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Heritage: Representation and Interpretation

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Stonehenge: A Representation of Heritage

Stonehenge is a fascinating historic monument that has captured the attention and imagination of people for thousands of years. Standing in the fields of Wiltshire, the henge is a symbol of humankind's prehistoric past and the ancestral heritage of ancient Britain. This essay aims to critically investigate the portrayal of heritage that has surrounded this unique monument, and intends to demonstrate how and why representations of heritage do not remain static, as they are instead a dynamic product of their own changeable socio-political environment. The analysis will therefore offer a brief overview of the history of the site, with particular attention being paid to the more recent developments from the late 19th Century to present day. This period has seen changes in 'ownership' of the site, the adoption and expansion of extensive transformations regarding access and conservation, the areas incorporation into UNESCO's list of world heritage sites, and the recent administrative involvement and management by the English Heritage Trust. The investigation will also explore the events surrounding the so called 'Battle of the Beanfield' which took place in the mid 1980's, widely seen as a decade that was a turning point in the history of the henge, materialising as a result of changes to 'official policy' and also reflecting wider social factors of the time. The investigation will then be drawn toward its conclusion by critically examining contemporary portrayals of heritage that are currently being exhibited at the henge. Through the use of new technological mediums and interactive experiences which have appeared through the creation of a new visitors centre and Stonehenge 'exhibition', the current experience of the henge will lastly be explored. Here, investigation into the involvement this has with the latest incarnation of heritage representations regarding this unique cultural artefact will conclude this research report.

To begin this investigation into the dynamic representations of heritage surrounding Stonehenge, first it is important to explore what is meant by the term so that context can then be applied to the notions of its representation and interpretation. Although a very common and widely used term, the concept of heritage and what this constitutes remains extremely difficult to categorically define. 'Heritage' exists in many forms, a doubtlessly multifaceted concept that applies to many historic cultural aspects of humanity, and likewise, humanities relationship and reverence for the environment and habitat in which they live. Writing in *Understanding the Politics of Heritage* (2010), Rodney Harrison describes heritage as often used to refer to 'things' that are deemed worthy of preservation or conservation in some form. Often 'heritage' status is assigned to physical objects, such as buildings, property and landscapes, which communicate a perceived 'tangible' worth, whether that be expressed through perceptions of cultural or historic value, with this then imparting 'significance' over other aspects of humanity. However, heritage does not merely exist in this 'tangible' physical form. Harrison (2010) continues by describing how various 'practices of heritage' also exist, which are often, but not exclusively, conserved through their passing from one generation to the next. These 'intangible' forms of heritage, invisible by comparison to the tangible, endure in formats such as music, literature, language and faith, and help give context to humanities past and often the physical items of heritage expressed through the tangible. Here, 'practices of heritage' can be seen as existing correspondingly with 'items of heritage', however their mutual exclusivity is not always guaranteed. In essence, for every object of tangible heritage there exists an aspect of intangible heritage that encases it. Yet, it is this circumstance that leads to differing, and sometimes conflicting, 'perspectives' on heritage (Harrison 2010, pp.7-10).

Tangible heritage, conspicuous by its physical presence, is often given greater 'legitimacy' through its recognition and inclusion into national and multinational heritage schemes. Such inclusion into administrative trusts like English Heritage and UNESCO's World Heritage scheme, existing sites are 'created' as 'official heritage', thus being subjected to various new 'assumptions' about how they should be treated and regarded in relation to other locations. Any site that receives 'official heritage' status therefore, must be actively managed, conserved and protected, by virtue of the assumptions and obligations that this official status necessitates (Harrison 2010, pp.5-11). Often, in being granted 'official heritage' status, a site will become contested due to the application of new conflicting official administrative duties regarding the management of a heritage location, versus the 'rights' of smaller fractional groups of people whom now share a very different interpretation of how that particular site should be regarded and utilised. In this sense, Harrison (2010) argues that:

"Heritage itself is a dynamic process which involves competition over whose version of the past, and the associated moral and legal rights which flow from this version of the past, will find official representation in the present" (Harrison 2010, p.8)

This discrepancy creates disparity between the new 'official' position of a heritage site compared to that of its more distant past, thus generating 'unofficial' heritage interpretations at the more localised level. Correspondingly, once a location receives recognition of official heritage status, the relationship it previously shared with the landscape and environment in which it resides is immediately altered. Instead of being

organically embedded within its locality, heritage recognition often renders it an entity 'outside' of the everyday, or outside of the 'living landscape' (Lowenthal 1979). Evidently, the significance of 'official heritage' is therefore interpreted with varying degrees of acceptability by divergent groups of people. In addition, the manifestation of 'official heritage' in the particular context of the administration of physical tangible objects and locations implies 'ownership' of heritage to some degree (Harrison 2010, pp.5-11).

Through the official obligations of management and conservation, objects and places are often no longer represented as part of the natural environment, and as 'belonging' to the local people who believe they have authentic lineage. Instead, the act of official recognition brings with it the implication that the heritage is now 'culturally owned' by the wider community, and in the case of World Heritage, globally (ibid). These concepts surrounding heritage are of utmost importance when contextualised in regard to Stonehenge and how it is represented, with these also constituting the key narrative throughout this investigation. Perhaps it is best to consider heritage, both tangible and intangible, as entities that bare special importance to humanity. However, with differing opinion and beliefs existing as an innate part of humanity, interpretations and representations regarding heritage are essentially contested.

Now that an introduction into the concept of heritage and its mechanisms of interpretation and representation has been presented, this can now be expanded further by exploring the some of the history of Stonehenge, and naturally, the subsequent representations of heritage that have been attached to the ancient monument. English Heritage (2018), the current custodians of the henge site, offer a concise history of the monument through their glossy interactive website. Exploring this is both helpful in establishing a useful historical

framework, and also serves as an introduction into representations of heritage regarding the henge. As described by Susan Greaney (English Heritage 2018), the history of the Stonehenge site dates back some 5000 years, with the all too recognisable stone circle being erected in the Neolithic period around 2500 BC. The wider site itself contains numerous structures that predate the famous henge, these dating to the Mesolithic period some 8500 – 7000 BC. It is theorised that the particular monument site was chosen due to its unusually open landscape, at a time where large proportions of the British Isles were covered in dense forests (Greaney 2018). From the first appearance of ancient structures in the area, the site of the henge has been an important focal point for numerous peoples throughout the ages. The purpose of the henge is still a matter of some debate, however ritualistic uses are mostly agreed upon, including burial and passing, healing and worship (ibid). In more recent history, since the 17th Century the site itself has changed ‘ownership’ several times, with the henge’s condition being recognised as slowly deteriorating in the late 1800’s. After the turn of the 20th Century, private ‘ownership’ of the henge came to an end, when in 1918 the then owners ‘gave’ the site back to the nation, where it defaulted back into ownership by the Crown, and later the administrative jurisdiction of English Heritage. A consolidated effort was then drawn together, re-erecting fallen stones in the first efforts to conserve the site. From 1927, the National Trust also took interest in the area and began purchasing the surrounding Avebury landscape, which would continue to be developed and conserved over the coming years (ibid).

Whilst English Heritage’s immediate portrayal of Stonehenge appears to be a refined and concise historical representation, it indeed fails to address some of the more important events that have surrounded the monument in more recent history. The era that is perhaps

of most contextual significance to this investigation begins at the time when the monument itself transitioned through a period of 'legal ownership', and the ensuing developments that would gradually unfold as a result. Ownership of the henge happened to coincide with the steady increase in interest towards the site and the subsequent rise in visitation.

Christopher Chippindale (1990) explains that the earliest records surrounding the ownership of Stonehenge date back to medieval times, with the land around site belonging to Amesbury Manor and a Robert Newdyk. Although the henge itself is not mentioned in surviving records of the period, its ownership is thought to have been included in the land in which it was located. At this time the henge was seen as having little value, as Chippindale (1990) states, the stones were protected by "their own weight and worthlessness" (Chippindale 1990, p.15). In the 17th Century ownership of the Amesbury Estate and Stonehenge passed to Sir Lawrence Washington, then to Thomas Hayward who established a colony of rabbits at the henge and held an annual fair. In 1778 ownership then passed to the fourth Marquess of Queensberry, and upon his death the entire estate was bought by Sir Edmund Antrobus (ibid). Antrobus took a keen interest in the henge and proudly announced himself as 'the proprietor of Stonehenge', initially believing that the monument should be left undisturbed. He maintained the current condition of the site by instructing that the rabbit colony previously installed be removed, but did not go further to 'improve' the henge through the re-installment and positioning of fallen stones. Throughout the 19th Century, growing interest developed around the henge, and a series of guardians looked after the site under the instruction of Antrobus as the numbers of visitors grew. Towards the end of the 19th Century, the popularity of the henge had grown to such an extent that *The Times* described it as being in danger of becoming

‘vulgarised’, noting that its continued gradual deformation would be an ‘eternal disgrace’ (Chippendale 1990, p.14-16).

At the turn of the 19th Century, attitudes towards the henge were starting to shift, and the next fifteen years would see the early beginnings of change regarding access to the site and the onset of conservation efforts. By 1898 Sir Antrobus had passed away and was succeeded by his nephew, who believed the popularity of Stonehenge was a liability to the estate and so offered to sell it to the Government for the then astonishing sum of £125,000 (Chippendale 1990, p.14-16). Unremarkably the Government rejected the offer, with the new Baronet retaining ownership for a further fifteen years. After the fall of two of the henge’s stones in 1900, Antrobus fenced the henge in for the first time and charged a shilling admission for visitors to the site. This development was supported by a High Court ruling in 1905, upholding Antrobus’ rights to charge admission against the public’s claim for ‘free use’ of the henge (ibid). Although perhaps a little premature, Antrobus’ actions would be the first signifier of things to come. By 1915, the Amesbury estate was sold off and a Mr Cecil Chubb purchased a small plot of land that included Stonehenge for £6,600. In 1918, in what can be seen as a rather philanthropic move, Chubb gifted Stonehenge to the nation, where it fell into government control, in return for the reinstatement of free access for the nation. Since then, the site was managed by various government departments before the responsibility was finally handed to English Heritage in 1983 (ibid).

The effects of ‘ownership’ and increasing interest in the henge would come to a climax in the 1980’s, which would unfold as a pivotal moment in the monuments history. This led to perhaps the biggest changes to the henge’s identity and representation, and reflected the

conflicting sentiments of several different groups at the time. It appears no coincidence that Stonehenge's labelling as a site of heritage in this decade had a considerable effect on the attitudes towards it and how it should now be treated. Many factors would coalesce leading to a very turbulent time in the history of the henge, culminating in a violent confrontation that has now come to be known as 'The Battle of the Beanfield'. The events leading up to the confrontation were set in motion in the mid 1970's, with the first hosting of the Stonehenge festival. The festival has its roots in the Druids association with the site, which is claimed to date back over a century or more. As Chippendale (1990) explains, whether or not this is the case is debated, however documents show the Druids have certainly held annual meetings there as far back as 1905, although evidently not always at the summer solstice. It is agreed however, almost unanimously, that Stonehenge was a place of ritual and spirituality in ancient history. The modern Druids maintain this position, claiming affinity with the henge and the right to access. The Stonehenge festival was a much larger gathering than the Druid meetings at the henge, with the first one being held in 1974. Some estimates claim that around 35,000 people were in attendance (Chippendale 1990, p.23-31). Over the coming years the festival became an established celebration that took place in the fields near Stonehenge. These celebrations would last for a few weeks around the solstice and were an important occasion for the mostly nomadic community to annually meet. The festival was never officially sanctioned by the National Trust, who were the proprietors of the land it was held on, viewing it as a menace that they could do little to prevent. In 1984, the henge itself began to be 'defended' from the festival, being barricaded by barbed wire and entrances blocked off, however festival goers still gathered around the fencing on midsummers morning. The 'official' position on the festival

was that it was to be 'tolerated' until it came to an end, however after a decade has passed by the mid 1980's, the festival showed no signs of abating (ibid).

As Peter Fowler (1990) describes, by 1985, the National Trust and English Heritage announced that the Stonehenge festival was to be banned, which would include the Druids gatherings as well, with Stonehenge being completely closed over the solstice to prevent any unwanted incursion. The police, in an apparent act of self-initiative, took a very active interest in the ban, halting the festival convoy several miles short of the henge (Fowler 1990, pp.151-155). A violent confrontation then took place between the police and the festival convoy in a bean field that ran along-side the road! Large numbers of police from many different forces were involved in the operation and more than 500 arrests were made during the confrontation. The actions of the police force were deemed to be extremely heavy handed and there were many accusations of police misbehaviour during the incident. In the following years, the festival convoys and Druids, who were 'included' by association, were again prevented from reaching the henge via a large police presence (ibid).

The ensemble of events that led to the very overt changes regarding Stonehenge in the 1980's were due to a variety of different factors, and it becomes problematic to try and single out any one definitive cause. With the increasing interest and footfall at the site, there was growing concern and pressure from archaeologists and scientists alike to limit access to the area in an effort to conserve the monument. This feeling was echoed by the state and both English Heritage and The National Trust, who as custodians and land owners, were duty bound to preservation of the area as one of the top priorities of its new

heritage status. As Fowler (1990) states, and paralleling the aforementioned concepts of Harrison's (2010) politics of heritage, this new status implies that, for all intents and purposes, Stonehenge is now 'dead', with its original purpose of a place of ritual and worship coming to an end. The henge becomes a secular relic, detached from any original function; a curiosity for scholars and academics. The use of the site for gatherings of people becomes a problem in need of intense scrutiny, as 'official' policy simply does not envision this as the sites continued function (Fowler 1990, pp141-146). Indeed, as has been illustrated through both Fowler and Harrison, representations of Stonehenge in terms of heritage in this regard will now only produce contention, as conflicting beliefs and interests become irreconcilable. Many people view the henge as a place of spiritual and religious significance, a monument signifying humankind's link to the ancient past and as a place to be 'lived' and experienced. Yet the often secular practices of management and custodianship are at odds with these views, thus creating 'unreasonable' interpretations of this heritage between both the 'New Age' and the state (ibid).

Furthermore, the application of heritage status to Stonehenge coincided with a host of complex social issues that arose in the 1980's. 'The Battle of the Beanfield' was but one situation in a boiling cauldron of social issues that were embroiled in the fallout from Thatcher's vision of Britain at the time. Clashes between the establishment and troubled populous were commonplace, as Britain transitioned through major economic and political changes. As Barbara Bender (1998) describes, Thatcher's conformist ideology left little room for 'travelling cultures' during this period, at a time where the erosion of civil liberties and feelings of alienation were rife throughout society. The divisive nature of Thatcher's confrontational politics contributed to many acts of civil unrest, and it was no coincidence

that the miner's strike of 1984 and the printers strike of 1986 flanked 'The Battle of the Beanfield'. Questionable police tactics were also employed at each of these encounters, with the widespread use of extremely heavy handed law enforcement practices, coupled with the deployment of non-local police officers who impeded accountability for any policing misdemeanours that may have appeared in the aftermath. These clashes signified the contrast between the establishment as upholders of democracy, and 'the other', with many in power, including Thatcher, seeing these people as 'the enemy' (Bender 1998, pp.112-116). Evidently, the Assistant Chief Constable at the time remarked that he "would not be the slightest bit troubled if [the pickets] were trampled by horses", Thatcher claiming that she would do everything in her power to make life difficult for 'hippy convoys'. Other Tory MP's called for the instatement of a paramilitary police force, with some claiming that the problem of 'squatters' at Stonehenge justified the case for military intervention (ibid).

The events of the 1980's show how representations of heritage can be contested by different groups, which in turn creates problems regarding the 'legitimacy' of the heritage representations that are being presented, and also introduces questions regarding 'authenticity'. Here, heritage can demonstrate its clandestine political agenda, where aspects of the past can become distinctly politicised. There is an observable relationship between the prestige of 'official' heritage status and control of discourse. In many cases, to wield power over the control of 'official' heritage narratives, is to hold the power to represent the past in ways that legitimise and reinforce certain political positions and perspectives in the present (Harrison 2010, pp.154-155). In this respect, the 'official' representations of heritage that are exhibited are at the behest and influence of the authority that is constructing the official narrative. This may exist in the form of active

control of historical discourse to suit certain political agendas, or simply as heritage representations reflecting the contemporary environment in which they are contextualised (ibid). This process can be highlighted at the fundamental level through the very application of heritage status itself. On the appointment of 'official' heritage status, the importance of that object becomes such that it transcends its locality and embedded existence, becoming a 'common concern' of humanity. If an organisation or governing body has sufficient power to impart such importance, then naturally, this grants authority to their interpretations of the past above any other (ibid). Evidently, this exact process has been highlighted through the case of Stonehenge, whereby government political discourse, influenced in part by UNESCO, did not align with or permit other 'unofficial' claims to heritage.

Further questions are raised in this regard, surrounding the 'authenticity' of contemporary representations of heritage. As Sophia Labadi (2010) explains, most definitions regarding the 'authenticity' of heritage, particularly in the case of UNESCO, characterise authentic heritage as an object, place, or practice, existing in its original state and form, 'frozen in time'. However, if a site is to be preserved, the issues of restoration, reconstruction, and 'originality' become problematic. Although UNESCO do issue guidelines on such matters, exactly *what* representations of heritage being presented as a consequence is not immediately clear (Labadi 2010, pp.76-79). This is perfectly exemplified through Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulations* (1988), in quoting *Ecclesiastes*, "*The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth, it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true*" (Baudrillard 1988, p166). The entire concept of authenticity, restoration, and reconstruction of heritage in this regard is ambiguous, as heritage is

hardly, if ever, 'frozen' in time, due to changes in ownership, usage, fashions, and most importantly economic and socio-political contexts (Labadi 2010, pp.76-79). Evidently, it can be contested that heritage being represented in such a manner is merely a facsimile, an imitation of the past, a true simulacrum. As such, with the 'authority' of 'official heritage' recognition, any current representation of heritage, through its very existence, becomes the truth.

Where does this leave current representations of heritage regarding Stonehenge? The site and the surrounding area have now been developed into the Stonehenge 'exhibition', which involves numerous 'attractions' in addition to the stone circle itself. The site now boasts reconstructions of Neolithic houses and landscapes, museums, a visitors' centre, a shop, and cafe, in addition to dedicated public transport links for visitors (English Heritage 2018). What is of particular interest, however, is that restricted access to the main 'attraction', the stone circle itself, continues to endure. The henge remains cordoned off, residing behind a low rope fence separating it from the public that come to view it; an object 'frozen' in time. Apart from special appointments, to walk amongst the stones and experience their physical interaction with humanity, arguably the very reason why the henge itself was created, has for now all but ceased. From a monument created to be experienced, to be 'lived', the henge is now removed and isolated. Instead, a different experience has replaced it, a virtual representation of Stonehenge, a computer generated experience of 'Standing in the Stones'.

"Watch the seasons pass and take a trip through time with our incredible audio-visual 360 degree view from inside the stones, in the visitor centre. Imagine what it feels like to stand

in the middle of Stonehenge at winter and summer solstice, with this unique and memorable experience” (English Heritage 2018).

Doubtlessly, under this current commodified guise, its representation becomes abstract, as Stonehenge no longer maintains the same relationship with humanity that endured for centuries. To remove the henge from human interaction also removes it from its human context. Instead, that context is applied to the Stonehenge ‘experience’. This recent conversion of heritage into an ‘attraction’ serves both a monetary and political functions, to generate income and advertise ‘national heritage’ on the global stage (Salazar 2010, p.130) Commodification sees a collection of recreations of ‘Neolithic houses’ and ‘ancient landscapes’, a multitude of artefacts imprisoned behind glass, given meaning via a short blurb in a museum. Representations of heritage are now displayed through a virtual means, one that exists as a computer simulation; A simulacrum. For the majority of visitors, the real Stonehenge may as well not exist at all. In removing it from its landscape, in removing it from its humanity, all inherent context is lost. Meanwhile, outside the visitors centre up on a grassy plane, there exists a peculiar circle of rocks, now quarantined from the very humans that once walked amongst them.

Bringing this investigation to its conclusion, the critical exploration into representations of heritage regarding Stonehenge demonstrate how heritage as a concept can be problematic. Representations of Heritage exist as a product of their own politics, dynamic portrayals of the past that reflect more than mere history. Heritage itself is a process that is encased within contest, a contention that eventually determines a particular recount of history. The application of ‘official heritage’ status brings with it powerful discourse, one

that often leads to conflict amongst communities, as the 'official' administration of heritage through authoritative bodies is often irreconcilable with 'unofficial' claims to that same heritage. 'Official heritage' status also imparts 'ownership', which in conjunction with official obligations of conservation, often isolate objects of heritage from their innate contexts. Subsequently, representations of heritage that are thus imparted are at serious risk of becoming little more than facsimile, a counterfeit ancestry. The example of Stonehenge shows how representations of heritage often reflect the socio-political climate in which they were established. The turbulent political climate of the 1980's is echoed in the disparity in heritage interpretation between the State and the New Age minority of travellers regarding Stonehenge, with the confrontational and conformist politics of the time leaving a dark mark on the history of the henge. Current representations of heritage reflect the creeping commodification of the past through world heritage sites, and the gradual expansion of contemporary representations of heritage as an 'attraction'.

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