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Entities out of Time

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A decade or so ago, in May of 2013, I was invited to the Universiteit van Amsterdam for a talk. Having a free morning on a Wednesday, I took the opportunity to visit the Rijksmuseum, which had only just re-opened its doors following an extensive multi-year renovation. The museum's design prompted visitors to begin the tour downstairs, in the low-ceilinged and dimly lit gallery dedicated to the art and culture of the Low Countries during the later middle ages. As I remember it, the first item in the gallery, sitting astride its broad entrance like a boulder in the midst of a stream, was the expressively carved head and face of a late medieval saint or mystic. The accompanying label, waxing eloquently about the piece, noted how the talented artist had managed to achieve an aesthetic that was, as the object label put it, "almost modern."

Over the years, I have taken unsystematic note of anachronisms like this that are described as if they had somehow managed to travel through wormholes in time and arrive in places where they don't belong. The ones considered "almost modern" are things, practices, or institutions so instantly familiar to us that we are surprised to discover them imprisoned in the past. At odds with their own date stamp, they get treated as harbingers, outliers, or false starts. More often, one finds entities that have moved in the opposite direction through the wormholes of time, such as barbaric practices described as "almost medieval" or "from the Stone Age." These are legacies or left overs, clinging on to existence like barnacles in the face of the rising tide of modernity. Rhetorically, such entities contribute to the work of chronological othering discussed by Éloïse Adde and other contributors to this forum. Some evolutionary psychologists gesture to a related phenomenon when they speak of evolutionary "hangovers": annoying behavioral propensities that, once upon a time, were actually useful, and linger on today only because they got lodged in genes. In the same vein, science journalists engaging with the work of zoologists and paleontologists are prone to describing ancient species like lungfish as "living fossils."

Entities out of time are not all that significant in the grand scheme of things, since people typically deploy the concept in ways that are casual or unserious. I don't think the curator at the Rijksmuseum was really making an argument to the effect that a late-medieval Dutch wood carver had somehow anticipated modernity. To call barbaric behavior "medieval" is an insult, not an argument. Every ichthyologist knows that the lungfish is a creature of today. What's interesting is the rhetorical instinct that produces such off-the-cuff expressions. Sometimes, the arguments and suppositions that matter the most are the ones we convey implicitly, by means of rhetoric, metaphor, and analogy. Evocations of entities out of time, on this theory, reveal habits of thought about chronology, periodization, and the historical imagination so deep-seated that we are not even aware of them.

To conceive of entities out of time is to imagine that something has departed from its homeland and wandered forward or backward in time, like an emigrant. The homeland is one of any number of the conventional time periods into which Euroamerican scholars divvy up the human and geological past: time periods, as Phillip John Usher notes, that in the current moment are targets of such a restless desire to define and redefine. Time periods have a nested quality whereby smaller spans of time, such as "later medieval Europe," "Holocene," or "Magdalenian" typically nestle inside larger spans, in this case "European Middle Ages," "Cenozoic," and "Upper Paleolithic." Each period is defined by a set of attributes that, much like chemical or isotopic signatures, serve as identifying fingerprints. Thus, a certain cast of mind is "medieval" because it has qualities that someone has decided are typical of how people in the middle ages thought. Ditto for a certain style of handwriting, or a way of collecting tax revenues, or beliefs about Others. All these things carry some kind of cultural signature that we classify under the portmanteau word "medieval."

Tracy Adams makes the important observation that an over-reliance on time periods can render things invisible to scholarship. Bearing this caveat in mind, some aspects of this kind of thinking do in fact make a great deal of sense. As Anna Klosowska points out, time periods offer a "common ground" that makes it easier for us to focus and to share. I am currently working on a project related to later medieval European material culture, using a rich collection of household inventories from all over the continent. I can wander into houses pretty much anywhere—France, Catalonia, Provence, Tuscany, England—and a lot of what I find is instantly recognizable by virtue of having counterparts elsewhere in Europe. The assemblages of equipment and furniture fit together in a way that makes sense. There is nothing unreasonable, therefore, about talking about a typical "medieval" household. Problems arise only when the time period is asked to do other kinds of intellectual work.

The systems of chronological classification that we use today are products of history. The archaeological version of the story of how time periods came to be is particularly instructive. In the nineteenth century, European scholars working in the field of what came to be known as prehistoric archaeology realized that the forms and attributes of stone tools reveal manufacturing techniques characteristic of vast assemblages. They began to name these assemblages. Since the finds were often located in strata, archaeologists were able to place them in relative chronological order. Given the existence of stratigraphy, it was easy to know that the tools that came to be known as "Solutrean" came before Magdalenian tools and after Gravettian. Archaeologists borrowed the technique of stratigraphy from geology, where the principle of relative chronology, in Europe, had been developed in the seventeenth century. At the time, no one knew how to accurately date the assemblages. For this reason, there was no serious effort to place the finds on an absolute time scale.

All this changed in the twentieth century, with the development of techniques for dating based on radioactive decay and other proxies. Over a period of decades, past eras and epochs that had formerly floated in absolute time were placed firmly on a chronology, and date stamps were added to period boundaries and entities. The newfound ability to date objects has been extraordinarily illuminating. Among other things, it has allowed the time of archaeology to be folded into the time of history. But when we date things, we have to constantly remind ourselves that the entities in question do not acquire their properties or attributes from chronology itself, let alone the time period to which the date is attached. To appreciate this in an archaeological context, you only have to consider the fact that the dates associated with the Neolithic are completely different depending on whether you're in Ankara or Orkney. The danger of forgetting this, as Johannes Fabian, Eric Wolf, and many others have pointed out, lies in the fact that when entities get handcuffed to dates or time periods, anyone who displays or practices those entities gets jerked forward or backward in time, becoming modern or primitive in the process.[1]

To appreciate the dangers associated with imagining that time is a meaningful attribute of an entity, consider a scenario in which you have caught a fish but lack a knife. If you have the necessary skill, you can pick up a handy cobble, knock off a sharp flake, and use it to gut the fish. This is a technique one would find throughout the Stone Age. Theoretically, it is possible that the skill itself, for some of those who possess it today, has been passed down through an unbroken sequence of ancestors going back to the Stone Age. Given the situation, is it okay to describe this as a "Stone Age practice?"

Certainly not. One cannot apply a period label to an entity, in this case a practice or set of gestures, that itself is not datable. It makes sense to apply a date stamp to a datable event, such as the actual year and day when a knapper chipped a flake off a cobble or when Louis XVI was guillotined. As above, it is convenient to use period labels to describe the assemblages that are particular to specific historical eras, since in any given society, things tend to fit together. But it doesn't make sense to apply a period label to an abstraction such as the sequence of gestures that produces a stone flake. The act of making a flake to gut a fish is not a Stone Age practice for exactly the same reason that sex is not a Stone Age practice.

Even tangible things, such as those you find in museum exhibits, are profoundly undatable. Imagine that you are showing the Rijksmuseum sculpture to a visitor from Mars. You explain that it is "from" 1475. You might well get the puzzled response "but isn't it here right now?" To say it is "from" 1475, you begin to realize, is as wrong as saying that a citizen of France is "from" Algeria. The Martian is part of a small group of visitors that includes a dendrochronologist, who examines the wood grain very closely and tells you that the object really dates to 1450, when the tree was felled. The astrophysicist in the group, who is in an ornery mood, is provoked to say that the hydrogen in the piece dates to the Big Bang and the heavier elements to various and more recent supernovae whose detritus coalesced in our own solar system. Some of the proteins in the wood, the plant geneticist informs you, display particular patterns of folding that are the product of genes that date back only a few hundred million years.

At this point, the curator scrubs out the date on the existing label and replaces it with one that says "carved in this form circa 1475," hoping to still the criticism by adding a little more precision to the thing that is being dated. But even that date stamp has an arbitrary quality, for it overlooks the gradual loss of the colorful paint that was originally applied to the surface, the weathering that has taken place since the paint was lost, and any retouching that may have been done by collectors or curators. The dates assigned to buildings such as medieval European cathedrals, endlessly renovated, are particularly meaningless. More subtly, after the sculpture was first removed from its original context, is it still the same sculpture? Critics of the plans afoot to clone mammoths have pointed out that whatever a mammoth is, it consists of the animal itself and its ecological niche. In this understanding, the definition of a mammoth includes the cultural memory of its own migration routes as well as its DNA. When you resurrect an animal without bothering to bring back everything else, you don't really have a mammoth. Ergo, the sculpture in the Rijksmuseum isn't from 1475. Arguably, it's really from 2013, the year when it was placed in its current location—although the Martian still insists it's from right now.

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[1] Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1983); Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History*, 2nd edition (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA/ London: University of California Press, 2010).

Also hard to date, though for different reasons, are the Neolithic arrow points that are occasionally found in early medieval graves. Which of these two acts governs the date stamp: the moment of the original knapping of the points, or the moment when the points were discovered in furrows and repurposed as grave goods or apotropaic devices? An instance where the dating system has been provided by the repurposing, not the original manufacture, is seen in the case of the Makapansgat pebble. This is a small pebble from southern Africa on which natural processes of wear, over tens of millions of years, sculpted something that looks for all the world like a human face. Around 3 million years ago, an Australopith, apparently struck by the resemblance, picked up the pebble and carried it away, eventually depositing it some miles away from the nearest possible geological source. A long time later, the pebble was found alongside datable Australopithecine remains. Go read about the pebble online. You'll probably find that it bears the date stamp "circa 3 million years before present" or similar.

These thought experiments are playful, yes, but what they show is how date stamps and period stamps, when applied to anything that is not an event, do not describe a quality that is intrinsic to the entity in question. The inconsequential nature of date stamps or period labels can be appreciated by considering the fact that anthropology, at its core, is indifferent to dates. This is not to say that anthropologists don't date things or describe periods. Date stamps and period dating are particularly important for anthropological archaeology and related fields. But the goal of anthropology is to drive beyond the particular instantiations of customs, patterns, processes, or things—a gift, a welcome, a work slow-down, a fetish—to arrive at analytical objects that are abstract and undatable, such as gift exchange, hospitality, resistance, and hau. Yes, for anthropologists to say anything at all, they have to ponder the datable manifestations of such analytical objects, but the next step is to boil away the particular to arrive at the general. The dates vanish in the steam.

This raises the question of why people who think like Euroamerican historians collect entities from the past and mount them, like the corpses of so many butterflies, on timelines. It is not my place to speak for all the many ways in which the world's people, both past and present, have chosen to render their own understandings of the past without the need for dates, but what seems obvious to me is that there are ways of engaging with the past that do not involve stretching the thing out on a tenter in the manner peculiar to the Euroamerican historical imagination. The habit is actually peculiar only to the historical imagination that emerged in the relatively recent past. The individuals who compiled medieval household inventories, to take a salient example, sometimes described things as "old" or "ancient," but they never, ever, attached date stamps or period labels. The historical calendar, with its hashmarks, emerged from Europe's revolution in chronological understanding, as described by David Landes and others, a revolution that produced the providential and teleological histories that subsequently came to rule the historical imagination.[2] Today, we congratulate ourselves on having jettisoned the teleology, but it continues to exert a silent grip by virtue of the hash-marked chronology that, like a barnacle, lingers on. Indravati Félicité suggests that the grip of the master periodization of modern and premodern is growing even more intense, given how necessary it is for sustaining the illusion of rupture upon which so much of the contemporary historical imagination depends.

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[2] David S. Landes, *Revolution in Time: Clocks and the Making of the Modern World*, rev. and enl. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

I think about the lingering grip of historical time periods as I contemplate the tendency—much in vogue among medievalists today, including good friends—to think about the "global middle ages." Leaving aside the slight whiff of academic imperialism that accompanies the act of speaking about "medieval Africa," the intentions that have fostered this trend are honest and good. As Sharon Kinoshita points out, to speak of a "global middle ages" is to acknowledge that interesting things have happened all over the world before the era of European hegemony. But there is something slightly odd about the desire to place Cahokia and Paris together in the same conversation simply because interesting things were happening in both places in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The problem here is that the act of describing Cahokia as "medieval" simply because it is co-eval with medieval Europe would give far too much importance to time as an attribute of entities, as if the ticking clock of world historical time automatically leads to situations where human social formations occupying the same time slots are, or ought to be, roughly similar to one another. Why should the pairing "Cahokia – Paris" be more meaningful than the pairing "Gobekli Tepe – Paris"? What does coevalness contribute to the act of comparison? To appreciate the problems with this kind of thinking, think about the discomfort you might feel if you found yourself reading a book referring to something that happened eight hundred years ago, in "medieval Australia."

When I approach household inventories from later medieval Europe, I begin by selecting records based on their date stamps. I know the date stamp with a great deal of confidence because each inventory was the product of a datable event. As I read and analyze the collection, I begin to discern the presence of typical items and assemblages that fit together in interesting ways. What emerges from this process is an abstraction that, for sake of convenience, I can call a "typical late medieval household" with its typological variants. What I have to resist is the temptation to allow the label to drift out of the world in which it was formulated. It doesn't make sense to speak about households in Cahokia as medieval households simply because they occupy a similar time slot. It makes even less sense to speak about medieval Australian rock art. In a different vein, the material profile of some peasant households in twentieth-century Italy is distinctly similar to that of households in the same region in 1350. But those households are not medieval. They are twentieth century. The act of comparing households across time is more meaningful when I begin from the assumption that the twentieth-century Italian peasant household, with all its similarities to the late medieval household, was the product of conditions of the twentieth century, not a bit of flotsam that was left behind when the dark medieval tide receded.

The perception of a similarity that extends across time invites the rhetorical flourish whereby we embrace them under the same period label. It has the appearance of being a small and innocent gesture. That is precisely why we have to resist the temptation. Vast, hidden arguments emerge unbidden from tiny and subtle premises, especially when those premises are left unexamined. To appreciate this claim, consider how the idea that a modern entity is "almost medieval" has an eerie counterpart in the rhetoric of xenophobic nationalism. To say that some behavior is "almost medieval" is to deny the possibility of explaining that behavior as a product of modernity. Conversely, to suggest that a late thirteenth-century farce such as Adam de la Halle's *Jeu de la feuillée* is "modern," as was in vogue once upon a time among theater historians, is to deny that medieval people were capable of appreciating biting social satire.[3] Once again, it grants chronology an explanatory sovereignty that chronology does not deserve. When I laboriously assemble an abstraction of the typical medieval household, the word that must be underscored is “typical.” So many of the households I study have components and assemblages that are not part of the abstraction. An immigrant from Algeria might not be typical but she is fully French.

With Kathleen Davis and others, I believe that the chronological dimensions of the historical imagination that emerged in the twentieth century are grounded in understandings of time that are themselves the product of historical trends.[4] The time periods and date stamps that are now baked into historical thought and museum ontology are not universal. They are provincial. To a degree that is more than a little disturbing, they have cross-pollinated with the ontological categories and systems of classification that accompanied nineteenth-century Europe’s imperial projects and the rise of xenophobic nationalism. These habits of thought are so intrinsic to historical practice that they are hard to see. They are not taught; they are absorbed intuitively. Like fungi, which are the fruiting bodies of vast underground organisms, the rhetorical gestures that produce entities out of time reveal the presence of these ways of thinking about chronology, periodization, and the historical imagination.

About the author:

Daniel Lord Smail is professor of history at Harvard University, where he works on deep human history and the history and anthropology of Mediterranean societies between 1100 and 1600. His current research approaches transformations in the material culture of later medieval Mediterranean Europe using household inventories and inventories of debt collection from Lucca and Marseille. His books include *Legal Plunder: Households and Debt Collection in Late Medieval Europe* (2016); *On Deep History and the Brain* (2008); and *The Consumption of Justice: Emotions, Publicity, and Legal Culture in Marseille, 1264-1423* (2003), and he is also one of the principal investigators of the digital scholarship project, The Documentary Archaeology of Late Medieval Europe. He is now embarking on a microhistory of a formerly enslaved North African woman in later medieval Provence.

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[3] See the critique in Carol Symes, *A Common Stage: Theater and Public Life in Medieval Arras*, Conjunctions of Religion and Power in the Medieval Past (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

[4] Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time*, Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).