

# Inherited Identities

Constructing the Self through Archaeology in  
Houten, the Netherlands



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# Inherited Identities: Constructing the Self through Archaeology in Houten, the Netherlands

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## About the front page

The picture on the front page shows the view from one of the streets leading toward the old village square of Houten. You see the old church, and in front of the dark green door a man just passes over an artwork called 'Lichtpad'. This artwork consists of metal bars that look like sunrays incorporated in the pavement. The artwork is part of the TRAP-route, which is an art project funded by the municipality and started in the early 2000's. The project is a collection of artworks by Marijn te Kolsté, displayed in public spaces in locations of archaeological significance. The artworks tell the story of the archaeology that was found in that location. Furthermore, you see a pattern of straight lines in the pavement of the street. This is the floorplan of Villa Haltna, a Roman villa that stood there in antiquity, and the stones of which were used to build the first village church. If you look closely, you see that where the street goes left and right it slopes down slightly. The church and villa are on the highest point in the street. This is a current ridge. You will learn more about current ridges and why they are important for this research in this thesis.

Enjoy reading!

The picture on the front page is made and owned by the author

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## Introduction

Two people are seated across each other at the far end of a long table. One of them, a bespectacled, white-haired man, has laid out several folders filled with documents in front of him. “Do you want something to drink?” he asks. “A tea, please”, answers the woman sitting across from him. The bespectacled man grabs a thermos from a platter on the table and pours a cup of hot water. The woman picks a teabag from the box the man offers her and puts it in the cup. The bespectacled man inquires: “Have you heard about the excavation in Houten Castellum?” The woman answers that she has not. “Well,” the man says, “they found some very old remains, dating all the way back to the bronze age. These are the oldest remains ever found here. The oldest remains found before this were from the iron age. Now, Houten has become a thousand years older.”

How can Houten, a town, suddenly become older than it was? Is the age of things not a matter determined by when they came into existence? As the fragment above suggests, the age and origins of things can shift due to changing insights in the present. The narration of the past can change, even though we cannot travel back in time and change what happened in the past itself. History by many is perceived as that which transpired in the past (Palmié and Stewart 2016, 209). Common reasoning would pose that history cannot change since the past is detached from the present (Palmié and Stewart 2016, 217). The problem with this idea is that the past does in fact change, as can for example be seen with Houten becoming a thousand years older than it was. By ‘becoming’ a thousand years older the history of Houten changes, as well as the ideas about heritage and identity attached to this history. What then causes these changes to occur, and what purpose do they serve?

For this thesis I aimed to form a practical understanding of how ideas about history and heritage are constructed, and how these ideas are then used to shape and reinforce identities. Through this understanding I want to illustrate that the past is not distant and detached from the present but is in fact closely ingrained in the contemporary world. The problem that arises is that if history is seen as a static fact, the identities that are rooted in the narrations of this history appear as a static fact as well. Identity theory poses that quite contrary to being static, identity is an inherently dynamic construct (Jenkins 2008). As the white-haired, bespectacled man demonstrates by stating that Houten has become a thousand years older, history can be very dynamic as well. All this dynamicity does not

pose a problem in and of itself, but when the idea is created that the dynamic concept of history is in fact static and based on essential truths it gains strong political power. This power can be seen in the role history plays in the fulfilment of nationalist objectives. Histories can become *national* histories, heritage can become *national* heritage, and identities can become *national* identities. Perhaps it thereby seems that the construction of history, heritage and identity are only informed by a nationalist agenda, but in this thesis, I would like to argue against this.

In contemporary Western society certain historical narratives attain a status of greater legitimacy than others, for example narratives that are published in high school history textbooks, or narratives that are shown on public TV channels. But aside from these more prominent narratives history and heritage are constructed in many ways and inform many different ideas of identity on smaller scales than only for example the national. For this thesis I have set out to take a closer look at an instance of history, heritage, and identity construction at a smaller scale to thereby study how the dynamics of these constructions work, and how groups of people make these constructions their own.

Over the course of eleven weeks spanning from the 8<sup>th</sup> of February until the 27<sup>th</sup> of April 2021, I have conducted anthropological fieldwork in Houten at Archeologische Werkgroep Leen de Keijzer (Archaeological Work Group Leen de Keijzer). This work group is an association of volunteer archaeologists in Houten that focuses on the study of, and provision of information about, the local history and archaeological record. This setting provides an excellent context for studying the abstract and vast concepts of history and identity on a smaller scale. With the results from my field study, I will answer the following main question in this thesis:

*How do volunteer archaeologists use their own conceptualisations of history and heritage to construct a local identity of Houten?*

This question consists of three main elements: the construction of history, the construction of heritage, and the construction of identity. By asking not only how history and heritage are used to construct a local identity, but also how the concepts of history and heritage are understood themselves, I want to create room for alternative interpretations of these concepts instead of using preconceived notions of what they entail.

The societal relevance of exploring these three elements in the context of a local association of volunteer archaeologists lies in the insights that it can give in the ways history and heritage as concepts operate on a very practical level. These concepts have been at the centre of discussions about reclaiming heritage<sup>1</sup>, making history more inclusive<sup>2</sup>, and amplifying a wider range of voices<sup>3</sup>, just to name a few. More examples of recent discussion and the result thereof, like the recalibration of the National Canon in the Netherlands, will be given in the context section of this thesis. Debates about the contents of historical narratives would likely not take place if they were experienced to be universally applicable. Criticisms on what stories about the past are told in the present, and how these stories are told, demonstrate that history as it is told can be experienced as unapplicable, inaccurate, or not representative. Thus, the idea that history is completely and neutrally detached from the present becomes problematic. In this thesis a light will be shed on how history and heritage operate to shape identities in a specific setting to thereby show how these concepts work on a practical level, instead of just a theoretical one. The dichotomy between dominant understandings of what history and heritage are, and the ways in which these concepts influence the lives of people in the real world also illustrates the theoretical relevance of this topic. To better understand what the practical implications of history and heritage are, and perhaps why and how debates around these topics occur, can be valuable to let go of preconceived ideas about history and heritage and instead letting ethnographic findings structure new interpretations of these concepts. By doing so for this thesis, I want to create a coherent impression of what meaning history and heritage hold in the self-determination of (groups of) people, and, for this research specifically, places.

As previously mentioned, this thesis is written based on ethnographic research carried out in the town of Houten at the Archaeological Work Group Leen de Keijzer. More information about this work group will be given in the context chapter of this thesis. For this research I have used several different ethnographic methods. These include participant observation, qualitative interviewing, conducting focus groups, digital data collecting, and hanging out. Participant observation for a large part entailed attending weekly online meetings that the work group held. Furthermore, I also conducted

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.trouw.nl/buitenland/de-beeldenstorm-is-van-alle-tijden-wilhelmina-mag-van-mij-van-haar-sokkel-getrokken~b24f5f5c/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://overdemuur.org/hoezo-inclusieve-geschiedenis/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.4en5mei.nl/archieven/inspiratie/stemmen-uit-het-diepe>

participant observation on location at what the members of the work group call the archaeology attic: the work group's office and museum, located in the attic of an old train station. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted online and on location at participant's houses, workplaces, or again at the archaeology attic.

The choice for using these methods was made because of the abstract nature of the concepts that this thesis revolves around. By interviewing participants, observing and participating in activities, and simply hanging out and walking around Houten, I aimed to find practical and concrete answers to theoretical and abstract questions. By asking participants question about their understandings of history and heritage, and how they apply these understandings to the identity of the town of Houten, I was able to gain insights that I would not have gained had I only used digital data of quantitative research methods. However, the methods I have used for this research did pose ethical dilemmas. A prominent dilemma is that by choosing to conduct qualitative research that generates data that is only applicable to a very specific context, namely that of volunteer archaeology in Houten, I cannot provide the complete anonymity of the participants. Even if I had not given the name of the work group, my data is specific to the research location to such a degree that the results of the research would have revealed the location regardless. Furthermore, had I changed the research setting in this thesis for the sake of anonymity, my results would have become significantly less illustrative, since it would have required me to leave out many of the most striking details. Thus, no names of participants are given in this thesis, but the setting in which the research was conducted is revealed, which enables the work group and its members to be traceable. To negotiate this ethical dilemma the fact that the name of the work group is revealed in this thesis was discussed with all participants prior to any interviews or participant observation. For this thesis pseudonyms have been used, and in some cases, details like locations and appearance have been altered to protect the anonymity of participants. In rare cases in which quotes were used that could unavoidably be linked to a specific individual permission was asked to use these quotes in this thesis. I do not expect the results presented in this thesis to be shocking or harmful, but to avoid the accidental exposure of sensitive information I have anonymised participants as much as possible.

Another dilemma that this research has posed is my own positionality as a researcher. I have completed numerous courses in archaeology at university and have participated in multiple excavations. I have personally always had an interest in



archaeology, which also drove me to choose the topic of this thesis and research. Thus, because of my prior knowledge about the subject my position within this research is biased by my own preconceived notions of the subject matter. I have made a constant effort throughout the research period to challenge my biases and be open to new ideas, but I cannot completely rule out my own biased position as an individual. My personal biases thus influence the contents of this thesis. Not only have my biases influenced the choice of topic, but also the theories used, the questions asked, and the conclusions made. All these decisions were made using the highest degree of objectivity possible, and with academic legitimacy in mind, but in the end, I cannot deny that my enthusiasm for the subject matter and my prior education relating to it has had an influence on the research. My personal background will be noticeable in information given on archaeological and geological subjects, but most importantly, it will be noticeable in the core of this thesis: the subject and context I have chosen, and how I have combined these with anthropological research and analysis. This thesis is a very personal project reflecting my ambitions of studying archaeological subject with anthropological methods. Hopefully, this personal enthusiasm enhances this thesis and its legitimacy, rather than depleting it.

This thesis will start out with a theoretical exploration in which identity, nationalism, the construction of history and heritage, national histories and uniqueness in Europe, and the role of archaeology in constructed histories is discussed. Subsequently a closer look will be taken at the Netherlands as a context in which these theories come to the fore. This contextual chapter is followed by four empirical chapters in which the research findings are presented. The first empirical chapter will provide detailed information on Houten, and its archaeological and historical landscape and background based on the research findings. In the second empirical chapter, research findings are presented regarding the first theme of history construction. The third and fourth empirical chapters deal with the themes of heritage and identity respectively. The insights that flow from these chapters will culminate in an answer to the research question in the conclusion. But to do this a theoretical background is needed, which we will now get to on the next page.

## The past is in the present: a theoretical exploration of Western national histories and heritages

Dominant Western narratives convey the message that history is a field of study that contains essential truths that can be discovered through rigorous scientific research (Palmié and Stewart 2016, 213). In this theoretical exploration an anthropological approach will be taken to history to demonstrate that the interpretation of history in the present is a nuanced and political matter full of contradictions. To illustrate this an emphasis will be put on the mutual influence between history and nationalist identities, highlighting how both are constructs that shape each other. Finally, the role of archaeology in these dynamics will be discussed.

### Anthropology and Identity

The concept of identity has been of marked importance within anthropology, and social science in general, since the second half of the twentieth century (Barnard and Spencer 2010). Through time several debates have resulted in a wide array of definitions, formulations, and interpretations, resulting in what Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000) deemed a concept of abstraction beyond utility. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) argue that the way identity is understood within the social sciences is too vague and multifaceted to be of any practical use as a category of analysis. Their argument is illustrated by their formulation of identity as being fluid, dynamic, constructed and constantly negotiated by its owner (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). However, it is precisely this understanding of identity as being a 'thing' that can be 'owned' which contrasts with Richard Jenkins' (2008) understanding of the concept. He emphasises that identity is not something one *owns*, but that it is the act of categorising the self and the other, and thereby something one *does* (Jenkins 2008). Notions of similarity and difference are of the essence in this dynamic, as these form categories for distinction based on which one can construct an understanding of the self, either as an individual or a collective, in relation to a different other (Jenkins 2008). Not only does identity entail constructing an understanding of the self *in relation to* the other, but it thereby also relates to constructing understandings *of* the other in relation to the self or other others (Jenkins 2008). These understandings are, as Brubaker and Cooper (2000) formulate it as well, dynamic and changing, instead of passive and essential (Johnson 2010, 137). This instability defines identity, just like it

defines any other social construct. Whether this makes the concept unsuitable for practical use, like Brubaker and Cooper (2000) suggest, can be debated.

When it is understood as a process of categorisation it becomes clear that identity is never neutral or essential, since categorisation requires evaluation, and evaluations tend to be influenced by personal interests and needs (Jenkins 2008). This bias infuses identity with political meaning and power insomuch that the categorisations that result from identity dynamics are hierarchical and, as mentioned earlier, not neutral (Anderson 2016; Jenkins 2008; Johnson 2010, 137). Thereby, considering the fluidity and ‘vagueness’ of the dominant understanding of identity as a concept within social sciences at the moment, studying identity can lead to insights in how people make sense of themselves and others and how these understandings change through time and across cultural contexts, since the fluidity of the concept reflects the fluidity of societies themselves.

### The “making” of identity and history

As discussed in the previous section, identity can be regarded as a construct, an act of identification through which the self and the other are categorised according to the sameness and difference between the characteristics that are ascribed to them (Jenkins 2008). Identity is a powerful and important concept that has a prominent position in contemporary politics (Barnard and Spencer 2010). One of the ways in which the political potency of identity comes to the fore is through nationalism. One of the most influential works on nationalism is Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (2016). In it, Anderson (2016, 6) argues that the nation is “an imagined political community”. This community is imagined since despite never personally meeting every member of the community, its members still imagine themselves to be connected through a shared and unique culture (Anderson 2016, 6). Nationalism is the ideology of linking a self-defined group to a territory within which the national and political unit coincide (Eriksen 2002, 98-9). In contemporary society the intersection between nation, politics, culture, and the national community that is viewed to belong within these systems have come to be experienced as natural. However, multiple authors have argued that nationalism and the nation-state are modern phenomena, originating in the late eighteenth century as a result of ongoing historical processes leading up to significant political change in Western Europe (Anderson 2016; Eriksen 2002, 100-3; Wimmer 2002, 42-9). To elaborate on these historical processes is beside the point of this chapter, and interestingly also beside

the point of nationalism itself. The role of history within nationalism namely is both of importance and irrelevance, depending on the theoretical approach one takes to conceptualising history. When history is approached as a factual and neutral matter it becomes incompatible with nationalist interpretations, but when history is recognized as a construct it becomes clear that this construct is of marked importance within nationalism.

Western historicism bases itself on notions of linearity and sequence, meaning that events follow each other in chronological order, each event being influenced by the one that preceded it, in an endless forward passing of time (Palmié and Stewart 2016, 212). In this framework the passing of time has an essence of causality. The idea of causality and linearity is deeply ingrained in the very core of scientific thought and is therefore very difficult to move beyond (Palmié and Stewart 2016, 212). The fact that this linear and causal perception of time and history is so pervasive however does not imply that this perception is natural, essential, and free of cultural bias. Examples can be given of cultural contexts in which time is perceived to move in a different way. Within Buddhist thought time is circular, moving in endless cycles without a beginning or an end (McRae 2015). Western science would pose that this circular interpretation of time contradicts the sequential motion of past to present to future and is therefore irrational or not factual (Palmié and Stewart 2016, 213). When an anthropological approach is applied to this situation, one can argue that the Buddhist view of circular time is a cultural interpretation of the concept, and that therefore the Western sequential view of the passing of time is a cultural interpretation as well, no better or worse than any other interpretation one can fathom or come across. This opens the door to viewing time as a construct and viewing history as a construct as a result. The matter at hand thereby becomes how this construct comes to be, and what it consists of, which are exactly the dynamics this research will explore in the specific context of Houten.

The importance of history in nationalism is significant since for the nation to function as an imagined community the members of the nation must be convinced of their shared identity and culture, and thereby their communion (Anderson 2016). European nations as they are demarcated by borders today are relatively new phenomena, and their shapes and sizes have historically been dynamic (Anderson 2016). Their existence can somewhat be linked to cultural regions, but to justify the nation's sovereignty over its territory and inhabitants an idea of historical continuity has so be constructed (Eriksen

2002, 104-6). Phrased differently, this means that the nation must imagine its origins and continuity through time, despite being a new phenomenon and thereby not truly having a 'national history'. Constructing this national history is of striking significance in creating national identities and political cohesion (Eriksen 2002, 71). After all, if culture is the result of traditions throughout the sequential passing of time, the national culture that marks nationalist identities must be framed as an ancient essence that has long been, and therefore always will be (Eriksen 2002, 104). In this view the past of the nation becomes a process of its awakening and rediscovery of its 'original' state of communion and cultural uniformity (Wimmer 2002, 50). Since the nation is a new phenomenon, its history cannot be remembered. Hence, its history must be constructed (Anderson 2016). This constructed history rests on processes of shared remembering, but also shared forgetting (Eriksen 2002, 92). The remembrance and forgetting of events that took place in the past is not a neutral endeavour, but an inherently political one, since it is through the lens of the present that choices are made on what to amplify and what to subdue (Eriksen 2002, 71-2). Through these choices, history becomes not a consequence of the past, but a fulfilment of the needs of the present (Eriksen 2002, 73).

The nation and its history are thereby constructs, but this does not diminish their legitimacy and significance in either social or scientific contexts. On the contrary, the nation and its history being imagined does not make them any less real. Through the belief in the existence of nations and national histories collectives adopt behaviours that assume their legitimacy and thereby generate its reality (Jenkins 2008). This reality is powerful and shapes the human experience strongly, even if it is imagined. What this research aims to accomplish is to explore these dynamics by approaching them at a smaller scale, replacing the nation with a town, and thereby assessing whether and how the workings of big concepts like nationalist identity trickle down into everyday life.

### Constructing Western identities and imagining Western communities

If the assumption can be made that history is a construct it consequently becomes relevant to analyse how this construct comes about and what possibilities and limitations it provides for researching history-related topics. Research, as it is conceived of in Western scientific thought, is an effort to formulate a 'truth' that supposedly exists in the world and can therefore be discovered (Hamann 2016, 263). The Western science paradigm poses that this truth can be reached through reason and logical argument based

on proof (Palmié and Stewart 2016, 210). Proof is intricately linked to causation, based on the core idea of physics that one thing leads to another and that this is a universal truth (Palmié and Stewart 2016, 212). Historiography is, due to being a post-Enlightenment science, embedded in this Western science paradigm (Palmié and Stewart 2016, 210). Historians, then, work towards reconstructing 'what *really* happened' (Wirtz 2016, 344-6). What is 'real' can, according to this framework, only be formulated based on thorough research (Palmié and Stewart 2016). For this research to take place history needs to be conceived of as having a core of universal truth that exists outside of subjective conceptions, which can therefore be 'discovered' through scientific efforts. Here already a contradiction becomes clear between history on the one hand being a construct, but on the other hand supposedly containing an essential truth and factuality.

Starting in the early modern period the past began to be seen as something absolutely distinct from the present (Palmié and Stewart 2016, 217). If the past truly is distinct and isolated from the present, any present-day narration of the past becomes the essential and unbiased 'truth' mentioned earlier, since the present cannot, in this frame of thought, influence the past (Palmié and Stewart 2016). The instability of this 'truth' is therefore clear, seeing that history is inherently a biased and fluid interpretation taking place in the present, as was discussed previously. This shows that the past is not isolated or distinct from the present at all. On the contrary, even if the past and present are distinct, they are constantly intertwining and shaping each other.

As discussed earlier, nationalist identity construction requires notions of a national history that strengthen the nation's legitimacy as a political and cultural unit (Eriksen 2002, 104). This would clarify why in Dutch history education for example a heavy emphasis is put on historical events that are thought to pertain to the nation's history and origin, and topics that seemingly do not have much to do with the West or the nation are underrepresented (Ribbens 2007). The legitimacy of these national histories is asserted by scientifically formulated ideas about past events that are therefore considered truthful. However, just as different interpretations of the concept of history can be considered cultural constructs, the notion of scientifically constructed historical truths is perhaps a cultural construct as well (Hamann 2016). Hamann (2016, 263) refers to this as Occidentalism; the history the West constructs of itself. Occidentalism then poses a vicious cycle in which the West constructs its history and identity of itself with only itself as a frame of reference. The factual truthfulness of the histories nations

construct for themselves can be debated, but it is only the *belief* in this truthfulness that really matters (Jenkins 2008; Wodak 2009). Implying that the West is therefore some kind of homogenous cultural unit within which only this Occidental interpretation of history is present would be far too simplistic and frankly, untrue. Even in the cultural contexts in which Western historicism is dominant many different ways of constructing history and interacting with it can be found (Palmié and Stewart 2016, 222). An example of such an alternative construction of history is through volunteer archaeology, which is the context in which this research project takes place. Volunteer archaeologists often have no formal background in science, but simply take a keen interest in archaeology and history. Western historicism would pose that methods of constructing history that depart from scientifically dominant ones perhaps are not truthful, but if history is a cultural construct that serves the needs of the present, any way in which people choose to formulate those needs is legitimate and worthy of consideration. Volunteer archaeologists' ways of making these formulations will be considered as such in this research project. Scientific research into non-historicist ways of constructing histories and identities is thus confronted with the task of detaching from the very core of scientific beliefs regarding history and the past to be able to understand alternative beliefs and their implications.

### Shared heritage and national uniqueness in Europe

Throughout the previous sections an image has been sketched of a dichotomy between the Western notion of the importance of truthfulness and factuality in the narration of history 'as it *really* happened', and the fanciful and creative ways in which national identities and histories are constructed. This dichotomy makes it seem like these two contrasting dynamics are very distinct and impossible to unite. In this section, however, the example of Europe will be discussed that hopefully shows that factuality and fiction in conceptions of history on a large scale are not that far apart. Europe is one of the regions one would categorise as 'the West', and this categorisation will not be debated in this literature study. What can be debated is what exactly Europe is. Two main conceptions of Europe come to the fore: Europe as being a continent, and Europe as being a political unit (Drace-Francis 2013; Keulman and Kóos 2014). The second conception refers more to the European Union and its member states than to the geographical unit of all European countries combined (Drace-Francis 2013). However, both of these conceptions are of importance and are strongly connected.

Here it will be argued that the idea of Europe as a political and cultural unit can be thought of along the same lines as nations in a nationalist framework. As noted before, nations rely on a constructed national past to legitimise themselves (Eriksen 2002, 103-4). The starting point of this constructed past is what scholars have formulated as the *myth of origin* (Wodak 2009). This myth of origin is often set in a distant past of times immemorial to such a degree that the particulars of the events that are thought to have initiated the 'birth of the nation' can no longer be established with any scientific certainty (Wodak 2009). Once again this indicates a departure from Western notions of historical legitimacy, but interestingly enough when talking about myths of origin any supposed 'strong scientific evidence' tends not to be of much importance. On the contrary, the further back in time this mythical origin is placed, the stronger it asserts the legitimacy of the nation (Wodak 2009). In the case of Europe its mythical origin is often traced back as far as the Greek mythological figure of Europa (Drace-Francis 2013). What exactly connects the myth of Europa to Europe as we know it today is difficult, if not impossible to ascertain. However, it does give Europe, as both a continent and a cultural unit, the sense of having existed since times immemorial, and therefore being an eternal entity (Wodak 2009).

This eternal entity of Europe is, one could argue, made up of individual nations that are simply geographically situated in each other's vicinity. However, being part of this entity is of importance for the identity of the nations of which Europe is made up. The Council of Europe (n.d.), upon its founding in 1949, claimed the shared identity of European nations based on "spiritual and moral values which are the common heritage of their peoples and the source of individual freedom, political liberty and the rule of law, principles which form the basis of all genuine democracy." Europe, then, rests on ideas of a common heritage, and consequentially a shared past, much like nations. An interesting demonstration of what this shared past is supposed to be is given by Alex Drace-Francis (2013) in a curated collection of historical literary sources that discuss Europe. In compiling these sources, Drace-Francis (2013) has chosen to provide materials from antiquity until the twenty-first century, all of which appear to discuss Europe as a continent or cultural unit in one way or another. In doing so, Drace-Francis (2013) constructs a history of Europe, with a mythical origin somewhere in antiquity. This history is thereby supposed to be of significance to all European nations, inasmuch that it is their 'shared heritage'. This idea of a shared European heritage causes friction with the



national identities of the nations to which this shared heritage pertains (Wodak 2009). Nationalism namely strives to emphasise national uniqueness, especially in contrast to nations that have strong similarities (Wodak 2009). When similarities are present, the small differences that set the nation apart are amplified so as to ascertain that the nation is, in fact, quite a distinct cultural unit (Wodak 2009). European nations therefore have to look for ways to incorporate European histories, but adjust them in a way that emphasises their national uniqueness. This research project zooms in on this embeddedness even further by taking the town of Houten as an example and studying how the local historical narrative is embedded in a larger national one, which in turn is embedded in a wider European narrative. The combination of these narratives will serve as an illustration of how ideas of history are both connected and detached, constantly shifting to negotiate different scales of identity construction.

### Reflecting and constructing the self through archaeology

In the ongoing construction of national histories archaeology plays a vital role. The inherent material nature of archaeology provides an especially tangible way to 'prove' the ancient ancestry of nations (Johnson 2010, 205-6; Meskell 2002; Renfrew and Bahn 2016, 549-50). Dominant scientific discourse would pose that archaeological materials are an objective source of knowledge, since the people that produced the material record of the past have long since died, which detaches the materiality of their culture from its ideology (Meskell 2002). However, as has become clear throughout the previous paragraphs, it is not so much through itself that the past bears meaning, but more so through the interpretation of this past that takes place in the present. Archaeology is no different (Ames 2017; Coningham et al. 2006; Johnson 2010, 205; Meskell 2002; Renfrew and Bahn 2016, 549). Material remains are susceptible to the biased interpretation shaped by national political objectives (Renfrew and Bahn 2016, 581). As Johnson (2010, 206) formulates it, "the data are mute ..., rather, statements about it are made in the here and now." Since archaeology deals with tangible remains the matter of ownership becomes an issue (Ames 2017; Layton and Wallace 2006; Young 2006). The ownership of archaeological sites and artifacts is a complex matter that is often settled under the guise of heritage, with the dominant argument being that the 'closest surviving culture' in the present lays an indisputable claim to the material remains of a culture in the past (Young 2006). However, what constitutes the 'closest surviving culture' is a construct in the same

vein that culture in itself is. Here, once again, dynamics of nationalism are at play (Johnson 2010, 143-63; Meskell 2002; Renfrew and Bahn 2016, 550). Young (2006) argues that the way artifacts are valued in the present determines ownership, with the group that expresses the most ardent cultural attachment to an artifact laying the most valid claim to it. This attachment, however, is a product of identity construction and the role the archaeological material plays in its fulfilment (Meskell 2002). For this research project in particular the attachment to archaeological materials is of interest since this study will be conducted at a volunteer archaeology association.

The felt attachment to archaeological sites and artifacts leads to archaeological remains being perceived as bearing an irreplaceable value and therefore needing to be protected (Coningham et al. 2006). Forces against which this protection is necessary include deterioration due to construction, looting, improper management, and generally the strong spatial impacts of modern developments (Coningham et al. 2006). This, however, does not mean that all archaeological material is equally anxiously protected and researched. On the contrary, due to the sheer scale of the deterioration of archaeological remains in the present, choices have to be made as to which sites should be protected, and which materials should be studied and displayed (Coningham et al. 2006). These choices are inherently political, inasmuch that they result from perceptions of value and uniqueness (Coningham et al. 2006; Renfrew and Bahn 2016, 549-51). The paradox of archaeology lies in these constructed perceptions being experienced as natural and neutral. Choices about which materials to amplify become especially clear in museums (Ames 2017; Renfrew and Bahn 2016, 582). Museums form a space of unbounded imagination in the sense that information and materials can be displayed in any given way to convey a message of choice (Renfrew and Bahn 2016, 582). It is within these chosen conveyances that the mute data of archaeology become amplified symbols of local and national identities (Layton and Wallace 2006; Renfrew and Bahn 2016, 550). It can thus be concluded that the appreciation of archaeological materials in the present stems from the notion that these materials somehow connect present communities to 'their past', and therefore tell them something about themselves, but interestingly it is only in the present that choices are made about what the remains say and what to listen to. The volunteer archaeology association's museum will provide an excellent context in which these choices can be studied.

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## Zooming in: national and local examples

So far in this theoretical exploration the nation and its national history and identity have been discussed predominantly in conceptual terms. These conceptualisations will now be more practically applied to the Netherlands through the example of the National Canon. Subsequently, a closer look will be taken at the location of this research study, which, as mentioned before, is a volunteer archaeology association in the town of Houten in the Netherlands.

### National identity construction: the National Canon of the Netherlands

In 2006, following a request from the national government, the National Canon of the Netherlands was introduced as a didactic tool to be used in history education in Dutch primary and secondary schools (Commissie Herijking Canon van Nederland 2020). This canon is a compilation of fifty 'frames', consisting of historical figures, objects and events that together supposedly convey the historical development leading up to the nation of the Netherlands as it exists today (Canon van Nederland n.d. b). In this sense the National Canon of the Netherlands provides a striking example of nationalist dynamics of identity construction. To get a sense of the identity the Dutch government wishes to construct of the nation one needs to only glance the fifty selected items of which the canon is compiled. Not only does it show how selective the production of national history can be, but it also demonstrates that the degree to which a historical narrative can be manipulated is virtually boundless, with the entirety of history being reduced to just fifty 'frames'. Interestingly a commission was formed in 2019 to re-evaluate the National Canon of the Netherlands to 'update' the canon according to scientific and societal developments that have taken place since the canon's initial creation (Canon van Nederland n.d. b) This commission published the new, revised canon in 2020, along with a report detailing the process and outcome of the canon's re-evaluation (Commissie Herijking Canon van Nederland 2020). What this re-evaluation demonstrates is that the history of the nation is not a factual, neutral, and static matter. On the contrary, enough can change in the political objectives of national history construction in thirteen years to call for a complete revision of the narrative that is taught in schools. The revised edition of the National Canon of the Netherlands includes more women and more people of colour than the first edition (Commissie Herijking Canon van Nederland 2020). The addition of these more

diverse figures does not say anything about history in and of itself, but it answers to a need for a more diverse historical narrative in the present. It shows that the national identity that is projected through the National Canon has changed from what it was before, which points to the dynamic and shifting nature of identity construction (Jenkins 2008).

On top of the National Canon there are also more specific regional canons (Canon van Nederland n.d. a). These regional canons are compiled of “everything everyone should know about the history and heritage in their neighbourhood” (Canon van Nederland n.d. a). The contents of these regional canons partly overlap with the fifty ‘frames’ of the National Canon but contain information that specifically links local history and archaeology to a broader national framework (Canon van Nederland n.d. a). For example, for the canon of the city of Utrecht, the Roman limes (the Northern border of the Roman empire that was partially situated in what today are the Netherlands) is included, which is also included in the National Canon. In the canon for Utrecht however more specific information is given about archaeological research carried out in the region that relates to the Roman limes (Canon van Nederland n.d. a). These local specifications show an apparent need for regional histories and identities that are embedded in the broader frame of a national history, which in turn is embedded in a broader history of Europe. In this sense the way these different canons are constructed demonstrates how the general overarching dynamics of history and identity construction discussed earlier trickle down from the theoretical level into very concrete and practical formulations of local histories and identities. It shows that history and identity construction take place at every level and have a tangible impact on the ways in which a conception is reached of one’s surroundings and the self, whilst still being connected to the dominant ways in which a conception of the world at large is constructed in the West.

### Local identity construction: Houten’s volunteer archaeologists

The town of Houten is located south-east of Utrecht, the fourth largest city of the Netherlands. The first empirical chapter will provide more in-depth information about Houten. This section focuses on Houten’s volunteer archaeology association. The local volunteer archaeology association, Archeologische Werkgroep Leen de Keijzer (Archaeological Work Group Leen de Keijzer), was established in 1967 as an association of volunteers that occupy themselves with the archaeological material of Houten and a

few nearby villages and was named after its founder Leen de Keijzer (Archeologie-Houten n.d. b). Currently, the work group has thirteen active members. The association exhibits locally found archaeological materials in their own museum and provides classes for school children in which the local archaeological record is discussed (Archeologie-Houten n.d. b). Based on the previous theoretical sections one might deduce that the existence and activities of the archaeological association are mainly motivated by dynamics of identity construction, and in a sense this would likely be correct. However, when looking at the goals the association formulated for itself for the year of 2018 it becomes clear that the association strives mainly for the enhancement of the wellbeing of the residents of Houten (Archeologie-Houten n.d. a). This wellbeing is formulated in social, physical, emotional, and cultural terms, which could raise questions about the part archaeology and history play in the enhancement of such areas of personal and communal wellbeing. What this shows, however, is that a sense of local history can be meaningful in a multitude of ways, beyond the ways Western historicism might consider valid or factual. Archeologische Werkgroep Leen de Keijzer provides an area of study to explore ways of constructing the past in the present that take a different approach from the one that Western scientific historicism is used to. What becomes interesting in this context is how these different ways of interpreting and operationalising the local history of Houten interact with each other, since the ways in which Archeologische Werkgroep Leen de Keijzer constructs and projects a local past remains embedded in bigger regional, national, and international narratives. To understand this embeddedness better a more detailed description of Houten, its development, and its inhabitants is given in the next chapter.

## Houten: a short history?

The Kromme Rijn area is very important because it has two areas that were elevated in antiquity already. They call those areas current ridges, because the Kromme Rijn, which used to be the main river in the area, overflowed its banks for thousands of years, and thus pushed sand and rocks upwards. And so, elevated areas were created. (...) So, because those two elevated areas are here in the Kromme Rijn region there is a lot of archaeology to be found. It's an archaeologically interesting area because there was early habitation.

This quote by a volunteer archaeologist sums up part of what will be discussed in this chapter. Important recurring themes of landscape and large-scale construction of housing that are prevalent in the following chapters can only be understood when the required background information is provided. This chapter will provide that information, discussing the archaeological and geological background of Houten as told by the people that have been part of this research. Furthermore, developments in recent decades regarding the growth and expansion of Houten are discussed, as well as how these developments have shaped the composition of Houten's inhabitants today.

Houten is a town of around 50.000 inhabitants in the province of Utrecht, the Netherlands (Gemeente Houten n.d.). The landscape in which the town is situated has significantly been shaped by the Kromme Rijn: a river that has shifted and meandered through the area since prehistory and still exists today. To understand how this river has influenced the landscape a short geological explanation is needed. In the area that today is known as The Netherlands rivers transporting water from higher areas of the continent have flown out to sea since the end of the last ice age. Through time rivers shift, both depositing and eroding materials on their way. This process creates height differences in the landscape. As the quote at the beginning of this chapter states, this has also been the case in Houten. The higher areas in the landscape, or current ridges, are still visible in the landscape today. As one volunteer archaeologists described it during an online interview:

(...) here in 't Goy there was a castle, and that area was situated a bit lower, which is why there is a bump over there, and these are the current ridges. So suddenly it dawned on me how the landscape came to be. (...) And those current ridges, that I found very fun, to learn to recognise those in the landscape. How it made me realise, oh right, it's a bit higher over here, and this is why the bicycle path goes over a little bump.

The height differences that are visible today are subtle, and as this volunteer archaeologist says, might only be noticed by those that know of their existence and look for them in the landscape. However, these current ridges have a profound impact on the archaeological record in the area. Before the Middle Ages, the lower areas in the landscape were wet and soggy, and therefore unsuitable to live on permanently. By contrast, the higher situated current ridges provided dry patches of land on which houses could be built. Thus, archaeological remains are clustered on these current ridges, since it is on these spots that human activity has been most prominent throughout time. When talking about a recent excavation at Houten Castellum (a relatively newly built neighbourhood and shopping centre in the south of Houten) one volunteer archaeologists explained:

It taught us, it taught me, something about the origin of the landscape. About the influence of the river on the landscape. Gullies and current ridges. That people had a strong preference to live somewhere in prehistory, namely somewhere where they had dry feet and fresh water nearby. And that it is no coincidence that it is exactly on that spot a settlement was established. That is fascinating.

The current ridges are also connected to the Roman presence in the area. During the Roman age, the northern part of the Limes (the border of the Roman empire) partly ran across what today is the province of Utrecht. Rivers provided a natural border in the landscape that were used to mark the border of the empire. The Kromme Rijn was also used for this purpose. Along the Limes forts were built at somewhat regular intervals and at strategic locations to guard the border. One such fort, fort Vechten (or Fectio in Latin), stood not far west of present-day Houten, once again on a current ridge. On the spot where the fort once stood its contours today are marked by concrete blocks. This fort, and other remains of Roman presence and activity in the area, will become relevant in the next chapters.

The preference of people in the past to settle on the current ridges is connected to the location of the town today. The 'Old Town' (het Oude Dorp) is the name given to the town square and surrounding area from before Houten's major expansions at the end of the twentieth century. I will go more in-depth on these expansions further on in this chapter. The Old Town is the oldest area of dense building in Houten and was the centre of the rural village Houten used to be. The Old Town is situated on a current ridge, and uncoincidentally, the foundations of a Roman villa were found on the exact spot where the medieval village church stands today (see the picture on the front page of this thesis).

Many people I have spoken to thus tied Houten as it exists today to the human activity on these current ridges as a way of explaining that Houten's location is not random. An example:

(...) everything that you find today has been built over, but originally a lot has grown organically out of old connections. ... That is, I'm talking of the period after the last ice age. The first arm [of the Kromme Rijn] flowed along here from Werkhoven to Bunnik. And that third arm... The first and second arm have just about silted shut by now, but that third arm is the present-day Kromme Rijn that flows from Cothen to Bunnik. And those current ridges along there are the reason that roads are in certain places. The reason why villages have grown in certain places. Why reclamations happened after dikes were built around the year 1100 or so. And a lot has developed as a result of that.

The expansions mentioned before are the reason that the old connections this person is talking about can be difficult to recognise in the present-day town. In 1966, the municipality of Houten received a federal construction task to expand what was then a small rural village of a few thousand inhabitants into a town of up to 60.000 inhabitants (Oudhouten 2021). Construction on the first new neighbourhood started in 1973, after which expansion and the building of new neighbourhoods has commenced until the present day (Oudhouten 2021). The municipality at the time set up a specific plan on how these new neighbourhoods should look. A member of the regional historic association described this plan as follows:

Before the expansion of Houten started the municipality said, we don't want to. We don't want to execute a large building task. But they had no choice, because the provincial government said 'you must!' And then the municipality said, alright, if we really must we will gladly cooperate, because otherwise we will simply be forced, but we will do so only on our own terms. A: we want to put down a ring road, and we will only build inside that road. Not outside of it. And B: we will build with a village-like character. No higher than three stories, and possibly a small, tilted roof on top, and only an architectural accent at neighbourhood entrances. That can be an apartment building or a gate building. Well, those were the terms, and they developed those, and they made a beautiful expansion! Because Houten is green, very bicycle friendly, with only low-rise single-family houses with an apartment here and there for seniors and such. But the apartment buildings are very limited.

This fragment captures an accurate description of what Houten looks like. The people that have moved into the neighbourhoods built from the seventies onward came from



different places around the country, often moving in as adults with children. Because of this very large influx of new inhabitants the percentage of 'Houtenezen' today is very low compared to that of 'Houtenaren'. Houtenezen is a name given to what are deemed 'original' inhabitants of the village Houten from before the expansions. Houtenaren on the other hand are the people that moved into the newly built neighbourhoods from elsewhere. One volunteer archaeologist said "Houten of course is a club of imports. The Houtenezen, we still know of them, but when they started building around here there were less than 3000 inhabitants. Very strictly separated." Another said "(...) Houtenees, which means born and raised. A Houtenaar is import. That's the difference."

It is this word, 'import', that turns out to be a canonical name given to the tens of thousands of people that moved to the growing town from the seventies onwards. Many of the people I have spoken with described themselves to be import. This self-identification as import debunks a prejudice one might have about volunteer archaeologists, namely that they might be 'real locals' that have lived in the area they work in all their lives. Quite contrary, almost all members of the archaeological work group moved to Houten well into their adult lives. The same goes for a very large majority of Houten's inhabitants, and more people move to Houten every month (Gemeente Houten 2021). Looking from the outside in, the town of Houten can thus be perceived as a fairly new community, from an outsider's point of view seemingly sprung out of nowhere half a century ago. In a very practical sense, Houten as it is today might have a short history. After all, not much seems to tie the bronze age, Romans, medieval farmers, and Houtenezen to the contemporary town of single-family houses and 50.000 inhabitants. There is, however, more than meets the eye when it comes to connecting the past and the present of Houten to each other, and the volunteer archaeologists of the archaeological association have become experts at creating these links. But *how* do they create them? That question will be answered in the next three chapters.

## Lost in the mists of time: conceptualising history

It is Tuesday morning. Six people, five of them volunteer archaeologists, have gathered on Jitsy, an online video conference platform. They are visible from the chest up, all of them in a rectangular frame, in most cases with a glimpse of a living room or home office in the background. An older man wearing glasses says “there is simply no historical awareness anymore. Think about what John told me about the memorial plaque found not long ago.” He goes on to explain that the memorial plaque mentions a battalion from Drenthe that was sent to the Dutch Indies after the second world war. The plaque was found on a construction site. “Why was that plaque found in the ground at a construction site? What is it doing there?” the man asks. Initially, none of the others are able to answer his question and seem to be baffled by the mystery of the memorial plaque. Then, theories swirl about the soil maybe being imported from elsewhere with the plaque accidentally in it, and it thus ending up at a construction site in Houten. “Nobody remembers who these people were” the man in glasses says. Another man with short-trimmed hair concludes “So, is this just forgotten history then?”

In this chapter a closer look will be taken at the concept of history, and specifically how volunteer archaeologists come to an understanding and interpretation of that concept. In the theoretical exploration it was established that history is a fluid and changing concept with static and unchanging connotations. But is this also how history is understood by the volunteer archaeologists I have spoken to? Faced with the direct question “what is history?” one of them answered “History, wow, well that is so incredibly much. What my ancestors did, and where it all comes from...” The vastness that she seemingly experiences when thinking of history would imply that it embodies much, if not everything of what transpired in the past. History in a way is thus seen by her as being all-encompassing, the word ‘history’ being a blanket that covers the entirety of all that happened throughout the chronological progression of time. So, what does the man with the short-trimmed hair in the vignette above mean when he says that the story of the memorial plaque is ‘forgotten history’? The remark implies that history is something that exists outside human conscience and can both be forgotten and remembered again, much like Eriksen’s (2002, 92) theory that history is shaped by collective remembrance and forgetting. Thus, even if something is forgotten, it is still strictly part of history, since history encompasses everything. This seeming endlessness of history makes it difficult to put into words what

it is. If history is everything, even the forgotten parts, an answer to the question what history is can only be given if one *knows everything*. We cannot know everything but can only remember pieces and fragments and use these to grasp history. Or at least that is how the people I have spoken to seem to experience it.

History, thus, is difficult to grasp. The plaque was once remembered, subsequently buried and forgotten, and eventually found and remembered again. However, what is re-remembered after something has been forgotten can be entirely different from what was originally remembered when the plaque was made for example. The volunteer archaeologists do not know when it was made, why it was made, or how the plaque ended up in the ground in Houten. These types of shifts in remembrance once again illustrate the dynamic nature of history as discussed in the theoretical exploration. History encompasses all that happened in the past, but however counterintuitive it seems, what happened in the past does in fact change because of the shifts in remembrance that happen in the present. The historiographic interpretation of history poses that what strictly happened in the past does not and cannot change or be influenced by the present (Palmié and Stewart 2016). What the results of this research show is that what happened in the past does change, because what we know of what happened changes. And history only exists when it is known. Another change in what is known about history is illustrated by the following story a member of the archaeological work group told me:

It all has to do with new insights. [In the magazine *Archeologie in Nederland*] an article was published (...) about [Hessens-Schortens] pottery. Never heard of it. Never seen it. But what turned out to be the case? It was made in a period between when the Romans left this area and when people started to repopulate it during the Carolingian era around 700 A.D. (...) But between those periods there was thus also something, and it is very beautiful pottery. Very smooth. Pottery that we, and not only us but also a lot of professional archaeologists, have always made out to be from the Iron Age, but the very late Iron Age. Because it is just so beautiful and smooth. But it turns out to be from an entirely different time. We are talking 300 A.D. Well, then you're in a completely different [era]."

Thus, what is known of Hessens-Schortens pottery has changed, and therefore the position of this pottery in history has changed. But simply because these factors have changed does not mean they are now more correct than they were before, or that they will be more correct after they perhaps change again in the future. When the pottery was still thought to be from the Iron Age this was correct because it was believed to be correct.

Now it is deemed correct to interpret the pottery as dating from 300 A.D. Perhaps in the future this understanding will change again, and new research will conclude that Hessens-Schortens pottery was produced in 1200 A.D. instead. Hypothetically this could be possible. It reflects the point made in the theoretical exploration that simply the belief in (national) histories eventually generates their reality (Jenkins 2008). We believe Hessens-Schortens pottery to be from 300 A.D, thus it is from 300. A.D. The volunteer archaeologist from the quote now believes this to be a fact, and so it is, regardless of what might be the ‘actual truth’ according to historiography, because through a collective belief in this new insight its reality is generated.

However, all of this does not do much by means of making history more understandable or easy to grasp. In fact, the vastness and dynamicity of history only make it more difficult to put into words *what history is*. Luckily, this complexity can be navigated, as I have learned through this research. One important method to mediate the overwhelming complexity of history for volunteer archaeologists is creating points of recognition. By this I mean the process of finding similarities between remnants of the past and their contemporary counterparts or consequences, thus creating links between the past and the present. The following quote from a volunteer archaeologist perhaps describes it best:

[Through fashion the shape of objects changes.] You can see that in many things. (...) I’m talking about the details in clothing and jewellery. But with tools you see the exact opposite. Some shapes of tools have hardly changed since the Iron Age. If I look at the axe, granted, the shape has changed here and there, or instruments like tweezers. (...) The shape has stayed nearly the same as it was. Or cutting shears. The Romans already had those, and we still have those today. Those kinds of things. So that is very fun.

An axe or a pair of tweezers thus becomes a point of recognition: an object we can recognise around ourselves today, and for which we do not have to ponder its use because it is already known to us. It makes history relatable and consequently understandable, since people in the Iron Age needed axes to chop and tweezers to pick, much like people do today. Another volunteer archaeologist said: “(...) whenever I see those jugs, and those plates, from for example the Romans. We just copied them, but just in a modern version! Because they already had that plate, they already had that jug, they had... I find that impressive.” She sees a direct link between the jugs and plates she has in her cupboard at home and the ones that were used in Roman times and have been discovered through

archaeology. And indeed, it is hard to deny that the jug you use to pour liquids today has the same shape and purpose as the one used 1900 years ago. Something like a jug can be a recognisable element in a vast mysterious past. It makes history more comprehensible, because points of recognition reflect elements of the self that are known and understood, which then makes parts of the past known and understood as well.

This method of understanding history can even be taken a step further. Rather than only seeing similarities, they can also be physically experienced. One volunteer archaeologist gave a personal example of using physical experiences to understand specific elements of history better. Namely, by compiling a replica of a Roman soldier's armour, weapons and gear and putting it all on himself, he explained how he gained insights into what it must have been like for a Roman soldier to wear such attire all day. In this quote he describes what the process was like:

But I was curious to know how it would feel to wear such heavy armour for a day for example. Do you feel extra hot when the sun hits it? Or when it rains, how miserable do you feel in an iron suit with a woollen shirt underneath? (...) And that is why I started to privately compile this thing [the full gear set]. And some things I bought, and other things I made myself. (...) [It is] living archaeology. So, you can think to yourself a hundred times that it's very heavy to wear a suit of armour. Well, go ahead and wear it for a day, untrained. See what happens. It's not too bad actually. Very doable. I can easily wear it for an entire day without ending up with sore muscles.

Not long after the interview had taken place in which this volunteer archaeologist talked about his experience with wearing a Roman armour he told a similar story in a YouTube video, this time putting the suit of armour on and pointing out what it felt like doing so and what the functions were of different elements of the ensemble. What might be most interesting about his story is how he expresses that experiencing wearing the armour himself debunked some of the ideas he had about what it would be like beforehand. It was less heavy than he expected, and so Roman soldiers perhaps become less mythical and unrelatable. A point of recognition one might formulate as: Roman soldiers were not mythical, extremely trained beasts, but normal people like me, because I too can easily wear their armour for a day. A fragment of history thus becomes known and understood, lifted out of the mists of time.

Of course, the question can still be asked whether this volunteer archaeologist's experience wearing a replica of a Roman suit of armour accurately reproduces the

experiences of Roman soldiers as they were at the time. Think back to the ‘essential truths’ of history that were mentioned in the theoretical exploration. The idea that there are truths to be found in history, and that some interpretations of history are more ‘accurate’ than others. Is there an essential truth to the way Roman soldiers experienced wearing their armour? And if so, can we ever capture that essential truth? In practice, the answers to these questions do not negate the interpretation of history volunteer archaeologists create. They demonstrate that history can never be fully understood because it is vast and complex, but when you can recognise parts of your own reality in fragments of the past, history can at least become more approachable and less daunting.

Interestingly enough, it is sometimes exactly the unknown and unfamiliar aspects of history that generate people’s interest in the subject. The mystery and complexity of history can make it enticing to explore. When asked why he was interested in cultures of the distant past, a member of the regional historical association answered, “because there is something mysterious about it, and therein there are still a lot of things to discover.” The unknown parts of history provide motivation to learn more and dig deeper (in the metaphorical sense). Think back to the vignette at the beginning of this chapter, about the memorial plaque, the forgotten history. Not knowing how and why the plaque ended up where it did made the volunteer archaeologists want to know more. History is a mystery, an endless puzzle without edges or corner pieces. We do not know *everything*, but perhaps we do not want to, because not knowing is what makes us want to know more.

So, how do volunteer archaeologists conceptualise history? It remains a difficult question to answer, because putting into words *what history is*, is difficult, even for people that spend a great amount of time engaging with it through volunteer archaeology. For the people I have studied and spoken to, history seems to be a vast mystery that contains points of recognition and points of estrangement and wonder. It encapsulates all that transpired in the past and can never be completely understood. Rather, efforts can be made to understand it partly. It is a concept distinct from the self, since we are in the *present* looking at history in the *past*. However, the self and history are strongly connected since the self becomes a mechanism of understanding fragments of history. These results do not contradict the historiographic idea that history contains truths that can be found through research (Hamann 2016). On the contrary, these volunteer archaeologists are eagerly looking for the historical truth continuously. However, they also show that truths can change, for example with the dating of Hessens-Schortens pottery. Thus, perhaps the

truth does not lie in history, but in the present. We generate the truth as we find it, by wearing suits of armour in the rain and looking at the jugs and plates in our cupboards.

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## “It’s all about the story”: conceptualising heritage

With my back turned to the train station I open the little booklet in my hand. The front reads, “Three routes to get to know Houten (...) better.” On the first page the publishing details are printed, among which the information that the booklet was published in 2001. I flip through to page 36 on which the description of a one-hour long walking route starts. I follow the instructions that guide me away from the train station and out of the shopping district without pointing out any landmarks or points of interest. After ten minutes of walking, I arrive at the first point of interest on the route after following the instruction: “keep walking until you reach the building of the Cooperative Agriculture Association. This building shows a beautiful decoration on its outer wall. The image depicts different kinds of agriculture.” Indeed, the building still has the decoration on the outside, but now it has become a modern office building with different businesses in it. I try to find more information about the decoration, but there is none to be found outside, and when I turn to the booklet to tell me more, all it says is, “Now turn back to where you came from.”

When I took this walk, I was rather confused as to why I had to look at this decoration. It looked nice I thought, but I was unsure how it helped me ‘get to know Houten better’. In my field reports I called this walk a ‘heritage walk’, since it was a route compiled by the municipality with curated sights pointed out along the way. I thought this might tell me something about what the municipality wanted people to know about Houten, and thus what they deemed noteworthy heritage. On top of that the booklet was handed to me by a volunteer archaeologist during my first visit to the archaeological work group’s museum, so I interpreted this as a message that it was important for me to see the sights mentioned in the booklet. However, after finishing the walk it was still unclear to me what I was supposed to take away from the decoration on the side of the building. There was no background information and no date, only the instruction to “(...) turn back to where [I] came from.” The decoration on the wall did not feel meaningful. So, how *do* things become meaningful? How do things become heritage? And more specifically, how do volunteer archaeologists conceptualise and interpret heritage?

For full transparency it would be good to point out that the difference between history and heritage was difficult to find and even more difficult for me to understand. It was only in the final two weeks of research that the distinction presented itself more



clearly. During an online focus group that was attended by five members of the archaeological work group an article was shown about the Mexican government asking auction house Christie's not to sell several artworks that were considered national heritage by the Mexican government<sup>4</sup>. The attendees of the focus group were subsequently presented with the question, "when does something become heritage?" The answers to that question were as follows:

"Everything that tells a story is heritage", a man sitting in front of a bookcase says from his corner of the computer screen. "But what about that Roman helmet that was bought by the National Museum of Antiquities?" a woman in glasses asks, "It was found in Nieuwegein, but ended up in a national museum instead of a regional one." A man with short hair answers, "that's because the helmet tells a national story more so than a regional one." To this the man in front of the bookcase adds, "the cheek guards that belong with the helmet were found and restored, and somehow ended up in the Central Museum in Utrecht. It shows that there are political powers at play too when it comes to heritage and deciding whether it's of national or regional importance. The big museums have the funds to buy the most rare and beautiful finds." A woman with blonde hair answers, "heritage should be independent of political influences, but unfortunately it never will be." The others agree. A woman in a patterned blouse concludes, "it's all about the story."

Heritage, then, is about stories. Stories that become attached to objects, buildings, places, customs, among many other things. Perhaps such a story is also what was missing from the decoration on the wall mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Without a story, it does not say much. The volunteer archaeologists at the archaeological work group are masters of storytelling, because they know that without a story archaeological materials do not convey a message. As one volunteer archaeologist told me, "(...) not everybody has the imagination needed to create something out of a heap of fragments, and granted, those fragments do not actually say anything. The story behind them, that is always the most important part." The fragments do not *say* anything until they are made to. Like the quote by Johnson (2010, 206) discussed in the theoretical exploration, "the data are mute ..., rather, statements about it are made in the here and now." This seems to be something

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nu.nl/buitenland/6114046/mexico-vraagt-christies-artefacten-nationaal-erfgoed-niet-te-veilen.html>

that is understood well by the volunteer archaeologists in Houten. So, how do they go about making *their* statements in the here and now?

One volunteer archaeologist emphasised the importance of creating a captivating narrative when he talked about his initial interest in history when he was still in school, saying, “[I had] a teacher that taught both French and history. I wasn’t very good at French. I got fives and sixes with great difficulty. But history? I excelled in history. And that teacher could tell stories so beautifully. And that captivates you, and you take that with you. You keep that forever.” He thus explains how a captivating story enhanced his interest in history, and that the experience of having a teacher that could tell stories in a captivating way is one that he will always remember. It shows the power of good storytelling. Another volunteer archaeologist told me about her experience with the effect of creating a story, saying:

(...) there is a technique to determine the age of organic materials through [isotope] research. It makes it possible to determine the exact descent of a [deceased] person, and not only that, but also how that person migrated during their life. Isn’t that incredible? (...) A person that you perhaps only knew the name of now gets story, and thereby comes closer to you. Suddenly they are alive once again.

For her, the story that is created through the details uncovered by isotope research is powerful enough to in some way resurrect a person that has died long ago. Another volunteer archaeologist expressed the same sentiment, saying that when a story is told about archaeological materials, “Only *then* does it come alive, because then you can start storytelling. That’s why we love it when a lot of people visit us, because then we can give a narration.” It shows that if a story is told well, this creates another mechanism of making the *distant* past feel *closer* to the present, much like the points of recognition discussed in the previous chapter. However, when it comes to heritage, there is something distinct from understanding and conceptualising history at play. Heritage and its stories evoke a stronger sense of connection than just recognition: heritage speaks to something more personally meaningful.

Based on the theoretical exploration, and the research that preceded writing it, I had developed the hypothesis that the position of archaeology in a community, and the stories archaeology tells, are dictated by what people ‘want to hear’, and what their preconceived interests are based on a top-down dynamic of heritage construction dominated by political forces. However, as the power of storytelling presented itself more

strongly over the course of the research, it became apparent that this dynamic can also work the other way around. To the question whether the interests of the public dictate the position of archaeology in a community, one volunteer archaeologist gave the following, poignant answer: “It’s all about the story of the things you find, and which story you can subsequently attach to it. Archaeology is only fun if you can tell a story about it. Well, that is what we try to do with our exhibitions.” This short quote captured what had been unclear until that point. The public does not dictate the stories that volunteer archaeologists tell because they want to hear only certain things; the public wants to hear certain things because they are told in a captivating way. So, when the Roman period is taken as an example, initially the hypothesis of this research was that there was such a strong emphasis on the Roman period in Houten because that is a subject that is nationally and internationally considered as important heritage. The essence of this hypothesis was that there is a great interest in the Roman period because society has *learned* to have an interest in this time period because of national and international heritage narratives. But it can also be that, as one volunteer archaeologist said, “the Roman period speaks to the imagination because it lends itself well for storytelling.” Heritage, thus, only finds its footing if the story that accompanies it speaks to the public’s imagination.

This, however, does not mean that there are no political powers at play whatsoever. As was shown in the vignette on page 33, the volunteer archaeologists are aware of political forces steering the conceptualisation of heritage and acknowledge that these forces are powerful. “Big museums have the funds to buy the most rare and beautiful finds.” Thus, big and wealthy museums can pick and choose the artifacts that lend themselves particularly well for storytelling, and thereby heritage construction. They have the means to capture the public’s interest and evoke the sense of wonder and personal connectedness that a good story can bring about. The volunteer archaeologists aim to accomplish the same with the exhibitions in their own museum. Striking items are essential to engage the public. As one of the work group’s members said:

People always look at the jewellery. And yes, metal objects as well, but they have to look a little interesting at least. Like for example during the exhibition about the Merovingian period, when we showcased fibulae [coat pins] in the shape of bees. Those are unique objects that were only made in this period. (...) Or certain kinds of pottery. We had an exhibition about terra sigillata, which was the Wedgwood of the Romans. (...) The most exclusive tableware that was available at the time. And it’s so fantastic, if you look at the quality of the pottery (...)

you hardly believe how old it is. It could have been a contemporary item, sometimes even futuristic. That is how beautiful they still are today.

Here it immediately becomes clear how well these special items lend themselves for storytelling. The volunteer archaeologist manages to effortlessly weave stories of uniqueness and Roman Wedgwood into her narrative. And indeed, it does speak to the imagination. What to take away from this is that, contrary to what the theories about national heritage construction in the theoretical exploration pose, heritage construction is not only a matter of picking pieces of history at random and pushing them into the spotlight. It is also a matter of picking those pieces that reflect that light the brightest.

Does this mean that only governments and archaeological work groups construct heritage stories? Of course, the answer is 'no'. In fact, heritage is near boundless in the forms it can take and the ways its stories can be told. The next quote from an employee of the municipality of Houten gives an illustration of this:

It happens that people say, "the municipality has decided that my building is not a municipal monument, but I think it is. I think it is a significant place in this town because horses have been shod here for two hundred years." That does happen. Things like musical associations, marching bands, those are also things that fall under living heritage nowadays. They might not be named as such in Houten, but they are very dearly cherished by the people. People write books about the history of them. Often, many generations are active in [these associations]. That too is a part of heritage. Of the local history of a place.

What this quote shows is that virtually anything can be considered heritage, but that the common trait is that heritage evokes a strong sense of attachment and meaning. In addition to that, the creation of heritage can take place anytime and be done by anyone. The essence lies in the ability to create a story that captures an emotion, which is the very thing that the volunteer archaeologists at the association aim at doing as well as possible.

How do these results relate to the theories that were discussed in the theoretical exploration? The following analysis from the same municipal employee captures an answer to this question:

Before, heritage used to be something that was defined by experts. Nowadays you see, especially on a municipal scale, that local heritage is becoming more and more important. And that people can also present it themselves, like an object of cultural-historical significance (...) So that has changed over time. Heritage is a very broad term. You can apply it to archaeology, to buildings, to old landscapes, to art. (...) But I think you can define it as objects, buildings, landscapes, that give a certain authenticity to a place. That show a part of the history of that place.

What this quote shows is that the presuppositions that flowed from the theories in the theoretical exploration are not necessarily wrong. Indeed, there perhaps was a time when individuals in a highly regarded position dictated what should be considered heritage and what should not. However, this top-down structure has shifted to make room for community initiatives that champion a more diverse heritage with a focus on local uniqueness. Here lies the link to our theory. Local heritages remain embedded in larger scale, perhaps national, ones. Communities look for ways to amplify their uniqueness in a landscape of striking similarities, much like the nations in Europe do (Wodak 2009). It shows the same dynamic at a different scale. Conceptualising heritage becomes a process of telling stories that amplify authenticity, at whichever scale you want it to be done.

Thus, we arrive at the following conclusion: heritage is the culmination of fragments of human life, both past and present, that stories have become attached to that reflect a sense of authenticity to those that do the storytelling. Heritage tells a story, but only if it is made to. The stories are ones people create themselves, but some fragments of life simply inspire such stories in a more pronounced way. All that remains to be discussed is how the volunteer archaeologists of Houten put their stories to use to create a uniquely local narrative., which is what the next chapter is about.

## A village with urban charms: constructing a local identity

Nine people have gathered in an online video conference when one of them brings up the topic of a Roman helmet that was recently found in Nieuwegein. A short haired man says, “only ten of that type have ever been found, and this one is still in pristine condition. Perhaps it was deposited as an offering to a river god?” A woman wearing glasses and a beaded necklace adds, “didn’t they also find a sword there last year?” “We should annex Nieuwegein” the short haired man replies, “if we all jump into the canal at the same time, we can create a tidal wave and overtake them easily.”

To avoid any confusion: the short haired man was joking and had no serious intention of annexing Nieuwegein by causing a natural disaster. However, there is another message to be taken from this joke, namely that there are borders that dictate who archaeological materials belong to. Nieuwegein has a rare helmet and a sword, so we should annex the town to be able to consider those items as part of our local story. These items are rare and special, so we would like to be able to claim ownership of them and make them part of the story of Houten. In this case, that claim cannot be made. So, what archaeological and historical elements *do* volunteer archaeologists in Houten use for their storytelling, and *what* story are they telling about Houten? More importantly, how does this story relate to the identity of Houten?

In the first empirical chapter it was discussed that Houten rapidly grew from the 1970’s onwards. There was a sudden, large influx of inhabitants, which, as was also briefly mentioned in the first empirical chapter, could be interpreted as a ‘new’ community when it is contrasted to the Houtenezen, or ‘original’ inhabitants. The following quote by a member of the volunteer archaeological association describes what this new community initially needed, and what role archaeology had to play in the fulfilment of these needs:

Houten is a new community looking for identity. That’s how I interpret it at least. A lot of people come in, and one of the aspects of identity can be history. Well, we [the association] play a role in that regard. Moreover, it is one of the aspects that the municipality thought about already when they were confronted with the task to grow. It was a task given by the government. The municipality had no say in that. (...) Back then, the municipality already had the foresight that a new community was coming in. So, identity. One of the aspects of identity: history. So,

we will invest in what Houten is known for among other things: archaeology, and everything that's adjacent to it. That also meant that we as an association got very lucky. Not only was a lot being excavated and found, but we also had full support from the municipality at the time.

What this volunteer archaeologist describes here is not only that identity is something that can be actively and consciously constructed, but also that history is an important factor on which an identity can be based (Eriksen 2002; Jenkins 2008). By doing so, he gives a striking example of the theory by Eriksen (2002) discussed in the theoretical exploration that history has a significant role to play in the construction of identities. Not only does this volunteer archaeologist acknowledge that history can take on this role, but he also points out that it was consciously made to do so by the municipality, at least in the period shortly after the expansions of Houten. Thus, we have established the initial idea that history and archaeology play a significant and deliberate role in the construction of an identity for the 'new' community of Houten. Now, we have to figure out what this identity is.

At the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned that borders can dictate the ownership of archaeological finds. Perhaps the word 'border' brings to mind something very concrete, like the borders of a country that are shown on a map. In the context of the identity of Houten, however, borders should be interpreted as something much less concrete than that. The borders I want to explore are the ones of the area to which the identity of the 'new' community of Houten pertains. For this, the Kromme Rijn landscape of current ridges is of decided importance. The current ridge landscape extends beyond the outer limits of the built area of Houten. It would be safe to say that rather than that the current ridge landscape surrounds Houten, Houten is more so situated within it. Because of this situatedness, the history of Houten as it exists today cannot be limited to elements that pertain only to the area within the municipal border. The story of Houten as the volunteer archaeologists tell it is embedded in a wider landscape. The following quote from an interview with one of the volunteer archaeologists gives an example of this embeddedness:

Why Houten? Well, because we are on the Limes. So Houten, Vechten, but also Utrecht and Leidsche Rijn, all the way to Katwijk were the Northern border of the [Roman] empire. And it didn't happen above [the border], although there were some guard posts and such, and it didn't happen in the hinterland, because over there were those weird

Celts. It was *on* the Limes. That is where that transition took place. (...) It's a chain that goes from Katwijk along here to Xanten in Germany, all the way to South-Germany, transitioning into the Danube, over the Carpathian Mountains, leading back to the Middle East in a big circle. That was one big chain of Roman influence. (...) And it had all those little branches going left and right and up and down, but this post here [the Roman fort Fectio] was not insignificant.

In this quote, this volunteer archaeologist places the nearby Fectio fort (mentioned in the first empirical chapter) in a broader context. He points out that the fort was part of a system that ran across the entire continent, and that the fort can thus not be understood as an isolated element. Interestingly, he does emphasise that the Fectio fort was significant in its own right. What this quote thus shows are dynamics of embeddedness and uniqueness, much like they were discussed in the theoretical exploration (Wodak 2009). The Roman history of Houten is embedded in a narrative that spans the continent but is also distinct from the rest. After all, for identities to take shape they need to emphasise the small differences that set them apart (Jenkins 2002). As one volunteer archaeologist said it, "I think that if the archaeological work group ceases to exist, the scale [of the narrative] will become bigger, and if the scale becomes bigger you lose things at a smaller scale." He expresses that if there is no specific attention being paid to the local scale, the uniqueness of Houten is at risk of disappearing. What, then, are the unique elements that the volunteer archaeologists of Houten emphasise?

The introduction of this thesis started out with a vignette about Houten 'becoming a thousand years older' because of archaeological materials from the bronze age being found at an excavation in the town. But what do bronze age materials have to do with contemporary Houten? The story of Houten somehow dating back to the bronze age because of archaeological finds from that age being found within the municipal borders could be interpreted as a 'myth of origin' (Wodak 2009). By placing the origin of Houten somewhere in the bronze age (which in the Netherlands is dated between 2000 and 800 B.C.), the notion is created that Houten is indeed a very old town. This completely contradicts the idea that Houten is a 'new community'. The message that the myth of origin of Houten conveys is that the new import community moves into a town that, in spite of being built largely from the 1970's onwards, is actually very old. Why is it important to the volunteer archaeologists to convey this message? Possibly, it relates to what the volunteer archaeologist said on page 38, namely that Houten's population is



“looking for identity”. A myth of origin like the one of the volunteer archaeologists convey can give a new community a sense of identity and pride and connect them to their town and each other. One member of the archaeological work group captured this sentiment well:

Well, you hope that it makes them [the inhabitants of Houten] proud of the town they live in, and that they convey this feeling to each other. That they convey it to their friends, family, anybody. That they live in such a beautiful place that is so rural and so old. And that this beauty has been acknowledged for thousands of years, because that’s how long people have been living in this area for. (...) We don’t date back to 10.000 years ago or anything, (...) but that bronze age settlement is something at least.

A myth of origin can thus enhance the well-being of a community by making them feel proud and happy to live where they do and make them feel connected in this shared pride. Identity construction through history is thus also a way of enhancing life. It is hard if not impossible to state with certainty that the bronze age settlement the volunteer archaeologist is talking about has any direct relation with present day Houten. However, the belief in this direct relation can enhance connectedness in a new community looking for identity.

In the theoretical exploration it was established that the history of a community consists of more than only a myth of origin (Anderson 2016; Eriksen 2002; Jenkins 2004). So how are other aspects of Houten’s history being linked to a local identity? As was discussed in the second empirical chapter, the volunteer archaeologists use points of recognition to get a better grasp of history. These points of recognition can also be applied to identity forming processes. One example of this can be found in the following quote from an interview with a volunteer archaeologist:

I think in a more general sense that Western civilisation is indebted to the Roman one. [Houten] is a piece of that, but to say that Houten is purely Roman would be taking it a bit too far. (...) However, it does contribute to it. (...) Look, the Romans truly had a world empire. The commander that was stationed here was from Syria. He had a wife that I think came from Algeria. (...) The tenth legion [that was stationed here] was from Spain, from Tarragona. The cavalry of the Romans were Batavians. They weren’t from here; they were from Scandinavia. (...) And everything was centred around a certain ideology. (...) One language, one currency. So, the Roman empire did not discriminate based on race or descent. If you participated and did your best you could become a Roman citizen, and then you could even become

emperor. (...) Nobody minded that. So, in that sense, if you look at our contemporary multicultural society, those Romans have something to offer still. (...) That measly whining about closing the borders and immigrants... The Netherlands are purely a country of immigrants! Hardly anybody lived here during the Roman age. Everything that lives here is immigrated.

This volunteer archaeologist creates points of recognition in this quote by comparing the contemporary multicultural society that he knows and is part of to ancient Roman civilisation: Roman society consisted of immigrants, just like ours. He compares the new community of 'import' of Houten to the Roman community of immigrants that was present in the area two thousand years ago and concludes that the two are similar. Another volunteer archaeologist expressed something similar, saying, "In fort Fectio there were already guest labourers. There were Bulgarians, (...) Britons, people from Spain. They were right here. (...) Two thousand years ago. That is simply remarkable." Through their stories these volunteer archaeologists create an idea of heritage from the Romans. Something that Houten has inherited from the past and remains reflected in the present community.

That this similarity is pointed out between the Roman community and the present day one does however not mean that the community has been unchanging and consistent in character throughout time. One volunteer archaeologist that I spoke to moved to Houten as a young adult before Houten had grown to its current size. He described the way he was received in the village at the time as follows:

Well, when I moved here I was very much a stranger. Nearby there is a pub, which at the time was the village pub. (...) I thought, well, a pub nearby, that will become my favourite pub. Well, I still remember I went there a few times, (...) and they didn't want to have much to do with me. So, I did not feel welcomed there, and it never happened after that. And the funny thing is that I was truly a stranger in the village at the time, and now, so many years later (...) everybody thinks I'm a [Houtenees]. That's the difference. The [Houtenezen], at least around the old village square, are no longer around.

The image of Houten that is sketched through this quote is quite different from the idea of a welcoming and tolerant community of immigrants and imports. This volunteer archaeologist went through a period of feeling like a stranger and not feeling welcomed by the local community. Interestingly, as he describes it, after many years of living in

Houten, he is now perceived to be part of the community that initially did not welcome him. It shows that there is a discrepancy between the identity that volunteer archaeologists construct of Houten today, and the one that the volunteer archaeologist from the quote experienced when he initially moved there. However different the two may be, there is one element that links them together intricately, and that is the element of a 'village feeling'.

What is this village feeling? As was mentioned in the first empirical chapter Houten has 50.000 inhabitants. Such a number can hardly be deemed a village. Yet, there is a certain ambiance that many people I have spoken to describe as a village feeling. And it is exactly the fact that this element is a feeling which makes it difficult to capture in words. The village feeling consists of different elements. One of them is the way Houten is built, which was discussed in the first empirical chapter. This architectural structure conjures the village feeling that seems to be so instrumental in Houten's identity. One volunteer archaeologist described it as follows:

Look, [Houten] is a village with urban charms. And everything is nearby, so therefore there doesn't need to be anything here. (...) It's not a sleepy village, but the location is so strategic, in the heart of the province. It's a coveted place to live, and there is a lot of nature surrounding it. (...) It's so rural. You cycle for a bit and you're in the outdoors. And that is the structure of the whole place. That ring road is about fifteen kilometres long. You cannot (...) take a shortcut through town. You have to get back on the ring road to enter the next neighbourhood [by car]. And outside that ring road, that's when you're almost in the rural landscape. That's everywhere, and that constitutes the DNA of Houten.

For this volunteer archaeologist having nature nearby and few cars inside the town adds to an ambiance that he compares to that of a village: villages are rural and quiet, and Houten feels similar to that. A member of the historical association expressed a similar sentiment, saying, "Houten has a village-like character. Low-rise buildings, no flats, no high-rise." Thus, the architectural structure of Houten captures a village feeling, despite housing 50.000 people. This in itself is an impressive feat, but the village feeling is also made up of a social element. One volunteer archaeologist gave an impression of this social element when she talked about her involvement in the archaeological work group by saying, "So, in that sense I find it very fun to have contact in the village itself, I simply call it a village, but in the town itself. And you know, to have the feeling that you can

accomplish something as a community. That I also enjoy thoroughly.” For her, it is also through simply being part of the work group that a village feeling takes shape. This is where an interesting paradox comes to the fore. The following quote by a municipal employee illustrates this paradox more clearly:

What stood out to me when I started working here is that there are so many community initiatives, a lot of volunteer work, (...) of many different kinds. And that is very valuable. Or, I have come to see that as being very valuable, because it generates involvement in the community. The involvement in the community relates to the village-like character that Houten still has. And perhaps people are scared that if Houten grows and grows, perhaps to 100.000 inhabitants, that that village-like character perhaps disappears. (...) What does that growth do to the community spirit? The fact that you know your neighbour, and that people greet each other in the street, and all those kinds of things that are still strongly present in Houten? Perhaps in the future that will change.

This quote shows that there is a community spirit that is expressed through volunteer work, greeting each other, knowing your neighbours. This municipal employee expresses that rapid population growth could perhaps change this village feeling. Interestingly, it seems like this village feeling was in fact created by the rapid expansions from the seventies onwards. Thinking back to the quote of the volunteer archaeologist describing how he did not feel welcomed and included when he first moved to Houten, there did not always seem to be such a welcoming community as there is today. Perhaps there was a similar village feeling in the little village of Houten from before the expansions, but the way that the village community of that time was described is difficult to compare to the idea of the tolerant and multicultural immigrated Romans that contemporary Houten is compared to. Somewhere along the way, this diverse and welcoming village feeling has been created.

The volunteer archaeologists link the village feeling to the past, constructing stories of heritage that use points of recognition with past civilisations as a way to show similarities between the past of Houten and the present. Paradoxically, the specific contemporary village feeling that is linked to these points of recognition seems to be a relatively new phenomenon, starting somewhere after Houten’s expansions when more strangers moved in, and a more welcoming atmosphere toward newcomers was created. The narrations of the volunteer archaeologists conjure the idea that Houten’s identity is a

piece of heritage passed on from the past, but in actuality, it seems to be a piece of heritage from the present.

By their involvement in a volunteer initiative the volunteer archaeologists are embedded in the village feeling that is created through community spirit and involvement. The use of history and heritage to construct an identity of Houten thus becomes what Eriksen (2002, 73) called not so much a consequence of the past, but a fulfilment of the needs of the present. Newcomers are looking for an identity and find one by situating themselves in a narrative of historical continuity. Does this make the identity of Houten any less real? It seems to be that simply the belief in Houten's welcoming village feeling makes the people that live there act in ways that generate this exact village feeling, and thereby make it real as an effect (Jenkins 2008). Houten's village feeling is thus real, but the idea that it was passed on from history might be imagined. The volunteer archaeologists of Houten create an identity of Houten not only through the stories they tell and the finds they display, but also by simply coming together as a group of volunteers. Perhaps that was the unique local heritage of Houten all along.

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## Conclusion

“To some people it’s not important, but to me it is. It provides enrichment. If somebody doesn’t understand that, that’s alright. For me, it is an enrichment of my life.”

Quote by a volunteer archaeologist speaking about the value of archaeology

Archaeology is inherently tied to materiality. It deals with matters that can be seen and touched. These aspects make archaeology especially deployable as a mechanism to illustrate matters of a more abstract nature, like history, heritage, and identity. This anthropological research project has aimed to illustrate this mechanism more clearly by looking at a specific case study, namely that of volunteer archaeologists in Houten, The Netherlands.

Theoretically it was established that history is, first and foremost, a construct. The construct of history is riddled with many intricacies that cause an interesting contradiction, namely that between fact and fiction. It was discussed that history is constructed in politically motivated ways (Anderson 2016; Eriksen 2002; Jenkins 2008; Wimmer 2002). On the other hand, at least in a Western scientific framework, there reigns a prominent conviction that history deals with essential and unbiased truths that exist outside of influences in the here and now (Hamann 2016; Palmié and Stewart 2016; Wirtz 2016). This friction between the practical constructed-ness and the conceptual unchanging-ness of history provided the arena from which the case study was approached.

For the volunteer archaeologists of Houten history is an all-encompassing concept that encapsulates the entirety of everything that happened throughout the passing of time, which is similar to one of the interpretations of history that was explored in our theoretical section (Palmié and Stewart 2016). The idea of history being all-encompassing leads to the issue that history can never truly be known: if history *is everything*, we can only know history if we *know everything*. Knowing everything, unfortunately, is impossible. Thus, we are left with a vast and daunting concept that we cannot understand. The volunteer archaeologists of Houten have found ways of negotiating this issue.

One of these ways is creating points of recognition. This is a name I have given to the process of detecting similarities between elements from the past, like archaeological materials, and elements from the present. This process can be done through seeing and

feeling. When points of recognition are found through seeing, this relates to for example a Roman water jug. A similarity can be seen between a Roman water jug and a contemporary one. Thus, the element of history that the Roman water jug represents becomes understandable and known, because it can be approached from an angle that is familiar, namely the water jugs that we know and use today.

When points of recognition are created through feeling, this relates to going through a physical experience to create an understanding of what similar experiences must have been like in the past. The example for this that was given in this thesis was that of wearing a reconstructed Roman armour. By wearing this armour an experience is created through which the person wearing it can imagine what it might have been like for Roman soldiers in the past to wear their armour. Once again, the historical element that this experience represents becomes known and thus understood.

The problem with using points of recognition as a method for conceptualising history is that it remains unknown whether the interpretations that flow from this method are historically accurate. We cannot know for certain that the experience of a volunteer archaeologist in contemporary Houten wearing a reconstructed Roman armour accurately reproduces the experiences of actual Roman soldiers in antiquity. This poses a problem for the point discussed in the theoretical exploration that history is seen to consist of essential truths (Palmié and Stewart 2016; Wirtz 2016). Namely, if history contains essential truths, the *true* experience of a Roman soldier hypothetically exists and can thus either be accurately discovered or not. The volunteer archaeologists of Houten negate this problem, since they demonstrate another point from the theoretical exploration, namely that of collective remembering and forgetting (Eriksen 2002).

Collective remembering and forgetting was discussed in the context of national history construction, but can also be applied to the local history construction that the volunteer archaeologists engage in. An example of this was given through changing interpretations in the dating of a specific type of pottery. New insights have changed the way this pottery was dated and has now placed this pottery in an entirely different period in history. Because this insight was the result of scientific research the result is accepted and deemed true. What it indicates is that the ways things are remembered can change and are thus not set in stone. These changes do not make the results less true, because they are *deemed* true after all, but they demonstrate that there is no essential truth in history outside of the present, since it is in the present that these truths are constructed.

Thus, the comparison between Roman and contemporary jugs and the experience of wearing a reconstructed armour provide true interpretations of history, because they are deemed true based on the knowledge that is available to us in the present. It shows that different ways of coming to an understanding of the past outside of Western historiography are valid, since they serve the same goal of making history more understandable and less daunting.

However, there needs to remain an element of mystery to history. The goal of amateur archaeologists is not to understand and know the entirety of history, since it is the unknown and mysterious aspects of it that motivate their engagement with history in the first place. Thus, history can never be fully known, but the mystery that this leaves us with is necessary to motivate the search to know more.

With this information in mind the conceptualisation of heritage was discussed. Initially during the research period, the difference between history and heritage remained unclear. Likely this had to do with history being essential for heritage to form. For the volunteer archaeologists of Houten heritage namely is a collection of stories. Stories are at the heart of heritage and have the power to transform parts of history into heritage that people feel a keen connection and appreciation toward. The volunteer archaeologists have a deep understanding of the importance of stories, since they recognise that without a story, archaeological materials are mute (Johnson 2010). Thus, it is only through stories that history comes to life and gains the potential to become cherished heritage for a community of people.

This 'coming to life' of heritage through stories can invoke strong personal connections between people in the present and history. Stories of heritage are a way to draw the distant past closer to us. Based on the theoretical exploration we have understand that heritage is a politically orchestrated narrative that serves the objectives of those that have the power to steer these narratives. If this understanding is used as a framework to interpret the interaction between the public and heritage, the idea comes to the fore that the interest the public shows in specific subjects is the result of a narrative that was pushed on them through heritage construction done by political forces. In this dynamic the heritage that people feel a strong connection with and interest for can be interpreted as a learned behaviour because of top-down constructed heritage narratives. What the volunteer archaeologists have shown however is that this dynamic can also work the other way around. They acknowledge and recognise that there are political



forces at play when it comes to heritage construction. This is for example noticeable in the distribution of archaeological materials among museums, where big museums with large financial resources have the power to buy and claim the most rare and interesting finds to display and use for their heritage storytelling. However, simply that these forces are present does not mean they fully dictate what subjects the public takes an interest to.

When it comes to stories of heritage, the public does not exclusively want to hear certain stories because they have learned to take an interest in specific topics because of politically charged heritage construction dynamics. It also works the other way around in the sense that the public wants to hear certain stories because they are told in an interesting and exciting way. What the volunteer archaeologists of Houten have shown is that anything can turn into heritage if a good story is attached to it. It is not only a dynamic in which the public dictates what the volunteer archaeologists say, the volunteer archaeologists also dictate what the public wants to hear. Thus, the volunteer archaeologists have shown that heritage construction is less rigorously politically decided than the theory initially suggested, and that there is plenty of room for creative storytelling to construct new and meaningful heritage for local communities.

This meaningful heritage relates to a sense of a uniquely local identity. During the research period Houten was described to me as a new community looking for identity. History, heritage, and archaeology can play a role in the actualisation of a community identity. In the case of Houten archaeology was consciously used by the municipality as a vehicle for identity construction after the large-scale expansions that attracted 45.000 new inhabitants. This conscious use of archaeology as a way to shape identities is in line with the theories established in the theoretical exploration that history, heritage, and archaeology strongly shape collectives' identities because of the sense of a shared past they create (Anderson 2016; Eriksen 2002; Johnson 2016).

This shared past remains embedded in larger-scale narratives. In Houten this comes to the fore in the ways the history, heritage, and archaeology of Houten are framed by the volunteer archaeologists as being part of larger systems that operate on national and international scales. In order to ascertain Houten's unique identity, elements that set Houten apart in these wider narratives are accentuated. In this need to emphasize local uniqueness while acknowledging embeddedness in supra-local narratives a similarity can be seen with Wodak's (2009) theory about the need to emphasise the uniqueness of

collective identities, especially when these identities are compared to ones that are similar.

The volunteer archaeologists of Houten use different methods of emphasising the uniqueness of Houten. These methods culminate in a narrative in which Houten and its inhabitants are framed as an ancient and constant presence in the landscape. This narrative shows a striking contrast to the notion of Houten being a new community looking for identity. To negotiate this discrepancy a unique village feeling is framed as an element of heritage that has been constantly present in Houten throughout time and has been passed on from the past to now. When this village feeling is more closely examined it seems to be a relatively recent phenomenon that grew through the efforts of Houten's new community of 'imports' to connect to each other and the town after they moved in by the thousands from the seventies onwards.

Does this mean that Houten's identity is fake? Quite simply, the answer is no. What the volunteer archaeologists of Houten have shown is that not only is history constructed, but there are also many creative ways of coming to an understanding of the concept. This same creativity can be deployed in the storytelling that shapes and generates notions of heritage. This heritage operates as a cherished enhancement of daily life. It binds people together and can give a sense of identity to a community in search of connection and belonging. The volunteer archaeologists demonstrate that archaeology can be a positive force of connection by deploying their creativity to create binding elements in a town of 50.000 people. Their efforts nuance the notion that the construction of history, heritage, and identity are dividing political processes. History, heritage, and identity remain constructs nonetheless, but in the context of Houten are far more unifying than the theories suggest. Like the quote at the beginning of this chapter says, archaeology provides an enrichment of life. The volunteer archaeologists of Houten seem to understand this all too well.

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