The Quest for an Appropriate Past: The Creation of National Identities in Early Modern Literature, Scholarship, Architecture, and Art

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When thinking about the creation of "national literature" and "national styles" in art and architecture, most people will associate these developments with the nineteenth century: this period was characterized by the emergence of national states and attempts to codify specific geographically and nationally defined identities in art, architecture, and literature, based on models from a glorious past.[1] However, in the period from 1400 to 1700, as a result of a complex amalgam of political, intellectual, and religious developments, humanist scholars, artists, noblemen, and political leaders all over Europe were engaged in a similar effort.[2] The numerous developments and changes in politics and religion represented a challenge. And this challenge called for a response in terms of new efforts of legitimization and authorization. Central in these attempts was the search for suitable and impressive roots in a distant past, which one may call "antiquity". In late medieval and early modern Europe, "antiquity" was all the more important because political authority was formally based on lineage. In early modern times, all over Europe ruling princes, their courtiers, the civic elite, etc., were preoccupied with their line of descent – and as a result, so too were the humanist scholars, architects, and artists in their circles. Claims of heroic ancestry, lineage, and history for the dynasty became crucial points

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1   Cf. e.g. Leerssen J., *National Thought in Europe. A Cultural History* (Amsterdam: 2006); Klaniczay G. – Werner M. – Gecser O. (eds.), *Multiple Antiquities – Multiple Modernities: Ancient Histories in Nineteenth-Century European Culture* (Frankfurt a. M. – New York: 2011). For the Low Countries cf. e.g. Leerssen J., *De bronnen van het vaderland. Taal, literatuur en de afbakening van Nederland 1806–1890* (Utrecht – Nijmegen: 2006/2011); and Mathijsen M., *Historiezucht. De obsessie met het verleden in de negentiende eeuw* (Nijmegen: 2013).

2   Cf. Marcu E.D., *Sixteenth Century Nationalism* (New York: 1976); Asher R.E., *National Myth in Renaissance France: Francus, Samothes and the Druids* (Edinburgh: 1993); Kidd C., *British Identities before Nationalism: Ethnicity and Nationhood in the Atlantic World, 1600–1800* (Cambridge: 1999); Helmrath J. – Muhlack U. – Walther G. (eds.), *Diffusion des Humanismus. Studien zur nationalen Geschichtsschreibung europäischer Humanisten* (Göttingen: 2002); Enenkel K. – Ottenheym K., *Oudheid als ambitie. De zoektocht naar een passend verleden 1400–1700* (Nijmegen: 2017).

of reference in establishing or disputing hierarchies among countries, among ruling kings and queens, among noble families, and among cities.[3] Therefore, political ambitions and territorial claims were regularly underpinned by historical arguments, true or otherwise. Literature, architecture, and paintings were used to present these arguments, and to make them acceptable and plausible.

The massive quest for an appropriate past that took place in the early modern period has not been studied so far from a broad, European, and truly interdisciplinary perspective. The present volume aims at filling this gap. It brings together scholars from various fields of literature, historians of art and architecture, and specialists for different parts of Europe, such as Italy, Portugal, France, the Holy Roman Empire, Poland, Sweden, England, and Ireland. Our volume is the result of a research project supported by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW). Between 2014 and 2016 an international group of scholars from various disciplines came together in five conferences. The present volume offers a selection of about the half of the 60 total contributions; they appear here in a greatly revised and rewritten form. One of the outcomes of the project is that the close collaboration of Neolatinists and historians of architecture especially turned out to be most fruitful in mapping out the various strategies used in the period 1400–1700 in order to construct appropriate local or national antiquities, and in analysing the ways in which the processes of legitimization took shape.

1 Various Antiquities: The Perspective of Early Modern Historical Periodization and Its Consequences

If one wants to understand these strategies and processes, one must take into account that during the centuries in question the ideas on the periodization of history differed greatly from our present ones, and that for the intellectuals of those days, "antiquity" did not mean the same thing it does for us.[4] For us, "antiquity" is part of the generally known, so-called classical system of periodization: it refers to the civilizations around the Mediterranean, in the Middle East and parts of Europe, and denotes the period from the invention of written records (around 3000 BC) to ca. 500 AD or to the sack of Rome (476). Furthermore, it is split into a number of sub-periods – like the archaic,

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3   Melville G., "Vorfahren und Vorgänger. Spätmittelalterliche Genealogien als dynastische Legitimation zur Herrschaft", in Schuler P.J. (ed.), *Die Familie als sozialer und historischer Verband. Untersuchungen zum Spätmittelalter und der frühen Neuzeit* (Sigmaringen: 1987) 203–309.

4   For these aspects and additional bibliographical references cf. Enenkel – Ottenheym, *Oudheid als ambitie* 76–88.

classical, and Hellenistic periods of Greece, the Roman republic, Roman empire, late antiquity, etc. In this system, "antiquity" is followed by the period of the "Middle Ages" (ca. 500 to ca. 1500), again subdivided into the early Middle Ages, the Carolingian period, the high Middle Ages, and the late Middle Ages.

For early modern intellectuals, "antiquity" was chronologically, historically, and stylistically less clearly defined; "Middle Ages" did not have the status of a generally accepted and positively defined historical period; and the divisions between antiquity and the present time were partly vague, partly perceived in a different way. In general, the idea of long chronological and cultural *continua* was more important than more or less subtle divisions into various historical periods. Above all, the divisions derived from the Bible, and they were based on theological concepts.

For early modern intellectuals, the history of the world started with the Creation, i.e. about 4000 BC. Human civilization had its restart with Noah and his sons after the Flood, which was dated ca. 2600 BC. If one departed from those premises, there were still various ways to divide the history of the world into periods. A very influential periodization was that of the "Three Eras", based on the prophecy of Elijah:

1. the period before the giving of the law through Moses (*ante legem*), ca. 4000–2000 BC
2. the period subject to the law (*sub lege*), ca. 2000 to Christ
3. the period from the birth of Christ on to the present day (*sub gratia*).

The result was three long continuous, theologically defined periods, and importantly, the third one included everything from antiquity to the present day. The status of the present time was very unclear and feeble because the "Three Eras" division was frequently combined with millenarian ideas. Interestingly, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries this periodization with its intermingled millenarian thoughts was adopted by both Catholics and Protestants. The most influential chronicle of the Lutheran Johannes Carion was based on it; continued by Casper Peucer and Philipp Melanchthon, it was used as a schoolbook at Lutheran and Calvinist universities as well.[5]

Another frequently used system of periodization had similar features – that of the "Four Empires". This system was based on the idea of succession of the Babylonian, Persian, Macedonian and Roman empires in terms of both chronology and actual power. The last and conclusive empire, the Roman empire, was conceived as starting in 50 BC, with Julius Caesar, and continuing to the present day [Fig. 0.1]. Thus again, this system offered an enormously long

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5 Neddermeyer U., *Das Mittelalter in der deutschen Historiographie vom 15. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert*, Kölner historische Abhandlungen 34 (Cologne – Vienna: 1988).

FIGURE 0.1   Adriaen Collaert (engraver) after Maerten de Vos, *The Roman Empire*, embodied
by Julius Caesar on horseback. Print no. 4 from the series *The Four Empires of the
World* (ca. 1600). Engraving, 22.4 × 26.9 cm
IMAGE © RIJKSMUSEUM, AMSTERDAM

continuum of at least 1500 years, which included everything from antiquity
to the present day; again, it was combined with millenarian ideas, and again,
it was used by Catholics and Protestants alike. Their interpretation of history,
however, was much different. For Protestants, the time period that started with
Constantine the Great and spanned to the present day (ca. 300 AD to the six-
teenth century) was a period of constant decay; for Catholics, it marked the
triumph of the true belief viz. Christ's Church. Furthermore, there were differ-
ent opinions on the status and value of the Roman empire. Intellectuals in fa-
vour of the Holy Roman Empire regarded the German empire as the legitimate
heir of the Roman Empire of antiquity, via Charlemagne, and of course they
subscribed to legitimacy of the *translatio imperii*. Others denied the *translatio
imperii*, for example Italian humanists, such as Francis Petrarch.

Petrarch was one of the first intellectuals who initiated the idea of a
Renaissance of Roman antiquity in a narrower sense. He regarded the time
since the sack of Rome (476) as a period of decay and loss of culture, as a kind

of dark age. He very much hoped that these dark times would come to an end, but he was not sure when and how. In any event, he was not convinced that this goal might be achieved by a humanist revival of antiquity alone. In fact, he also believed in millenarian ideas. His visionary empire after the appearance of the Antichrist, however, had an antiquarian touch: he hoped that the Roman emperor would reside again in Rome and that Rome would be restored in all its antique glory. For him, the period of Roman antiquity was defined by the concept of virtue: when virtue departed, the Roman empire expired. Thus, in Petrarch's definition, Roman antiquity was limited to the Roman republic (ca. 500 BC) up to Emperor Trajan (117 AD). After Trajan a period of moral decay came into being, culminating in Petrarch's own age, the fourteenth century, which he regarded as the worst of all ages.

Humanists after Petrarch further developed his idea of the revival of Roman antiquity in various ways; first with respect to the rebirth of the Latin language, Latin literature, and scholarship, and later with respect to the "rebirth" of the arts, architecture, and various other segments of culture as well. Over the course of the fifteenth century, some humanists became more and more convinced that they had succeeded with their programme of the revival of antiquity. Roman humanist and papal secretary Biondo Flavio invented the notion 'aetas media' (middle age); however, this was not meant as a distinctive, neutrally defined period, but more as a negatively conceived intermediary time between the glory days of Roman "antiquity" and the present glorious renaissance of classical culture in the fifteenth century, especially in centres such as papal Rome, Naples, and Florence. Who was responsible for the cultural and moral decay? In Flavio's eyes, it was the barbarian people who had invaded the empire, and in the end the German emperors too. Needless to say, Biondo's term of 'aetas media' was not accepted by all humanists, and especially not by humanists north of the Alps.

If one takes into account these various ideas on periodization and their ideological consequences, it becomes clear that the early modern constructions of "antiquity" could be rather diverse. Most importantly, a big part of what is nowadays labelled the "Middle Ages" was regarded as antiquity as well. Thus, chivalric myth up to 1200 could also be used in these constructions of local antiquity. Roman heroes, such as Scipio Africanus Maior (second century BC) and Julius Caesar (first century BC), were usually depicted as medieval knights [Fig. 0.2]. Charlemagne himself was conceived both as a medieval knight and as a Roman. Moreover, all over Europe Trojan heroes were being reinvented as ancestors of various dynasties, local noble families, and even of nations.[6] And

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6 Cf. e.g. Homeyer H., "Beobachtungen zum Weiterleben der Trojanischen Abstammungs – und Gründungssagen im Mittelalter", *Res publica litterarum* 5 (1982) 93–123; Fochler P., *Fiktion*

FIGURE 0.2
Julius Caesar, depicted as a medieval knight with the
Habsburg coat of arms. Woodcut from: *Die jeeste van
Julius Cesar* (ca. 1490)
IMAGE © KONINKLIJKE BIBLIOTHEEK, THE HAGUE

they, too, were imagined as ancient Romans and medieval knights. Over the
course of our programme it turned out that in numerous cases "medieval an-
tiquities" were chosen as the most appropriate past in order to legitimize the
political status quo. This goes for, for example, the Low Countries (see the con-
tributions by Enenkel, Maas [on Dousa], and Ottenheym [on "New Chivalric
Castles"]), Sweden (Neville), and Poland (Arciszewska). Furthermore, no con-
tradiction existed between medieval and Trojan ancestry. Maybe a bit surpris-
ingly, in the Eighty Years' War the medieval counts of Holland were still being
legitimized by their supposed Trojan forefathers (Enenkel), and the coat of
arms of the counts of Holland and that of Troy were still considered to be iden-
tical. Trojan heroes turned up all over Europe: as the contribution by Christian
Peters demonstrates, they were even used to affirm the political claims of the
Turkish Ottomans.

2 The Importance of Having Appropriate Ancestors

Claims of heroic ancestry, lineage, and history of the dynasty were in the first
place not the result of a romantic ache for history or just a fascination with the

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als Historie. Der Trojanische Krieg in der deutschen Literatur des 16. Jahrhunderts (Wiesbaden:
1990); Shepard A. – Powell S.D. (eds.), *Fantasies of Troy: Classical Tales and the Social
Imaginary in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Toronto: 2004). For the Low Countries, see
especially Keesman W., *De eindeloze stad. Troje en de Trojaanse oorsprongsmythen in de* (*laat*)
middeleeuwse en vroegmoderne Nederlanden (Hilversum: 2017).

culture of Greek and Roman antiquity; more often they were calculated instruments of political power play. Lineage and ancient roots caused and justified claims for privileges and superiority. In early modern Europe the strategies for distinguishing a state, a ruling family, or a city varied. Nevertheless, a certain common pattern appears. The virtues of forefathers, such as Trojans, Romans, or biblical heroes, were thought as still being present in the current members of the family, city, or nation.

The search for very old ancestors, generally speaking, offers a number of possibilities: the first, of course, is to sustain a claim of having an antique Roman origin. In the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries patrons and artists in Western Europe were well aware that their countries once had been part of the Roman empire, and more than once these roots were consciously used in their political legitimization of power (cf. the contributions by Senos, Lemerle, Maas [on Junius], Hendrix, and Pieper). The second way was to claim an even more ancient, and therefore more noble, origin, such as the cities of Capua, Trier, and Amsterdam (cf. the contributions by de Divitiis, Günther, and Vlaardingerbroek), or the province of Holland did (contribution by Enenkel). All of these entities pretended to be older than Rome itself: Trier boasted of its supposed Babylonian origin (second millennium BC!), Holland of the Trojan descendance ascribed to the counts (Troy, too, was thought to have been founded in the second millennium BC), and Amsterdam – as the construction of its new town hall in the middle of the seventeenth century demonstrates – claimed as forebear the Jewish King Solomon (tenth century BC, cf. the contribution by Vlaardingerbroek). This second manner of legitimization, of course, became especially relevant in northern and northeastern Europe, where claims of any direct bloodline going back to the ancient Romans were almost impossible to establish in a plausible way. In these cases the strategy was: *if you can't join them – beat them.*

With respect to nobility, to demonstrate descendance from the ancient Romans was not the only way to achieve legitimacy. The rich treasure-house of history offered many possibilities: Trojans, Babylonians, and Jews (biblical heroes), but also the various local tribes mentioned in Greco-Roman history. In a sense, the ancient Germans were especially appealing because they mostly managed to remain independent, and they finally even conquered the empire. Having been a part of the Roman empire was, of course, already in itself noble and impressive (Pieper), but one could present it as being even more noble to never have been conquered by the Romans, as the Goths, the forebears of the Swedes (Neville), and a number of German tribes demonstrated. The Hollanders wanted to have the best of both worlds: they claimed the tribe of the ancient Batavians – extremely brave and strong people – as their ancestors [Fig. 0.3]. In the eyes of the early modern Hollanders the Batavians were on

FIGURE 0.3   Otto van Veen, *Brinio raised on a shield as the leader of the Caninefates* (1600 –
1613). Oil on panel, 38 × 52 cm
IMAGE © RIJKSMUSEUM, AMSTERDAM

the one hand respected by the Romans as equals and 'brothers', since they had
never been conquered; but on the other hand they partook in the advanced
civilization of the Roman empire, and they were thought even to have built
cities. Last but not least, the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Hollanders
were convinced that the ancient Batavians had lived in the area of modern-
day Holland. As later archaeological research demonstrated, this was all based
on a kind of phantastical antiquarian construction. In the German empire the
claim of going back to German tribes of antiquity (as they were described by
Tacitus in his *Germania* and *Historiae*) became an important issue in humanist
antiquarian discussions, from Conrad Celtis on (cf. the contributions by Pieper
and Hoppe), while the new Swedish dynasty derived its legitimacy from its
supposed descendance from the ancient Goths (contribution by Neville), and
the Polish nobility of her phantastical "Sarmatian" origin (Arciszewska).

Importantly, these claims were underpinned by scholarly studies, such as
Konrad Peutinger's *Sermones convivales de mirandis Germanie antiquitatibus*
(cf. the contribution by Pieper), Olaus Magnus's *Historia de gentibus septen-
trionalibus* (Neville), and Hadrianus Junius's *Batavia* (Maas). Moreover, the
new discipline of archaeology played an ever more important part in this

process of reactivating local antique pasts. Early or proto-archaeology, called also antiquarianism or *Ars antiquitatis*, became an effective weapon in sustaining claims of ancient origin, and collections of antiquities such as the one of Konrad Peutinger, served the same goal. It was the task of the humanists to unveil these proofs of ancient forebears in treatises and poems, as Hadrianus Junius and Dousa did (cf. the contributions by Maas), and of the artists to express them in new visual creations and in architecture. Humanist and antiquarian scholarship was seen as being closely related to literature and art. This is one of the reasons why early modern intellectuals were able to display a great amount of creativity in their constructions of appropriate ancestries.

3 Various Antiquities: Problems with Differentiating and Dating Building Styles

In these processes, the material remains, especially those of "ancient" buildings, became incredibly important sources of inspiration for new *all'antica* architecture that was meant to display the continuity between the past and the present. However, early modern intellectuals, humanist scholars, antiquarians, artists, and architects alike faced substantial problems with the dating and determination of "ancient" buildings. In fact, they had no clue as to which period certain remains of walls belonged, what the various styles of architecture were, and how to date Roman brickwork. Without the help of written evidence, such as building inscriptions in stone or descriptions in Roman literature (e.g. by Pliny the Elder, Vitruvius, or Ovid), it was almost impossible to identify a building. And even in such cases it was difficult to reach any certain conclusion. The Pantheon, the best-preserved temple in Rome, was wrongly attributed to Augustan times solely because of its building inscription, which says that it was erected by Augustus's son-in-law Marcus Agrippa ('M. AGRIPPA L. F. COS. TERTIUM FECIT'),[7] whereas it was actually built by Trajan and Hadrian. Even in Rome itself – where numerous remains were comparatively well preserved – it took centuries to understand the true function of the ruins and to identify them. Erroneous attributions were the rule rather than the exception. For example, the huge remains of imperial bath complexes (e.g. the Baths of Caracalla) were generally interpreted as having been the palaces of senators or Roman emperors, and many late antique Christian churches were – if they

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7 'Marcus Agrippa, the son of Lucius Agrippa, has built it when he was consul for the third time'.

FIGURE 0.4   The Baptistery of Florence, depicted as an antique
             Temple of Mars during the destruction of the city by Totila,
             King of the Ostrogoths, in Giovanni Villani's *Chronica*
             (mid-14th century). Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Cod.
             Chigiano LVIII 296, fol. 36r
             IMAGE © PUBLIC DOMAIN

were central buildings – usually regarded as having been pagan temples. Given
this situation one can easily understand that early modern intellectuals were
deriving their ideas from a wide spectrum of possible interpretations in their
effort to understand the antique remains, and that this spectrum brought forth
a considerable amount of creativity aimed at underpinning antiquarian claims
(cf. e.g. the contributions by Hoppe and Ottenheym).

An additional difficulty, but also an opportunity, for creative interpretations
was the fact that the Roman antiquities in some provinces (e.g. the Rhine prov-
inces) were quite different from those in Italy – for example, the Porta Nigra in
Trier. The Porta Nigra was actually a Roman port building dating from about
180 AD; in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, intellectuals were
convinced that because of its archaic stone cubes it dated from Babylonian
times, i.e. the second millennium BC (cf. Günther [on Trier]).

The 'gothic style' (*maniera gotica*) was called 'modern' because it referred to
buildings that were made in the recent past (thirteenth to fifteenth centuries).
But anything before ca. 1200, what we would now call Romanesque, Ottonian,

Carolingian, Byzantine, late antique, imperial Roman, etc., was regarded as "antique".[8] We should not forget that the stylistic concept of "Romanesque art" was invented only in the early nineteenth century. In the early modern period there was a massive amount of confusion between Roman and Romanesque architecture. This phenomenon was not limited to Northern Europe, as is demonstrated by the famous example of the baptistery of Florence, which from the fourteenth up to the seventeenth century was regarded as an antique temple of Mars [Fig. 0.4]. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries intellectuals were not able to differentiate between architecture from the times of King Solomon, Emperor Augustus, or Charlemagne: anything from roughly 1000 BC to 1100 AD could be labelled as "antique". This, again, opened up a wide field for artistic and literary inventions: old buildings of different styles and periods were used as authoritative sources of new *all'antica* art. For example, in southern Germany Romanesque buildings were regarded as antique and were used as examples of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century architecture, as Stephan Hoppe demonstrates.

A volume like this inevitably has its limitations. Although numerous early modern appropriations of the past are discussed, and antiquities from various regions and periods are addressed, it is, of course, impossible to cover all regions of Europe and to include all relevant humanist treatises and all early modern works of art and architecture. So there still remains a considerable amount of material awaiting further analysis. This inevitable fact, however, relates to a pivotal aim of the present volume. The authors hope that it may evoke further research and stimulate specialists from various disciplines to closely study the fascinating early modern constructions of the past, and to analyse the various claims for national or regional antiquity. Legite feliciter!

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8 Cf. Hoppe S., "Romanik als Antike und die baulichen Folgen", in Nussbaum N. – Euskirchen C. – Hoppe S. (eds.), *Wege zur Renaissance. Beobachtungen zu den Anfängen neuzeitlicher Kunstauffassung im Rheinland und den Nachbargebieten um 1500* (Cologne: 2003) 88–131; Wood C., *Forgery, Replica, Fiction: Temporalities of German Renaissance Art* (Chicago: 2008); Wood C., "The Credulity Problem", in Miller P.N. – Louis F. (eds.), *Antiquarianism and Intellectual Life in Europe and China* (Ann Arbor: 2012) 149–179.