, central as these stories are to national identities, yet shrouded in myth and politicised disinformation and potentially highly sensitive at many different levels in society.

Nigel Mills has many years' experience providing interpretation consultancy across Europe and the UK. Recent projects include:

- Interpretation Framework for the Dacian Limes World Heritage Site in Romania
- Interpretation Framework for Augsburg and Kempten, Bavaria
- Interpretation Strategy for Kipfenberg and the LimesGemeinden, Bavaria

Faces of national and discrete heroes of Yugoslavia – a shift in museum narratives

Aleksandra Momčilović Jovanović (Serbia)

Though Museum of Yugoslavia was established almost 30 years ago on the fragments of two institutions whose missions were to nourish and spread historical macro narratives about the achievements of Josip Broz Tito as the head of state and the Communist Party, museum staff realised the potential of small and diverse stories in sharing experiences that are common to the people that were born and lived in this country. In recent years, the museum has developed a number of projects with different interpretive models, often realised in cooperation with different social groups, communities, experts and artists. I will share some of the examples and illustrate a couple of relevant controversies – from the interpretation of the political figures of Tito and king Aleksandar to Gastarbeiter and working class heroes, I will introduce some of the challenges we are facing.

Aleksandra Momčilović Jovanović is a senior curator who graduated in ethnology and anthropology from the Department of Ethnology and Anthropology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade. In recent years, she has been engaged in defining the development policy of the Museum of Yugoslavia and its implementation. She handles the collections in the field of ethnology within the Josip Broz Tito Historical Memorial Fund and the collection of folklore. She earned her higher professional title by working on the exhibition 'Juga, my Juga - gastarbeiter stories', which she co-authored. She is involved in the standardisation and development of the oral archive of the Museum of Yugoslavia. She is interested in issues of the axiological profile of museum objects, especially the symbolic and affective value in the context of the Yugoslav experience and heritological hermeneutics.

Interpreting heroes: László Székely's imagery in Timișoara's early 20th century development

Florentina Murea-Matache & Lucia Leca (Romania)

The interpretation of historical figures often walks a fine line between idealisation and factual accuracy. László Székely is renowned for his pioneer work in modernising Timișoara, alongside engineer Stan Vidrighin, contributing significantly to the administrative endeavour at the turn of the 20th century, including the city's water supply. The 1914 opening of Water Plant No. 1 Urseni marked a pivotal step in improving water quality and public health. While Székely is often credited with designing the plant, archival evidence attributes its development to Vidrighin.

This paper examines the implications of hero-making in heritage interpretation. By analysing Székely's documented contributions to Timișoara's architectural identity and contrasting them with unfounded claims, the study emphasises the need for interpretations to be rooted in historical accuracy, ensuring that

figures are linked to verifiable achievements rather than idealised myths.

Florentina Murea-Matache is an architect and a specialist on built heritage, at the Ministry of Culture in Romania. She has contributed to numerous research and heritage value recognition projects. Since 2016, she has worked at the National Institute of Heritage, focusing on cultural heritage research, documentation, and protection, with a recent focus on how heritage interpretation supports broader cultural site management goals.

Lucia Leca has been active in the field of cultural heritage since 2014, being involved in various research and enhancement projects for historic buildings. An architect and specialist on built heritage studies for the Ministry of Culture, she has recently been focusing on how interpretation can strengthen the relationship between heritage and communities.

Bandera reaffirmed: Scrutinising lessons of a nationalist symbol in struggling Ukraine

Eleonora Narvselius (Sweden)

The presentation will delve into dilemmas of interpretation of one of the most emotionally charged and politically controversial symbols of modern Ukraine, Stepan Bandera. Bandera's incarnations went through several stages, from a personification of the wartime nationalist movement to an attribute of geopolitics in the Poland-Ukraine-Russia triangle, from a propaganda prop to a pop-cultural meme, and from a local hero to an embodiment of the struggling nation. It is especially instructive to look closer at how Bandera's symbolism has been re-considered and re-framed in Ukraine between two core events in the country's post-Soviet history, namely the Euromaidan in 2014 and the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2022. Arguably, this transformation indicates important shifts in the actual state of public meaning-making in Ukraine, the country that up until now has been searching for its political identity by negotiating its position within the 'triangle of memory' (Poland – Ukraine – Russia), and beyond the triangle of the detrimental '-isms' (Nazism, Soviet authoritarianism, violent nationalism).

Eleonora Narvselius is an anthropologist from Lund University, Sweden. Her research interests comprise Ukrainian memory culture, narrative analysis, heritage interpretation and nationalism. In the course of her academic career, she has participated in several international research projects focusing on urban environment, memory cultures and cultural heritage of East-Central European borderlands. Among her core publications is 'Ukrainian Intelligentsia in Post-Soviet L'viv: Narratives, Identity and Power' (Lexington Books, 2012).

Who defeated Napoleon Bonaparte in his unsuccessful attempt to conquer Akko (Israel) during his war campaign to the East?

Shelley-Anne Peleg (Israel)

The French attempted to lay siege using their infantry only. Napoleon believed the city would capitulate quickly to him. In a documented correspondence with one of his subordinate officers, he even voiced his opinion that a mere two weeks would be necessary to capture the linchpin of his conquest of the Holy Land, before marching on to Constantinople, and from there

back to France via Vienna. But after a two-month siege, his attempt to conquer the city failed. The French soldiers fell into a trap and Napoleon Bonaparte was forced to retreat and withdraw back to Egypt. His unsuccessful attempt to siege Akko was the turning point of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt and Syria.

To whom should we attribute the successful defence of the city?
Was it the local Ottoman cruel ruler al-Jazzar Pasha that refused to surrender and withstood the siege? Was it Haim Farhi, al-Jazzar's Jewish adviser and right-hand man, who played a key role in the city's defence, directly supervising the battle against the siege? Was it the British Commodore Sidney Smith commanding the Royal Navy flotilla that reinforced the Ottoman defences and supplied the city with additional cannon manned by sailors and marines? Or was it the French Military advisor de Phélippeaux, that joined forces with the Ottoman ruler and planned a second defensive wall, several feet deeper into the city, thus producing the trap?

Historical documents show the brutality of the Ottoman army. French soldiers were decapitated, and high ranking officers lost limbs. Dying far from France, they were all buried in Akko. Decapitated skeletons were found during recent archaeological excavations. The graves became important memorial sites in Israel, and French ambassadors and consulates visit these graves regularly and hold military ceremonies.

This presentation suggests different stories about the successful defence programme that are presented according to the cultural identity of the guide, or the cultural affiliation of the group. Local Arab guides often emphasise the capability of the Ottoman – Moslem ruler, while Jewish guides will suggest that the success should be attributed to the Jewish advisor. French visitors are interested in hearing about the French soldier that joined force with the Ottomans, while British people request more information about the English major.

The presentation will question issues such as a 'correct' historical story. How can we present a balanced tour? And is there such a thing? Are we presenting a tour through a narrative depending on a cultural interest or on historical facts? Who was the real hero of this historic event?

Shelley-Anne Peleg is a specialist in conservation procedures and preservation of cultural heritage (archaeological sites, historical cities and intangible heritage) and is an instructor in tour guide courses. She is a fellow researcher and lecturer in the Department of Israel Studies at the University of Haifa, a lecturer at the Kinneret College and an independent researcher. She is the Chairman of the ICOMOS - Israel Intangible Heritage Committee. She was the initiator of Hands-on-Heritage, a programme targeted at promoting cultural heritage in Israel.

Her research areas emphasise the connection between tangible and intangible heritage and tools of connecting local communities to built cultural heritage. These research areas are based on 25 years' work at the Israel Antiquities Authority. Within this framework she served as the Director of the Archaeological Educational Center in North Israel. She initiated, prepared and developed curricula, programmes and seminars for educational systems in Israel. During her second position she served as the director of the International Conservation Center – Citta' di Roma (situated in the Old City of Akko). She established national and international curricula and training programmes in practical conservation and cultural heritage studies. Additional activities included developing programmes to increase awareness of cultural heritage in Israel.

Victims of heroes? Victims of murderers

Ladislav Ptáček (Czechia)

The Ploština Memorial commemorates the murder and burning of the settlement in the White Carpathians less than three weeks before the end of World War II. The cause was the Nazis' attempt to suppress the partisan movement and intimidate the civilian population. The current memorial serves as a place of remembrance and aims to help prevent such crimes from happening again. The exhibition focuses on the victims and the description of the historical event. It also shows how the tragedy was handled, often propagandistically, by various political regimes. An issue that is only very peripherally addressed is the extent of the partisans' responsibility for civilian casualties, which is reflected in some of the artworks.

This paper will focus on the interpretation of the Ploština Memorial as an example of a historical exhibition reflecting institutionalised evil, heroism, sacrifice and responsibility. The presentation will discuss the limits of the current narrative, approaches to interpreting sensitive themes, and suggestions for deeper visitor engagement.

Ladislav Ptáček has been active in the field of heritage interpretation for the past 20 years. Founder and former chairman of the Czech Association for Heritage Interpretation (SIMID), he works as a freelance consultant, contractor and trainer.

Heroes / interpreters of the memory of Old Belgrade: The House of Jevrem Grujić – Museum of Serbian History, Diplomacy, Art, and Avant-Garde

Ana Radovanac Živanov (Serbia)

After a turbulent period of state formation in Serbia, civil society began to develop in its capital, Belgrade, during the 19th century. During this time, affluent families contributed to the strengthening and development of Belgrade and its social life through their activities in diplomacy, politics, art, and literature. One such family is the Grujić family.

The Grujić family home was built in 1896 and remains in their ownership today. In 2015, it was opened to the public and transformed into a private family museum named the House of Jevrem Grujić – Museum of Serbian History, Diplomacy, Art, and Avant-Garde. This cultural monument of great importance is housed in a building designed by architect Milan Kapetanović and was the first object protected by the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments – Belgrade (1961). The sophisticated lifestyle of numerous family members – beginning with Jevrem Grujić, Minister of Finance under Prince Miloš Obrenović rule, diplomat, and liberal leader – helped create an authentic ambiance of an elite 19th-century bourgeois house. Enriched by intangible heritage content, it represents a unique document of Serbian society and its history.

By transforming a private space into a public one, the House of Jevrem Grujić exists in two ways giving a true interpretation: as a place of memory (the past) and as a 'living museum' (the present). The museum's collection has been

gradually formed – its artistic collections cover areas of fine and applied arts and include collections of old weapons and archival materials. The current preserved interior is not entirely original; however, the interpretation concept consists of collected items that evoke memory and serve as triggers for recollection, collectively providing an adequate impulse for creating a museology image.

The presentation will be based on viewing the museum's inventory as a stylistic-historical testimony and as a mechanism for building memory and preserving recollections, highlighting distinguished family members and their individual contributions to Belgrade society. The goal is for the house-museum, viewed as a 'picture' of the preserved heritage of the Grujić family, to enable a specific reading of 19th-century Belgrade's civic history while recognising and emphasising this family as heroes – guardians and interpreters of an authentic unique treasury of national heritage.

Ana Radovanac Živanov is an Art Historian and works as Senior Consultant at the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Serbia in Belgrade. In addition, she is finishing her PhD thesis at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, Department of Art History, at the Seminar for Museology and Heritage studies. She is an IE Certified Interpretive Planner (CIP) and is also IE's Country Coordinator Serbia. She participates in, and is the team leader of, several projects related to the interpretation of cultural heritage in Serbia. Fields of scientific interest include interpretation of cultural heritage, history of architecture in Serbia between the two wars, conservation of cultural heritage, interpretive methodologies and concepts, memory studies, history of private life. She is an author of many professional and scientific articles and is also a member of ICOMOS and the Society of Conservators of Serbia.

Polish heroes as described by a Japanese for the Japanese in the years after World War I

Jadwiga Rodowicz-Czechowska (Poland)

Nitobe Inazō (1862-1933) served for the Japanese government as an adviser to the colonial administration in Taiwan, as Undersecretary in the Secretariat of the League of Nations in Geneve, and as a member of the International Committee for Intellectual Cooperation. He was a pacifist but a proponent of colonial rule, too. During his career he met with numerous people, whom he later described as "great" in his books written for the Japanese readers. He recorded and interpreted their words in two books which are rather unknown: Ijin gunzō (A bunch of Great People) and Tōzai aifurete (When East meets West). He himself wanted to serve as "a bridge between East and West". His descriptions of Polish military leader Józef Piłsudski, the national-democrat politician Roman Dmowski, Prime Minister and virtuoso pianist Ignacy Paderewski, and the top woman scientist Maria Skłodowska-Curie, give interesting cues as to how the Japanese saw heroes of foreign countries and of different cultural backgrounds.

Jadwiga Rodowicz-Czechowska has never participated in interpretation-specific programmes. But he has 20 years' experience as a Polish diplomat (I.a. a Polish Ambassador in Japan), and is a Japanologist by profession. In his work he very often has to navigate between narrations of history as understood by his native (Polish and a Silesian) or European identity, and Japanese paradigms of history and values.

Blind badasses – Turning tales of historical underdogs into interpretive experiences

Iva Silla (Croatia)

Meet a blind watercarrier and some badass women. What difference do they make as interpretive topics, do the audiences want to get to know them, and are the interpreters the heroes or villains of their histories?

In recent years, there has been a growing number of interpretive experiences that are crafted around the historical underdogs, personalities that don't even make it into the footnotes of history books. I will present two such projects that successfully attracted audiences and contributed to the discussion of a more tolerant and socially conscious society. One of them is 'Badass Women of Zagreb', an interpretive walking tour. The other one is an interpretive project about Ivan Čop, a blind water carrier from the Croatian town of Bakar. It consisted of many workshops with local schoolchildren of different ages, creation of a self-guided tour in the shape of an illustrated book, a gamified walking tour, and more. One of them is free for participants, the other one is a service with a price tag. Two different cases can offer a lot of insight on how to build such projects and how the participants react to them.

On the other hand, I will also pose some challenging questions. Even if discussions regarding the acknowledged heroes are becoming a common thing in heritage interpretation, do we dare to do the same when it comes to the unknown ones? Does it even make sense to stir such discussions when building experiences that are meant to contribute to social engagement and spark understanding for disadvantaged groups? Let's think about it together through the examples of our blind badasses.

Iva Silla is an interpretive experiences designer and an Interpret Europe certified trainer. She has experience in the interpretive world as a consultant, trainer, writer and a guide/performer. Last year her company was selected among the top ten young Croatian impact companies thanks to her efforts to create meaningful self-guided tours, just one out of many recognitions she has received for her work. Iva was a part of the creative team for both projects that are presented here.

Change of heart at the museum

Steve Slack (UK)

Blackburn Museum & Art Gallery (UK) is home to CHANGE [of Hart], an interpretive experiment which re-examines the display of historic collections, shifts in attitudes and developing museum practice. After identifying interpretive tropes that seem stuck in the past, this project intentionally seeks to do things differently. Through ten experimental interventions we put R. E. Hart (the dead, white, male Victorian object collector) into the footnotes, both literally and physically. We challenged the reverence of manuscripts with a disco ball; we re-examined gender and colonialism; we wrote on walls; we crammed a case with objects; we invited teens to curate; and we placed Roman coins alongside chocolate bunnies. Importantly, we have brought visitors into conversations about each of these, trying to understand what they make of our change of heart. This paper describes how we went about challenging our own work, where we hoped we could be brave and how we engaged audiences with our work.

Steve Slack has worked in heritage interpretation for over 20 years, creating exhibitions and public programmes at museums, galleries, libraries and outdoor heritage sites. He writes about and teaches interpretation and published Interpreting Heritage: a guide to planning and practice (2021). Steve is based in the UK and works internationally.

Breaking bad in the museum: The ethics of antiheroic interpretation

Philipp Thapa (Germany)

The recent 'Golden Age' of television has shown that mass audiences do appreciate morally complex stories and protagonists, as signified by the rise of anti-hero characters. Heritage interpreters are right to use this opening in narrative habits for reconsidering how they tell political and social history, in particular. More generally, this is a chance to reflect what interpretive patterns we use to select, organise, and evaluate facts, including facts about the natural world. To this end, I highlight some ethical considerations of interpretive storytelling. I argue that interpreters should begin by treating all characters (human and otherwise) in their potential stories as anti-heroes because this gives audiences the freedom to judge for themselves – or to refrain from judgment. In addition, discussing the morally complex stories and characters created by antiheroic interpretation requires a much more sophisticated moral vocabulary than simple heroics. I offer some examples and resources.

Philipp P. Thapa is an ecologist, philosopher, and writer with some experience in natural heritage interpretation. His current work focuses on the potential of the creative sector for sustainable development. Philipp has taught ethics and environmental philosophy at various universities in Germany, currently including Eberswalde University for Sustainable Development. He is a PhD researcher in this field with Radboud University, The Netherlands.

Urban heritage interpretation: Framework for navigating the dynamics of cities

Laura Time (Poland)

This paper explores how heritage interpretation (HI), particularly through interpretive planning (IP), can address the challenges of modern urbanisation, like social inequality, environmental degradation, overtourism, and cultural homogenisation. By engaging with foundational literature, such as Lefebvre's concept of lived space, and value-based interpretation, the research highlights the transformative potential of IP to empower communities and mediate conflicting interests. The author delves into how HI can serve as a methodological bridge for reimagining the evolving relationship between heritage and the complexities of modern cities. Theoretical insights illustrate how IP can balance idealisation with critical deconstruction to reconcile competing urban priorities, and ensure cities remain culturally rich and environmentally sustainable. The session invites participants to reflect on the implicit values conveyed in urban heritage narratives and how they shape contemporary moral orientations and societal cohesion.

Laura Time is a researcher specialising in heritage interpretation, with a focus on integrating interpretive planning into urban development strategies/ urban policies that foster sustainability and inclusivity.

Facilitation approach in the work of an IE trainer

Mateusz Tomaszczyk (Poland)

The workshop aims to answer the questions: What is the difference between a trainer and a facilitator? Where is there room for facilitation in the work of a trainer? What does it offer? What facilitation tools does a trainer use? How do I develop a facilitation approach in myself?

The structure of the workshop is based on exercises and discussions with elements of theory on the facilitation approach woven in.

Mateusz Tomaszczyk is a licensed tourist guide, licenced tour manager and certified business trainer working in the tourism industry. In the area of training, he specialises in developing the competencies (especially soft skills) of tourist guides. He is an IE certified trainer and a trainer for WFTGA with the rank of Lead International Trainer. In the World Federation of Tourist Guide Associations, he works in the training committee in the position of Experienced Trainer. He is a participant in the Facilitator School and will soon complete his Facilitator Certification.

See-Think-Do-Share concept: Good criterion to define target groups

Ondřej Vítek (Czech Republic)

See-Think-Do-Share is a concept developed by Avinash Kaushik for marketing. By this concept you define four different target groups of customers according to the attitude or phase towards purchasing your products. Within this concept the ultimate goal of your company is stable and secure business and admiring customers.

In heritage interpretation, our ultimate goal is secured heritage and visitors showing their respect to the heritage. This is quite similar to the business mentioned above. Therefore we can apply the See-Think-Do-Share concept to our visitors, too. We can identify the heritage to the "See" group , we can explain its uniqueness to the "Think" group. The "Do" group would visit and experience your heritage in person, it would be motivated to repect your rules onsite or it would be actively helping to preserve your heritage e. g. through voluntary work. Those members of the "Share" group would spread your ideas and needs to a broader audience.

Ondrej Vitek is a landscape ecologist, nature conservationist, and an IE Certified Interpretive Guide (CIG) and trainer.

Drelicharki and drelicharze (linen traders) from Andrychów in Poland – local community as collective hero of entrepreneurship

Sebastian Wacięga & Tomasz Adamski (Poland)

In 18th-century Andrychów, a collective hero existed – a community of entrepreneurs. This modest village became a town within few decades. The community developed the cottage industry of weaving before the Industrial Revolution. Thanks to the local policy made by the Schwarzenberg-Czerny family, who were the landowners, the community started to produce high-quality linens and sell them all over Europe using carts forged by local blacksmiths. They reached Hamburg, Amsterdam and Barcelona,

among other countries, and sold 80% of their production abroad. The high quality of production and the excellent organisation of companies called 'kolegacje' (from the word 'colleagues') allowed them their success. Entrepreneurship characterised the community. Innovative thinking characterised two generations of the Czerny-Schwarzenberg family, who created the conditions for entrepreneurship to flourish in 18th-century Andrychów. The game 'Peasant Business School' brings this history to life and recreates the entrepreneurial community.

Sebastian Wacięga is a PhD Interpreter. He is an IE certified trainer, a co-worker with museums as part of the Dynamics of Exposure programme at the Malopolska Institute of Culture, co-creator of heritage-inspired educational games and co-worker with cultural institutions on team, participative strategic planning.

Tomasz Adamski graduated in sociology from Jagiellonian University and in European Studies from the University of Exeter. At the Malopolska Institute of Culture, he heads the team for training and research activities. He is involved in heritage projects, international cooperation and strategic consulting for cultural institutions.

"No more heroes anymore!"

Mark Wallis (UK)

Using the title of a song by the punk band 'The Stranglers', I will discuss why I disagree with the song's premise and ponder why humankind universally feels a need to put other humans on the pedestal marked 'Hero'.

Every country has its own heroes and it is a fascinating study to compare and contrast them. I will examine some of those in the UK who deserve the timeless accolade but will also chart the fate of some who fall under the critical axe of revisionism. Still other heroes rise and fall according to their usefulness to succeeding generations.

Then there are yet others whose real lives were far from heroic but nevertheless were feted by their contemporaries and lauded by later generations (Bonnie Prince Charlie, Dick Turpin) and with Robin Hood and King Arthur we have (probably fictional) heroes who speak to universal human needs, beliefs and desires.

My working life has been spent as the director of what was the UK's largest provider of professional costumed interpretation. Our mission was to bring to life human stories spanning 2,000 years in the UK and I would participate on occasion: this has sometimes required me to portray Oliver Cromwell – a man who was, and still is, both lauded and loathed.

Mark Wallis brought costumed Live Interpretation from Colonial Williamsburg back to the United Kingdom in 1987. His company, Past Pleasures Ltd, held Europe's largest contract for daily professional costumed interpretation and education with Britain's Historic Royal Palaces (until the Covid-19 pandemic). He continues to train interpreters in Europe, Australia and North America and has been made a Fellow of the UK Association for Heritage Interpretation (AHI) which has called him the 'Father of Costumed Interpretation'.

Rethink revolutionary art

Dr. Katarina Živanović (Serbia)

This presentation explores the exhibition Kun: Artist – Worker – Soldier, which reinterpreted the artist's multifaceted oeuvre by situating it within the framework of Yugoslav avant-garde and critical art practices, highlighting the convergence of art and politics.

Utilising contemporary curatorial approaches, the exhibition redefined the retrospective format by fostering an ongoing dialogue between diverse artefacts from Kun's extensive legacy. These included large-scale oil paintings, graphic maps, numerous drawings and illustrations, applied art objects, and archival materials. Both the artworks and archival resources were presented with equal significance, accompanied by thoughtfully created interpretive texts and design.

Given Kun's profound resonance within collective memory, the exhibition also engaged with contemporary artistic practices, prompting the essential question: For which values should we fight today?

Katarina Živanović holds a PhD and is an expert in cultural heritage, specialising in cultural management, museum interpretation, and community engagement. Her work bridges theory and practice, emphasising the integration of cultural heritage with pressing social issues through a transdisciplinary, holistic dialogue that values cultural diversity and inclusivity. She is a board member of Europa Nostra Serbia and an active participant in the professional network of Creative Mentorships. She currently leads the Gallery of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, where she oversees innovative curatorial practices and fosters meaningful connections between heritage and contemporary society.