

Arnau Lario-Devesa, A Quest for the Ancient World. The appropriation of the proto-historic and Roman heritage by contending national and regional political movements in the nineteenth-century Spain.

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An identity in the making

From approximately 1850 to 1900, historians became heavily influenced by positivism and political and cultural movements such as Romanticism, which aimed to evoke glorious episodes of national history.¹ This trend, that emerged around the 1830s and was fully consolidated during the 1870s, defended language and culture as the way for the creation of a ‘national spirit’.² Romanticism also influenced the formation of Archaeology as a discipline emancipated from the sheer accumulation of “rare and ancient objects” typical of Antiquarism. This trend was, thus, inevitably accompanied by a new approach towards historical heritage.³ During this period, the eighteenth-century Spanish tradition of preparing glosses of the emblematic

¹ Cortadella i Morral 2003; Gracia Alonso and Munilla 2013

² Gracia Alonso 2013

³ Romero 2009

episodes of the 'history of the nation' was severed, and a series of themes of essentialist content and orientation were constructed in the form of "National Histories".

Romanticism, together with the struggle against the Napoleonic occupying force, brought the need and will to build up on what had been until then only cultural identities. Central and peripheric scholars began to generate almost *ex novo* national identities suiting their political interests. The evident failure at creating a successful state-wide Spanish nationalism in a country that until 1716 had mostly been a patchwork of small states loosely united by a common Crown facilitated the emergence of smaller, regional identities in areas such as Catalonia. In both cases, in order to efficiently create the image of centuries-long legitimacy, the origins of the 'national *ethnos*' had to be found in periods as remote as possible. Given that Prehistory was still mostly unknown, and despite the fact that Middle Ages was considered the true beginning of the aforementioned 'nations', the Iron Age and Ancient Rome were the obvious choices.

Thus, the singularity of the early settlers was seen as an essential element in shaping modern cultures. For many authors, a modern nation was the result of the union of race (ethnicity), language and territory, aspects that could be traced long before the appearance of medieval institutions.⁴ In generalist historiographical treatises, there are entire chapters devoted to the analysis of the racial and cultural origin of the inhabitants of a region or a country, which illustrates the importance given to these subjects.⁵

⁴ Duplá Ansuátegui and Cortadella i Morral 2014

⁵ Salvador i Roses via Cuyàs i Tolosa 1977, I:100–166; Pella i Forgas 1883; Pellicer i Pagès 1887; Sanpere i Miquel 1878; Sanpere i Miquel 1881

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Similarly, a particular interest arises in Roman municipal institutions, which enjoyed a high degree of political autonomy⁶, a very coveted concept within Catalan and Spanish political arenas. This project of rebuilding national identities required the reconstruction of common traditions and their historical heritage, an idea that was not restricted to the study of history: ‘Only societies without convictions, which have no definite ideas, those who live the present without taking into account their past in order to understand the future, only these societies ignore the fact that their history is written on their monuments’⁷; ‘Archaeology will bring us before a true example; [...] If we turn our eyes to the monuments of the past, we will discover every day new reasons not to be ashamed, but to feel honoured to be sons of Catalonia’.⁸ This mindset shaped many contemporary authors’ approach towards Antiquity.

This approach is by no means an isolated phenomenon, since during the same chronological period, Spanish historiography based in Madrid was also building its nationalism using the indigenous and Roman world, specifically through the recovery of the memory of the epic siege of Numantia.⁹ In order to consolidate the idea of the people as a sovereign subject, and the Spanish nation as its guarantor, all the cultural elite had to be involved in the construction of the national project. This active process, which

⁶ Balaguer 1860; Pellicer i Pagès 1887

⁷ Domènech i Montaner 1877

⁸ Gudiol i Cunill 1902

⁹ De la Torre Echávarri 1998

sprouted as a direct consequence of the Napoleonic invasion of the Iberian Peninsula (1808-1814), created a close connection between the study of the past and the conception of a united and indivisible homeland¹⁰. Thus, a united and uniform Spanish 'national identity' collided with the particularistic approach of regional scholars such as the Catalan and Basque ones.

Archaeology, an unexploited discipline

Some of the triggers of this new *status quo* were the publication of Víctor Balaguer's '*Historia de Cataluña y de la Corona de Aragón*' (1860) and Modesto Lafuente's '*Historia General de España*' (1850-1867), global works aimed to provide Catalan and Spanish historiographies with a sourcebook with which to construct a national identity. For Balaguer, who was not a trained historian, the history of Catalonia began with the first medieval counties, so ancient times only constituted a necessary preliminary to explain later events. Additionally, the book presents characteristic features of the historical research at the time, and it was an important foundation and inspiration for later works.¹¹ Similarly, Lafuente sees the Roman conquest of *Hispania* as an obstacle for the inevitable and desirable political unification of the indigenous peoples in a 'proto-Spanish' state. According to him, the locals too eagerly accepted Roman values and culture, and so they degenerated into a Romanised society that would not be redeemed until their

¹⁰ Álvarez 2001

¹¹ Aulèstia i Pijoan 1878; Sanpere i Miquel 1878; Pella i Forgas 1883; Pellicer i Pagès 1887; Soler 1890; Sanpere i Miquel 1890

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conversion to Christianity.¹² Amador de los Ríos' reflection on this matter is an especially illustrative example:

'The nineteenth century, which so tenaciously looks back into past times to take from them lessons in order to understand the life of the ancient peoples and to understand their actions, has put its attention towards archaeological studies. It has, without dispensing with Roman and Greek civilisations, set its focus on Middle Ages. It has admitted that this great period, until now hidden in the dark and seen with disdain by scholars interested in other historical times, is instead luminous. Christian Archaeology, the Archaeology of medieval times, has come to take the place of Pagan Archaeology'.¹³

During this period, there began to appear, mostly in local writings, mentions of archaeological objects beyond the already well-known inscriptions.¹⁴ European trends in Historical research seem to have had a late but intense impact on contemporary intellectual circles.¹⁵

Even though objects and architectural structures of the past were considered to be valid sources of information, during the 19th century they

¹² Lafuente 1890

¹³ de los Ríos 1861

¹⁴ Epigraphy were a documentary category per se with a long tradition of study since the late 15th century, and which was systematized as a scientific discipline from the mid-19th century in the context of the Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum project of the Academy of Prussia. The French prehistoric and the Scandinavian Archaeological Schools, which attempted to produce material typologies of prehistoric and protohistoric elements and, subsequently, confront them with ancient texts are also relevant to understand this change of attitude.

¹⁵ Cortadella i Morral 2003

were not given a historiographical category of their own. Instead, in most cases, they are viewed as conspicuous vestiges of an already known and pre-established past. Thus, in general terms, archaeological vestiges were not seen as a case study by themselves but served to solidify the already established historical discourse on elements of everyday life, rarely treated in the great chronicles of classical authors.

First attempts at a ‘professionalisation’ of historiography

Methodologically, there was a tendency to, to the best of their ability, ‘update’ historical research to ‘modern quality standards’, and authors of the last decades of the 19th century already criticised many of their predecessors’ arguments for being ‘not scientific enough’. In Catalonia, as in other territories with little academic development, positivism united the regionalist and Catalanist political component with the intellectual will of institutionalisation. The debate about which tools should be used to make hypotheses about the past was intense. Pellicer i Pagès was aware of the need to adopt a ‘systematic’ approach: ‘To those who wish to make another opinion prevail, we ask them to oppose texts; but not modern authors, because they, however egregious they may be, will never be able to match the [classic] ones that we will display on this and other issues.’¹⁶. This author presents some contradictions, though, since when he talks about prehistory and protohistory, his claims depend entirely on modern authors, on whom he enthusiastically recommends their reading and consultation, and on their own interpretations.

¹⁶ Pellicer i Pagès 1887: 126

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However, Pellicer's 'work ethic' is not exclusive to him, since even previous studies already use literary sources such as Avienus' *Ora Maritima*, the Bible and etymology to elaborate complex conclusions on pre-roman indigenous peoples.¹⁷ All of these late 19th-century interpretations ultimately draw from much earlier assertions made by Annio de Viterbo in his *Antiquitatum volumina XVII*, specifically in his paragraph entitled '*De origine Italiae et Tyrrhenorum*'¹⁸, where he links the facts and characters of the Bible to his hypotheses.¹⁹ Similarly, although with a certain level of caution, they were still seen as prestigious sources on the '*Crònica Universal del Principat de Catalunya*' by Jeroni Pujades (1606) and the '*Anales de Cataluña*' by Narcís Feliu de la Peña (1709), which perpetuated the legendary discourse. Gaietà Soler, a contemporary of Pellicer and undoubtedly one of the most objective authors of this period, strongly criticized Pellicer's (and indirectly others') approach: 'It is impossible to read the first article of the Study IV of this work in earnest, since the author is pleased to accumulate on *Iluro* all that it is known of ancient colonization throughout Spain. It is unfortunate that Mr. Pellicer so often lets his fertile imagination run through the veiled fields of History, to its detriment.'²⁰ This shows that there was a sincere desire for mutual review and reading among the various intellectuals, an indicator of the academic dynamism existing in Catalonia at the end of the 19th century.

¹⁷ Anònim 1860

¹⁸ Annio de Viterbo 1498

¹⁹ Cuyàs i Tolosa 1977, I:31–32

²⁰ Soler 1890: 16

In fact, although most works are the product of relatively autonomous individual initiatives, entities such as the *Acadèmia de les Bones Lletres de Barcelona* (1729) and the *Ateneo Catalán/Ateneu Barcelonès* (1860) functioned as informal research institutions. Spanish scholars could also meet and discuss their research in institutions such as the *Real Academia de la Historia* (1738) and the *Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando* (1752), which exerted a certain amount of control over the provincial ‘Commissions of Artistic and Historical Monuments’²¹. In any case, its members lacked the authorisation to carry out archaeological excavations, which had to be ultimately sanctioned by the central government. Instead, they were instructed to ‘be aware of the antiquities that exist in their respective provinces which deserve to be preserved’ and to create catalogues, descriptions, and drawings of them²².

The need for entities dedicated to historical research on the margins of an inoperative university was manifest: ‘University culture, which is commonly divorced of reality in our homeland, has also not been more effective than the illustrious senate of national history [the *Acadèmia de Bones Lletres de Barcelona*] in the general historical movement of the Peninsula’²³. Although its members had what is now called ‘academic freedom’, the atmosphere of constant debate and exchange of historical and archaeological developments served to establish agreements and create a common ‘work method’. Despite this apparent ‘consensus’, though, tensions and debates existed between different authors.

²¹ Mederos Martín 2014

²² Lavín 1999: 15

²³ Rubió i Lluch 1913: 128

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The Ancient past, a malleable subject

For the authors of the second half of the 19th century, the Roman city represents the best-known subject of study: a centre of power that articulates and controls the surrounding territory, a religious and political seat of the imperial authority and containing the best-known architectural expressions of the ancient world. The countryside ceases to generate interest when the indigenous Iberians become assimilated into urban societies, and it is only mentioned when talking about the *villae*, seen as a model of settlement based on the classical descriptions of Columella and Varro. Rural areas, and thus their settlements, are relegated to the role of witness, often endowed with a bucolic nature that enhances the city's importance: 'So the magnificence of the city [of *Iluro*] extended to the east and west, giving his hand with *Baetulo* and *Blanda* through *villae* that for their rich fruits, exquisite water, benign Iberian climate and health, and an atmosphere continuously embalmed with the fragrance of the gardens and the smell of the mountain, turned the coastline into an uninterrupted garden [...]'.²⁴ Trade in agricultural products, which later research has shown to be a key element of the economy of the cities on the Catalan coast, receives a superficial treatment: 'In such a state of enlargement had they put Barcelona, that the fertility of its countryside from

²⁴ Pellicer i Pagès 1887: 247

which it was the natural port, poured into Rome's immense markets cereal, oils and wines and other rich products²⁵.

An element that receives extensive treatment in all works of this period is the political articulation of the Roman cities, the differences in status, their magistracies and the prerogatives that the municipal government had. All authors devote entire sections or chapters to rebuild the political systems of the urban centres they study, and efforts are made to enumerate as many local magistrates as possible through the epigraphy.²⁶ The identification, often decontextualized, of some of the inscriptions along with their provenance, led in some cases to misinterpretation, such as the one already cited in Pellicer's case. Account must be taken, however, of the lack of resources of scholars at the time in contrasting the information they received from third parties.

This interest in what they considered the first political institutions of the area fits with the express will of the authors to seek the origin of the contemporary bourgeois city model not among those considered 'ethnic ancestors', lacking the attributes of civilization, but among the prestigious Roman magistracies that still had direct equivalents. However, the romantic discourse of subservience of the indigenous substratum persists, according to which the Romans 'passed on to their new subjects, along with their laws, their sciences, arts, language, customs, and thus increased the population of that country, reforming agriculture in particular and somehow gloating on the sorrow that the local people felt for the loss of their freedom, thanks to the

²⁵ Aulèstia i Pijoan 1878: 9

²⁶ Pi i Arimon 1854: 83–86, 127–28; Pella i Forgas 1883: 217–36; Pellicer i Pagès 1887: 231–34; Sanpere i Miquel 1890; Soler 1890: 31–40

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appearance of well-being offered to them by the Roman institutions.’ Other authors, however, commend the ‘civilising’ task of the Romans, whose municipal regime would have contributed more to Rome and the future national spirit than the violence of Roman armies²⁷.

According to the average scholar of this period, the Roman political and military dominance in *Hispania* is, in every way, a negative outcome, as it led to the suppression of the indigenous peoples’ freedom and culture.²⁸ With some exceptions, the bad image the Romans are given contrasts, not without some amount of contradiction, with the common approval of the political integration brought by Roman imperialism.²⁹ This ‘autochthonous substrate’ would have seemingly outlived all of them, learned of the invaders’ superiority and become what those scholars knew as their present society. It should not come as a surprise, then, that Rome was seen as a harmful force that either hampered the inevitable unification of the indigenous peoples (into proto-Spaniards) or that acted as the first oppressive power (to the proto-Catalans) of the many to come.

The typically Roman architectural elements, such as the *insulae*, aqueducts, theatres or temples, are generally referred to as ‘monuments’. All the studied authors dedicate in their works a chapter or sub-section to these structures, which are listed and described in detail. In some cases, the

²⁷ Bofarull 1876: 98

²⁸ de los Ríos 1861

²⁹ Lafuente 1890

professional expertise of some authors causes a special interest in architecture.³⁰ However, apart from the annotation of their measurements, functionality, materials and special features, they are not integrated into the historical account and are relegated to archaeological curiosities illustrating a speech based mostly on written sources.

Conclusions

The second half of the 19th century marks a transition from Antiquarism and humanist thinking to a historiography dedicated not to formulating limited hypotheses based on biased information, but to the manifest desire to construct a historical account. This discourse, despite not always putting objectivity as a priority element, seeks to produce a coherent and comprehensive speech. Between the transition period between 1860 and 1900, most scholars, still outsiders to the University, manifestly intended (not always successfully) to acquire an objective and secular approach while writing History. They met in academic institutions and informal congresses, mutually discussed their research and generally shared their knowledge to their peers.

The past had to legitimise the political claims of the present, but what differentiated this from what had already been done many times? One of the main advancements can be found in Archaeology. Even though attention was mainly set on the so-called ‘monuments’, this discipline could be used to establish cultural differences through material culture, much in consonance with what was being done with Prehistoric societies in other countries.

³⁰ Sanpere i Miquel 1890

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Archaeology was best suited to identify the geographical extent of pre-roman peoples, the ones identified as ancestors to modern Catalans and Spaniards.

The use of Archaeology as a source of legitimacy for contemporary political claims is inevitable, as, it provides us with uninterpretable facts. Ancient History became, during 19th century's last forty years, the period in which to identify one of the only autochthonous elements in a Peninsula since it was then invaded from every direction by dozens of ethnically diverse foreign powers. What is interesting is that even in a situation of ideological conflict, the 'argument-building' mechanisms, and even the core arguments themselves, are almost identical, which shows us that, even when being at the political antipodes, there are more contact points than it seems.

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