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THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

A Multi-Perspective History of Modern Europe, 1500-2000

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7.4.1 Heritage and Memory in Early Modern History (ca. 1500–1800)

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Introduction

Memories are narratives—representations and retellings of events—which provide a shared sense of the past. Through memory, communities (and not just individuals) can remember events, such as the emergence of modern states, or the history of a town or religion. Memory is often a collective and social act constituted in the present by the telling and retelling of stories about the past.

In the early modern period, memory played an important role as a foundation for and a legitimator of laws, privileges, customs, and—on a larger scale—of political and religious systems. Memory played an especially large role in the case of 'confessional history', which sought to explain and affirm the beliefs and attitudes of various religions, such as Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, Calvinism and more. While this understanding of memory implies a certain stability in practices and in forms of one's own religious identity, the use of memory could also be applied as a justification for major changes in such systems: by pointing to a (perceived) continuity with the past, a proposed change could actually be portrayed as a restoration of stability or a return to a lost state. Religious reform movements—not just Protestant, but also in the core of the Catholic Church—saw the solution to contemporary crises in a return to the Golden Age of antiquity and the early Christians. However, the rise of humanism also brought with it a change in the way history was studied, used, and perceived. Relative to medieval historiography, history was now less oriented in a teleological way to transcendent topics and the history of salvation.

There are differences between the early modern historiographies of Western, Southern, and Central Europe. Thus, this chapter presents examples which deal with the past from different areas of Europe—namely England, the Dutch Republic, and the Lands of the Bohemian Crown. They nevertheless display very well these basic tendencies related to memory and its use, though with

certain variations. We take four examples with an emphasis on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and based primarily on written sources, but still informed by an awareness of memory and heritage in material culture and in other media as well, such as visual arts.

Uses of the Past to Improve the Image of a Stigmatised Country: Humanist Histories of the 'Heretic' Czech Lands

The historiography of the Czech Lands, meaning the Lands of the Bohemian Crown (*Corona Regni Bohemiae*), a conglomerate of territories which in the beginning of the sixteenth century included Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia and Upper and Lower Lusatia, is a good example of how humanist intellectuals dealt with history. The writing of the history of the Czech Lands by humanists between the second half of the fifteenth and the first quarter of the seventeenth centuries was influenced by at least two important factors: first, this part of Central Europe could not build on the classical tradition, because it had not been part of the ancient Roman Empire, which contributed to a sense of inferiority. Second, the Kingdom of Bohemia was discredited in the eyes of Catholic Europe as an 'heretical land' because of the Hussite movement, a Proto-Protestant Christian group that followed the teachings of reformer Jan Hus (1372–1415), while the other Crown lands maintained the Roman Catholic faith. The goal of the humanist intellectuals was thus to improve the country's image and to invent a connection with antiquity. Religious notions were intrinsically bound up with notions of ethnicity, with the religion being particularly prominent in defining the Czech people (who are referred to as the "populus", "natio" or "gens" in period sources) since the late Middle Ages. The basic question was: who were the good, proper Czechs: Catholics or Hussites?

Humanist historians from Bohemia were usually ethnic Czechs of various denominations, including Catholics, members of the Unity of Brethren, a Protestant church founded in the mid-fifteenth century and following more radical streams of Hussitism, as well as Utraquists, the denomination which resulted from Husʾ teachings, representing something of a middle ground between the two. From the wealth of historical works written in Bohemia in the humanist era, two examples can demonstrate some of these trends: the work of conservative Utraquist preacher Bohuslav Bílejovský (ca. 1480–1555), published in Nuremberg in 1537 under the title *Kronika česká: způsob víry křesťanské pod obojí způsobou těla a krve Pána Jezu Krista i také pod jednou v sobě obsahuje* (*Czech Chronicle, containing the way of Christian faith of communion under both kinds*), and the similarly titled *Kronika česká* (*Czech Chronicle*), published in 1541, a book on Czech history coming from aristocratic Catholic circles, written by the Catholic priest Václav Hájek of Libočany († 1553).
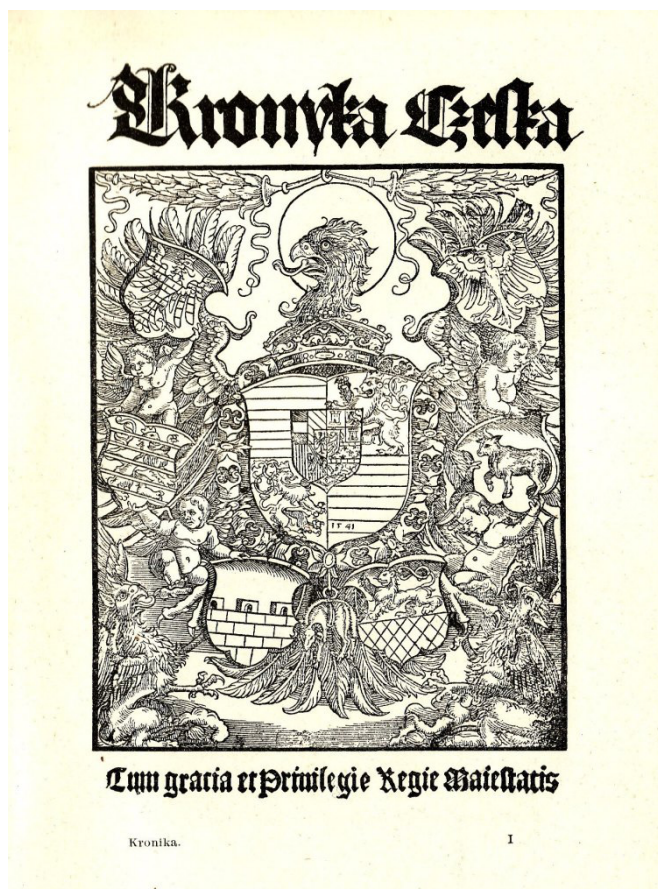
Fig. 1: Václav Hájek, "Hajek Kronyka" (1541), Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.
org/wiki/File:Hajek_Kronyka.jpg. The frontpage of the Latin manuscript *Kronyka Česká* (1541), which
recounts the history of the Czech lands from ancient times to the first quarter of the twelfth century.

Although Bílejovský wrote the history of and stories about Bohemia and the
Czechs in the Czech language, his main aim was to present the history of the
Holy Communion in both forms—i.e., wine and bread. The Holy Communion
of Christ's Body and Blood was considered the most significant belief element
of the Czech Utraquist movement. Historically, he regarded it as older and
truer than the communion in one kind, with just bread representing the Body
of Christ. The work of Bílejovský railed against the Catholics, who served Holy
Communion in just one form, but also against a variety of other Christian sects,
including the Unity of Brethren, and partly against the Lutherans. Hájek's
work, on the other hand, was of a popular character and partly fabricated, his
main goal being to "cultivate our Czech homeland". He attempted to rally the
Czech people against the perceived belittlement and insults of them by their
neighbours and enemies. Hájek was patriotic and anti-German; the religious
issue, by contrast, was not so strong in his work.

Bílejovský shows when and how "our predecessors" accepted the Christian faith, and seeks to prove that from the very beginning, these predecessors served the Eucharist in both forms, as they had since the days of St Cyril and Methodius (since the ninth century). The heirs of this tradition are, according to Bílejovský, Utraquists. Bílejovský also argues for a continuity of liturgy in a Slavic language. For Bílejovský, the Holy Eucharist in both forms was first doubted by Germans in Bohemia; at the beginning of the fifteenth century, "the Germans came to Bohemia in tremendously huge numbers", particularly to its university, and "were helping ecclesiastics opposing the truth"—that is, they fought against the Holy Eucharist of the Body and Blood of Christ. The confessional factor was however more important than the national difference for Bílejovský. Many biblical parallels are present here, with a clear comparison of the Czech Hussites and the "people of Israel".

Hájek's different take on the mythic history of pagan Czechs is noteworthy—it was not so important for Bílejovský. Hájek presents it as an integral part of Czech history and discusses it with "exact data". This is why Libuše—the legendary ancestor of the Přemyslid dynasty, which ruled Bohemia, and a purported prophet—is a real Czech duchess for him, the matriarch of the Czech tribe who, according to Hájek's story, actually contributed in the mid-eighth century to the construction of the Czech state, its power structure, its castles and towns, its economy and its legal system. Hájek also disputed the idea that Slavic Bohemia was in fact German land, as Pope Pius II (1405–1464) and many others argued. Hájek reached an interesting compromise, saying that "we Czechs have our land from Germans, and our kin and language from Slovaks," i.e., Slavs.

In Hájek's narration, many events have a clear national (rather than confessional) edge. The Battle of Brůdek in the Šumava Mountains in 1040, in which the Czech duke Břetislav defeated the Roman-German King, is an illustrative example. This event was cherished by many generations of Czech nationalists—throughout history, a victory of Czechs over Germans was hard to find.

Hájek's chronicle influenced many subsequent generations of Czech historians (much more than Bílejovský), although it cannot be labelled official, state historiography, unlike, for example, the *Book of Martyrs* in England, which is discussed in the next section. It is also worth mentioning that his work was translated into German (quite early) in 1596, and it influenced the whole of Europe through the Latin history of Ioannes Dubravius, Bishop of Olomouc, who accepted many of Hájek's theses and stories.

The works of these two authors highlight features of Bohemian historiography of the time, which was not only 'confessional': while religious confrontation was present, the need to 'catch up' with neighbouring Germans

was even stronger. Historiography influenced the identity—or identities—of Czech people in the era, which were not always homogeneous. These particular examples also demonstrate the importance of history-writing in the creation of the image of the Bohemian people in Central Europe.

Uses of the Past to Legitimise Religious Movements: Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* and English Protestants

In order to legitimise the Reformation movement in Europe, it was argued that it was necessary to return to the early days of Christianity. The idea was that by retracing those steps, religious practice could return to Christ's original intentions, before—in the eyes of the Reformers—the Catholic Church had corrupted the faith. According to this logic, Protestantism was the 'true' Christian religion. John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments of these Latter and Perillous Days, Touching Matters of the Church* (published in 1563) was an example of this Protestant interpretation. The book was part of an effort by English Reformers to collect evidence of an unbroken English tradition of ecclesiastical independence from Rome. The aim was to justify the English decision to break with the papacy, which took place between 1534 and 1535 through a series of parliamentary actions. The English break with the papacy famously included Henry VIII (1491–1547) declaring himself the Head of the English Church in 1534.

John Foxe's (ca. 1516–1587) use of the word "monument" in his title indicates his aim to commemorate a "perilous" past and indicates how this book sought to use memory to discuss "matters of the church" in the present. The book is a martyrology, in which Foxe tells the stories of numerous Christian martyrs in European history, but with a special focus on English (proto-)Protestants. *Actes and Monuments* continues the narrative beyond Henry VIII to his successors. Significant space is dedicated to the rule of Mary I (1516–1558), who decided to return England to Catholicism, and who—in so doing—persecuted Protestants, earning herself the grim nickname 'Bloody Mary'. *Actes and Monuments* presents those persecuted as martyrs of the Protestant faith. It further recounts how Mary imprisoned her sister, Elizabeth (1533–1603), for fear that she would head a Protestant rebellion against her and usurp her throne. This fear provided a strong foundation for Elizabeth's Protestant rule, proving that she could have been a martyr for the Protestant cause as well, if fate had not intervened. The book was incredibly popular and became widely known as *Foxe's Book of Martyrs.* As head of the Anglican Church, Queen Elizabeth I even ordered every parish to buy a copy so that it would be available to read as well as use in sermons. By making the book so widely available, the Crown hoped to ensure that as many citizens as possible

would hear this version of events. This was not merely an act of propaganda for the monarchy, but also a means of creating a collective identity for English Protestants, by providing them with a foundation in history.

Uses of the Past to Legitimise Political Movements: Batavians and the Dutch Revolt

The Batavians, a Germanic tribe, were often cited as the ancestors of the Dutch. They revolted against Roman overlords in 69–70 AD, and parallels between this rebellion and the Dutch Revolt were frequently made. Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), a major political thinker of early modern Europe, wrote a book on this subject called *De antiquitate rei publicae Batavicae* (*On the Antiquity of the Batavian Republic*), which was published in 1610. Grotius' aim was to establish continuity between this Germanic tribe and the Dutch Republic to support his argument that the Dutch had been a free people from antiquity onwards. In the first chapter Grotius states: "Now this is the most lawful beginning of a free state: that a people of free origins found it on free soil". In doing so, he links ancestral freedom to both the Dutch people, and their land. Grotius argued that the Dutch were free to elect or remove a sovereign if they did not fulfil their duty to act in the best interests of the people. This was an oft-used justification for the Dutch Revolt: Philip II had not acted in the best interests of the Dutch and therefore they had the right to rebel and even to remove him from power.

Thus, we can argue that the Batavian Rebellion was viewed as having prefigured the Dutch Revolt against Spain. Just as Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* was intended to help create a sense of common identity amongst English Protestants, the Batavian Myth created a sense of common origins for the Dutch Republic. This was expressed in various ways. For example, in 1613 the States General—the main governmental body of the Dutch Republic—bought a series of twelve paintings by Otto van Veen about the Batavian Rebellion to be displayed in the room where its assemblies took place. Displaying such images at this significant political location created a connection between this past rebellion and its present government. The myth was represented in more public spaces as well. Geeraerdt Brandt (1626–85), for example, did so in the theatrical performance he was commissioned to write for the public celebrations in Amsterdam marking the Peace of Münster (1648), which officially ended the war with Spain. The title neatly summarised the piece's argument: *Vertooningen van den Oorlog der Batavieren Tegens de Romainen, vergeleken met one Oorloog tegens Spanje* (*Displays of the War of Batavians against the Romans, Compared with Our War against Spain*). These performances were first put on at the market square, then the Municipal Theatre, and eventually they were printed and sold

as well, allowing for wider dissemination of their argument. These examples demonstrate how memory was used to legitimise major political and religious changes and to create a sense of collective identity, by arguing that these were in fact based on ancient practices and foundations.

Fig. 2: Otto van Veen, "The Batavians Surround the Romans at Vetera" (ca. 1600–1613), Rijksmuseum. nl, http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.6800. In 1613, the Dutch parliament (States General) commissioned Otto van Veen to paint twelve paintings depicting the revolt of the Batavians against the Romans in AD 69 and 70. These were displayed in the *Binnenhof*, the central government building in The Hague. In the early years of the Dutch Republic, many compared their own revolt against Spain to the Batavian uprising.

Uses of the Past to Foster Urban and Regional Identities: Upper Lusatian Town Chronicles

The use of the past to create a sense of collective identity in the present can also be seen when examining events in Upper Lusatia, a region of Central Europe, which is today divided between Germany and Poland. In the ninth century, the region was colonised by the Slavic tribe of Milzener and in the tenth century, it became a part of the Holy Roman Empire. The territory ultimately became part of the Bohemian Crown Lands, united through their ruler. The region was dominated by the royal towns of Bautzen, Görlitz, Zittau, Löbau, Lauban and Kamenz. In 1346, these towns formed an alliance called the League of Six Towns (*Hexapolis*).

In terms of the volume and scope of historical works written on the subject, writing on the Upper Lusatian towns compares to that of the most significant cities in the Holy Roman Empire, such as Nuremberg or Augsburg.

The oldest chronicles on the region date from the late Middle Ages, which began in Central Europe after the 1350s. Lauban (today, Lubań in Poland) is an appropriate example. It had about 6,000 inhabitants and was located in an extremely important position on the trade route called the *Via Regia* (Royal Route).

The chronicles of the town flourished in the sixteenth century, with the arrival of a new generation of Protestant, humanist-educated historians. Many of them were members of the municipal administration, others were teachers, or Lutheran clergymen. They sought to craft a history of the town from its earliest days in accounts which stressed patriotism and Christian (especially Lutheran) morals. This concept is clearly demonstrated in the introductory chapters of town chronicles, where authors often referred to well-known historians from the Classical era. Apart from this, the main goal was to celebrate their *Patria* (Fatherland), usually meaning the town where they were born or where they lived. When writing about the Middle Ages, they used older local chronicles as well as a variety of other resources as sources of information.

A number of Upper Lusatian chronicles displayed a traditional, cyclical approach to history and time, summarising events, like epidemics, great fires, executions, floods, tragic deaths, frosts and heatwaves, storms, periods of economic difficulty, and more. In this context, the descriptions of key moments and crises nevertheless challenged more static perceptions of time. These crises of history were decisive points shaping regional historical awareness and identity. We can identify four such key moments in the history of Upper Lusatia from the ancient era through to the seventeenth century: Christianisation and the founding of towns; the towns' evolving relationship with the ruling dynasty; the reflection of the Utraquist movement and the effect of the Hussite Wars; and the Protestant Reformation and the process of consolidation of the new Protestant denominations.

Regional awareness developed among the burgher elites of Lauban. Writers focused on the earliest roots of their towns, and formed the town's identity based on its supposed ancient character, its links to the rulers of Bohemia, the Holy Roman Empire and Brandenburg, its early adoption of Christianity and Lutheranism, and the Slavic presence there. They created a fairly stable record of the town's early history, which was extended up until the nineteenth century, but they very often lacked a clear concept of wider history. More often, these writers described a mere sequence of events, emphasising moments of crisis. Their main goals were to serve as a source of information for the people of their town, as well as to offer them moral guidance.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have discussed how the past was used for building collective memory, shaping identity, political legitimation, and fostering national identity. Through these examples we have sought to show that there were many different ways in which memory could—and did—play a role in early modern society. Here, we have focused primarily on examples from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but such applications of the past continued in the eighteenth century as well: during the Enlightenment, *philosophes* would frequently refer to antiquity to support their arguments and the study of old and rare objects and their history would become a popular practice. While the usage of memory continues to shift and evolve over time, in many ways it continues to fulfill a key function in European society.

Discussion questions

1. Describe the ways in which memory was used to legitimise changes in early modern Europe.
2. Describe the ways in which memory was used to shape identity in early modern Europe.
3. Do you think that the uses of memory described in this text still influence Europe today?

Suggested reading

de Boer, Dick E. H. and Luís Adão da Fonseca, eds, *Historiography and the Shaping of Regional Identity in Europe: Regions in Clio's Looking Glass* (Tournhout: Brepols Publishers, 2020).

Pollmann, Judith, *Memory in Early Modern Europe, 1500–1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

van der Steen, Jasper, *Memory Wars in the Low Countries, 1566–1700* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

Wiszewski, Przemysław, ed., *Memories in Multi-Ethnic Societies: Cohesion in Multi-Ethnic Societies in Europe from c. 1000 to the Present* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2020).