



Archaeology in Museums and national Identities in Europe (1848-1914)
A legacy in search of new Challenges for the 21st century

International conference marking the 150th anniversary of the opening of the Musée
d'Archéologie nationale in Saint-Germain-en-Laye

Saint-Germain-en-Laye

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Housed in the castle of Saint-Germain-en-Laye the “Musée des Antiquités celtiques et gallo-romaines” was officially inaugurated for the Universal Exhibition in Paris on 12th May 1867.

This new museum was part of an emblematic movement, which started about 1800, and took shape during the second half of the 19th century when great national museums relating to human history were established across Europe : the British Museum (London) was one of the first in 1753, the Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum (Budapest) in 1802, the Nationalmuseet (Copenhagen) in 1819, the Museum für Vor und Frühgeschichte (Berlin) in 1829, the Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum (Mainz) in 1852, the Musée cantonal d'archéologie et d'histoire (Lausanne) in 1852, the Museo Nacional de Arqueología (Madrid) in 1867, the Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etnografico « Luigi Pigorini » (Rome) in 1876, the Musée d'art et d'histoire (Neuchâtel) in 1885, the Naturhistorisches Museum (Vienna) in 1891, etc.

Europe was by this time fully immersed in the Romantic period with its glorification of what we still call “The Dark Ages”. Land reforms and the countless civil engineering works of the Industrial Revolution brought to light the objects of ancient civilizations forgotten by the collective memory or swept into the oblivion of time before History. With the “Revolutions of spring” 1848 and the emergence of European nationalism, these long neglected relics suddenly acquired the status of national treasures: dug up from ancestral lands, they became the privileged representatives of this new, tangible and genuine history of the homeland or Nation.

All collections of objects, each with their own specificity, have to find their place in a museum, but which museum? Depending on the type of collection, on the practical circumstances or on the specific organisation of each scientific institution, they are entrusted to museums holding encyclopaedic or universal collections, natural history museums or museums of Ethnography. Nonetheless, in ideal political circumstances, these objects are given over to academic places that measure up to their worth in terms of identity: museums devoted to metropolitan archaeology

whose mission is to demonstrate the importance of communal roots as well as the antique nobility of modern states. In the France of Napoleon III, the “Musée des Antiquités celtiques et gallo-romaines”, designed along the same lines as the Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum in Mainz, belonged to this type of museum with a twofold ambition: to promote Celtic culture and to demonstrate from the earliest times onwards the solid continuity of the Nation.

All museums aim to display their collections in an ordered and precise way and in a suitably adapted environment. Far from being anecdotal, the choice of the objects on display is part of a careful staging that goes beyond the objects themselves, it becomes a message, a demonstration, is perceived as the will to bring to light or inversely to hide. The process of giving archaeology its rightful place in the museum was seen as a political as well as a scientific challenge, but was also seen as a valuable tool in the 19th century, one that was likely to last. Within a certain scientific diversity and strong political disparities, what were the museum projects that gained full national support in Europe? How were these differing situations addressed? How could particular archaeological discoveries interfere with politics? How did museums reconcile the emerging debates in ethnology and anthropology with the notion of a national archaeology, with questions about origin and colonialism within the context of evolutionism? Overtly public and open to all, the new museums were the product of political and social mutations during the 19th Century in Europe, when nation states looked to educating the masses with the aim of making them into citizens. By definition, museums were founded on education, whilst laying claim to science. Archaeological museums are places of knowledge that exhibit their findings, with an inherent academic and scientific vocation, which was developed within their walls. This vocation evolved with the collections they housed, provided by the new discipline that was archaeological excavation. Therefore, archaeological museums have occupied a special place within the museum community, in particular in the case of national antiquities. Between a naturalistic paradigm and the storytelling of a nation, these museums structured and gave sense to an archaeology that represented everything “ante-historical”. The MAN played a key role for asserting this new field of study and setting up the subsequent archaeological discipline. Indeed, beyond its museographic function of demonstrating and staging Prehistory's authenticity, the MAN has managed to assemble such a large reference collection, from Roman Gaul to the *antediluvian* man revealed by Boucher de Perthes, that the curators were provided with the best objects to represent this universal knowledge using a typological approach the naturalistic nature of which was unanimously adopted by scholars.

In the history of Archaeology, museums have for a long time been pride of place, as they benefit from their normative authority; indeed, excavations were prepared in museums which subsequently received and analysed the finds; they also housed research laboratories, which published their findings and trained the students destined to carry on the same work.

The science we today call pre- and protohistory owes its development rather more to the workshops and laboratories and also to the contemplation of the storerooms of the MAN and similar institutions created throughout Europe during the second half of the 19th century than to field excavations.

Since then however, museum institutions throughout Europe have largely lost their prominent place, mainly due to methodological evolutions and epistemological changes in archaeology, as well as the changing trends in research policy. The symposium “*Archaeology in museums and national identities in Europe (1848-1914). A legacy in search of new Challenges for the 21st century*” aims to take stock of the archaeological heritage of museums, to analyse the changes that have taken place in relation to their scientific and public missions and to define the challenges that lie ahead for research, mediation and communication in the 21st century.

1867-2017. This international conference marks the 150th anniversary of the opening of the museum in Saint-Germain-en-Laye. Originally named “Musée des Antiquités celtiques et gallo-romaines”, it became “Musée des Antiquités nationales” (MAN) in 1879, and became the “Musée d’Archéologie nationale” in 2005. The evolution of its name parallels the evolution of its intellectual design. However, it is not possible to consider the “MAN” without taking into consideration the intellectual and political context of Europe, or the interaction between different scientific disciplines at the time of its inauguration. This anniversary provides the opportunity to look back over the history of the MAN, but also to bring together specialists from all over Europe to discuss the issues that archaeological museums were faced with at the time they were founded. This meeting will be an overview of European museums, founded on local or regional collections and will provide the opportunity to consider the choices that were made within a historiographical perspective, and, more broadly, to mirror with museum displays the political or historical backdrop of the time.

Our museums are long-lasting institutions that having survived the 20th century, thus becoming our heritage for the 21st century, within a very different political, archaeological and museographical context. How have the different European countries apprehended the evolution of their own institutions? How have they managed the continuity or the transformation of these first great specialised museums of Archaeology, Natural History or Ethnography? How have they integrated thematic approaches (chronological, classical antiquities, territorial and extraterritorial) and what is the place of these museums within the framework of national legislations and the emergence of local or monographic museums. From yesterday to today, what are the practical realities and politics concerning museums in each country? These questions are at the heart of a renewed tangible or ideal environment for archaeological museums and will be topic for discussion during the symposium.

Information and Registration

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