THE TYRANNY OF NARRATIVE

History, Heritage, and Hatred in the Modern Middle East

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ABSTRACT

Narrative is the heart of heritage interpretation, and modern Middle Eastern narratives of national histories tell distinct and conflicting tales. This paper highlights some major genres of archaeological and historical storytelling and analyzes the symbolic messages they convey. A closer look at the juxtaposition of competing story forms reveals a complex intertwining, in which one nation or ethnic group's "period of desolation" is simultaneous with their rivals' "Golden Age."

From the very beginning of modern heritage commemoration, the celebration of every nation's unique historical identity and destiny has been a central motif (Connerton 1989). Indeed, the drama of each nation's rise (or rebirth) and fervent belief in its unchanging national "character" have been commonly communicated in the form of a narrative, a story told—as we will see—in many styles and communications media. This familiar story always extends from the dawn of history to the modern era, highlighting the distinctive talents, events, and leaders that have made a particular country great (Silberman 1995). B. Anderson has highlighted the process by which these "imagined" national communities have played a decisive role in modern political life (2006) and in a pioneering work on this subject, B. Lewis has described this process as "History: Remembered, Recovered, Invented" (1987), suggesting that these national narratives are the result of contemporary social contexts with a wide range of contemporary political and ideological aims.

Indeed when the formulation of the national narrative is seen not only as a commonplace internal function of modern state building, but also as a potentially powerful offensive weapon, the negative impact of traditional heritage stories becomes clearer. A teleological vision of history that sees the present politico-economic regime of a particular modern nation as the inevitable and triumphal endpoint of a millennia-long story of struggle, perseverance, and territorial attachment is almost certain to be mobilized in contemporary conflicts between rival nations, as justification for purely contemporary territorial or military goals. Although the narratives may be reported to be based on sound historical method and/or systematic archaeological excavations, the selective use of the past as a rationale for modern policy is also a "romantic" literary creation, especially in its dissemination in the national educational system, mass media, and popular culture (Lowenthal 1996). Historical and archaeological narratives are comprised of a meaningful arrangement of arbitrarily chosen arguments or evidence that can serve seemingly to validate a particular ideology. Claims of ethnic precedence should therefore be viewed as contemporary assertions rather than merely antiquarian facts. The case of Israel and Palestine is perhaps the...
clearest example: the competing narratives of Israelis and Palestinians that claim to express the greater validity and “truth” of their territorial claims—even if based on legitimate archaeological or historical documentation—cannot both be exclusively true (e.g., Benvenisti 2000).

Geopolitical changes can also occasion new narratives in which the repatriation of significant archaeological artifacts from former colonial powers is seen as a symbolic historical validation and the climax of a political-poetic narrative (Cuno 2008). It is a narrative materially enacted in the mass media and political fora, through the calls for—or actual return of—nationally symbolic artifacts. Still more assertive are the increasingly numerous claims of indigenous peoples not only for repatriation of human remains and religious objects, but also for recognition of their exclusive rights both to interpret and to control their own heritage (Fforde, Hubert, and Turnbull 2002). These asserted rights are the highpoint of historical narratives of vindication and empowerment, rhetorically redressing historical traumas of displacement, colonization, and attempted genocide.

In view of this widespread use of heritage narratives for contemporary purposes, it is perhaps useful to consider more closely what the term “heritage narrative” implies. The work of D. Lowenthal (1985; 1996) has highlighted the contingent and highly subjective nature of heritage as a dynamic, contemporary means of public reflection and reaction to images of the past. H. White (1987) and subsequently K. Jenkins (2003) have analyzed the literally constructed nature of academic historiography and have powerfully argued that narrative is the basic (and inescapable) medium for deriving meaning from otherwise isolated historical facts. In the sections that follow I will attempt to show that the combination of the two—public heritage commemoration based on academic narratives—has become the most influential means of expressing political identity in the twenty-first century and that both have a decidedly negative influence on the possibility of contemporary political compromise and cultural coexistence in the Middle East.

Heritage Narratives in a Globalized and Tribalized World

Heritage narratives must be clearly distinguished from scholarly historiography in the sense that they serve clear public (rather than academic research) purposes and they come in a variety of media and forms. While the work of White (1987) and Jenkins (2003) surely applies to the literary formation of historians’ and archaeologists’ “stories,” they fail to deal with the aspects of public communication and performance that the popularization of those narratives necessarily entails (Beck and Cable 2002). In that sense they represent something akin to the “powerful speech” of oral cultures, where professional bards elaborate tales from the past to challenge or flatter the powers-that-be (Niles 1999). In these narratives there is no question of an objective, scientific presentation of the past entirely separate from the present. The primary point of the exercise is to utilize the metaphorical power of origin accounts and hero adventures to make evocative connections to the institutions and events of the present day.

In oral cultures, the changes made to epic narratives are incremental; subtle innovations that enrich the story without transforming its basic direction are testimony to the narrator’s skill. But when we consider the role of the narrator or interpreter within modern heritage practice, the issue of “change” becomes especially contentious. New stories quickly arise from emerging political contexts as much as from surprising discoveries. In the initial, domestic phase of the modern Heritage movement in Western Europe and the United States in the nineteenth century, the conservation and public display of historical monuments and archaeological sites was an essentially romantic, conservative one, tracing the essentialized history of an ethnically and linguistically homogeneous nation through a series of political, artistic, and technological stages of development, each illustrated by a particular group of landscapes and iconic monuments (Lowenthal 1985). At the same time, a brand of “imperial” archaeology was developed by those same nations, concentrating on the Mediterranean and—especially important for the subject of this paper—in the Middle East (Silberman 1982). Its main narrative was a universalized history of civilization, symbolized by a progressive chain of great monuments and artworks that culminated in the rise of “the West.”

These two approaches to official heritage commemoration (and by extension, to the narratives that underlay them) informed international policy and legal frameworks throughout the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century. Yet with the rise of systematic
social history, interest in indigenous and non-European, non-monumental, heritage, and intangible cultural heritage, the perceived locus of significance began to shift (Araoz 2007). Basic questions began to be asked about heritage monuments and the narratives on which they were based: Is/should heritage be stable or frozen? Is it exceptional? Is it typical? Is it global? Does it unite communities and nations or does it inevitably create tensions between those identified as “us” against those culturally branded as “them”? The narratives told about the past were increasingly seen not merely as popular syntheses or resumes of historical scholarship, but as a type of public discourse with enormous influence on and influence from contemporary ideologies (Kohl and Fawcett 1995).

The general scholarly recognition of the contemporary political subtexts of traditional western heritage narratives gradually revolutionized the theoretical orientation of archaeology (Trigger 1984), museology (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998), and of public heritage practice itself (Smith 2006), resulting in the creation of counter-narratives and the commemoration of silenced or overlooked voices through non-elite material culture, intangible traditions, and oral histories. Yet the basic form of the narrative (if not its specific contents) remained largely unchanged. Sites, objects, and behaviors continued to be seen, pars pro toto, as symbolic representations of a story that linked the present with the past. Whether it was family values, technological innovation, ethnic traditions, indigenous cosmologies, or historical tragedies, the narrative arc was meant to enshrine the nobility of the contemporary subject as essentially timeless, eternal, and inevitable.

As mentioned above, the power of heritage narratives is magnified by their diversity of narrative styles and media (Dicks 2003; Silberman 2004), yet is integrated into the flow of contemporary life by a striking uniformity of physical form. In the design and construction of heritage sites all over the world, the heritage narrative has become embodied—a public ritual performance that is a narrative “meant to be read primarily with the visitors’ emotions and feet” (Silberman 2007: 183). The visit to an historic monument or archaeological site has its own sequential structure: from the parking lot, through the ticket booth, along a carefully marked path of interpretation, out through the gift shop and cafeteria, and back to the parking lot again. This ritual superimposes a personal story of (presumably) memorable experience on the “official” narrative of the site. And whether it is in Europe, the United States, or the warring nations of the Middle East, the modern heritage site cements the seemingly inevitable and unbreakable connection between a carefully selected starting point in the past and the consciousness of the individual visitor in the present. As such, it is often a celebration of historical essentialism that impedes the possibility of change.

**A Basic Typology of Historical Narratives**

The ubiquity of heritage narrative frameworks should not blind us to the distinctive messages and morals that various heritage narratives express. As will be seen in the following section, their recombination in distinctive and conflicting patterns in Middle Eastern heritage sites and presentations exerts a powerful effect on contemporary conflicts.

1. The “Decline” Narrative (Fig. 1): Expressed in antiquity in the Garden of Eden story in the biblical book of Genesis (2:8–24) and in the declining “Ages of Man” in Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, this basic narrative sees human history as a tale of steady decay and moral deterioration. It looks back to an idealized Golden Age—timeless and perfect—which the chaotic forces of evil, greed, hatred, and violence have destroyed. In this narrative of despair, sin, decay, and deterioration are the inevitable effects of the passage of time.

2. The “Progress” Narrative (Fig. 2): In this alternative unidirectional narrative, history is a saga of steady improvement, from barbarism to advanced civilization. The universal missionary religions’ vision of ever-widening conversions; the Enlightenment belief in steady improvement through rationality; and the modernist vision of better life through ever-evolving technologies (Nisbet 1980) typify this upward narrative line. It expresses confidence that life can and will get better, due to human ingenuity or divine decree.

3. The “Suffering” Narrative (Fig 3): This compound narrative form expresses both a rise to a Golden Age of power and prosperity and a painful descent into
powerlessness and dependence, which often form the narrative used by diasporic or exiled peoples to underline their complex identity. The descent may be ascribed to the people’s own failings or to forces beyond the people’s control. It is the victim’s expression of collective resentment and communal martyrdom.

4. The “Restoration” Narrative (Fig. 4): In this final variation, we have the fully articulated theological scenario, in which the effects of an unexpected and
painful historical catastrophe are reversed. A people or community, having experienced both the triumph of self-determination and political power and the humiliation of weakness and displacement is restored to its rightful station. The Golden Age is not seen as a brief moment of glory, but as the nation’s true destiny—its once and future greatness among the families of mankind. This narrative expresses
confidence in the certainty of the people's eventual vindication. It is an epic quest of an ancient, but now-suffering, people for a new Golden Age.

**From Ancient Myth to Modern Story**

What is the relevance of these heritage narrative types to the Arab-Israeli conflict? As I will suggest in this section, the traditional narratives of decline, progress, suffering, and restoration have been updated and retold with archaeological illustrations and linked closely with the rising or falling fortunes of each ethnic group or nation-state. The effect, I would argue, has been to intensify the zero-sum conflict in the region by restricting visions of history to separate viewpoints, in each of which there is only one true nation of destiny, namely “ourselves.” All other nations are either weak or evil characters in the historical story. Unfortunately a nation can be triumphant in its own narrative and play the role of the villain in the narrative of someone else. This duality of perceptions and interchangeability of characters makes shared histories (and peaceful coexistence in the present) exceedingly difficult as the story logic demands only one winner in history. The tyranny of these narratives, then, is their focus on complete victory or complete degradation for one side or the other, and their insistence that history has an unchangeable, preordained plan.

Through the later nineteenth and especially the twentieth centuries, the biblical stories of mankind’s creation through Adam and Eve were gradually supplanted by a narrative of increasingly upright and larger-brained hominids, yet the inflection of those stories being evidence of either “decline” or “progress” remained (Landau 1991). Likewise the rise and fall of the great ancient Near Eastern empires, as discovered and elaborated by modern European antiquarians and archaeologists, was told as a narrative of steady progress toward a Golden Age of social complexity and monumental building and then a long decline in which the monuments became ruins and the great kingdoms disappeared. Yet in the telling of this story by Western archaeologists and scholars, it became a decidedly different tale from those told in sorrow of a people’s lost greatness. The imperial nations of the West now assumed for themselves the status of true “inheritors,” leaving the modern nations of the Middle East entirely out of the picture and suggesting a parallel between the great imperial civilizations of antiquity and their own modern Golden Age (Larsen 1994; Kuklick 1996; Reid 2002). An exclusivist narrative of inheritance of the great cultural and technological achievements of ancient Near Eastern civilization—without any necessary connection with the people who had lived there for millennia (Fig. 5).
The rise of modern nationalist movements in the region began to contest this imperial vision, with modern Egyptians, Lebanese, Syrians, and Zionists claiming a particular ancient civilization (and maximal territory) for themselves. Thus the “adopted inheritance” scenario was particularized and politicized by the elite of would-be ethnic nation-states to justify their exclusivist twentieth-century sovereignty claims. The Lebanese Maronites identified with the commerce-minded Phoenicians; the Turks with the powerful Hittites; the Egyptian nationalists with the greatness of the pharaohs; and the Jordanians with the Nabataeans and the classical bedouin. Of all of these stories of national resurrection, the Zionist and later Israeli narrative of Jewish national rebirth was most conspicuously celebrated and validated by archaeological excavations and elaborate heritage presentations (Fig. 6). Taking the literal historicity of the Bible for granted, the Jewish community of Palestine-Israel saw its Golden Age in the era of ancient political independence under the Israelite kingdoms and later kingdoms of the Hasmoneans and Herod, punctuated by periods of exile and desolation, that were finally reversed and ended forever with the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. At every major heritage site (e.g., Hazor, Megiddo, Masada, Qumran, and Jerusalem) the presentation and interpretation of ancient Israelite or Jewish remains stood as both a general symbol of historical regeneration and a specific illustration of a particular chapter of this narrative of national rebirth (Silberman 1993).

In the gradual crystallization of a Palestinian national movement in the early twentieth century, archaeology was never an important factor, but folklore, memory, and historical geography were woven into a powerful narrative of subjugation and dispossession (Khalidi 1998), closely following the trajectory of the traditional “suffering” tale (Fig. 7). Obviously the Israeli and Palestinian narratives partially responded to each other. Yet it is in the specific juxtaposition of the stories, not merely the internal role each narrative plays in the self-conscious identity of each nation. What makes the interaction of these two narratives so intractably hostile is that, when seen together, they are inextricably intertwined (Fig. 8). The Golden Age of one narrative is the period of desolation of the other, and as one gains power and predominance, the other must inevitably suffer decline. Indeed the central lesson represented by this simultaneous change of fortune in opposite directions is that history itself is a zero-sum game.

Thus the tyranny of narrative in the current Arab-Israeli conflict transforms every historical discovery into a reason for hostility and intransigence in the on-and-off struggle to reach a political settlement that does not
undermine their core identities. Yet as long as powerful and entirely exclusivist links continue to be made between idealized, ethnically homogeneous Golden Ages and specific modern national movements, the peoples of Israel and Palestine will be unable to see even the possibility of a shared history.

A New Narrative that “Remembers” Forward

So what can we learn from the irreconcilable positions encouraged by heritage narratives in the Middle East and in other regions of conflict throughout the world? The fruit of such competing narratives is inevitably
bitter. A new approach to heritage in the Middle East, as elsewhere, must somehow avoid seeing the present as anything more than a waypoint on a still unfolding history, whose course is not inevitable, but unpredictably determined by the variable capacity of humans for both wisdom and self-destructiveness. Moreover, new understandings of complex population genetics show the factual difficulty of drawing precise (and exclusive!) genealogical connections between ancient peoples and contemporary ethnic nation-states (among the first were Mirza and Dungworth 1995), thus undermining the rationale for long-range historical redress through contemporary events.

The narrative link between past and present has heretofore been inherently conflictual, essentializing historical processes and rigidly separating an “us” from a “them.” The key to breaking through stifling and unnuanced heritage narrative patterns may lie in the recognition that the final verdict of history is yet to be written and the numberless experiences and insights revealed in the traditions and remains of the past do not mandate any particular ending, rather hypotheses that could serve as foci for discussion about what a common future could be. Thus, this article has attempted to sketch out a rough typology of historical and heritage narratives that should be analyzed and understood as literary expressions based on tradition and fragmentary evidence, not indisputable, unambiguous historical reality. This approach can help us analyze the processes and impacts of narrative construction as an essential component of historical consciousness, rather than merely accepting the exclusivist conclusions of the narratives themselves.

Further research must be done on the dynamics of tradition—namely how certain narrative patterns are adapted through time to serve changing political identities and ideological trends. It is essential to craft narratives that integrate conserved traditions, scientific discoveries, and archaeological landscapes with a view to the future, not just the present. This new kind of narrative, this altered juxtaposition of the past and the future, can help us see ongoing inheritance conflicts as the period of desolation that rival nations share. Thus the structure of public heritage narratives may need to be reconceived as a link between the past and a shared future that is within the power of contemporary communities in Israel and Palestine (and elsewhere) to fashion for themselves (Fig. 9).

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**FIG. 9**
Toward a Shared Narrative.
References