

HERITAGE AND NATIONALISM

Understanding populism through big data

Chiara Bonacchi

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For Mario, Angela, Tommaso and Giacomo

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Author's note

In this book direct quotes of single words, sentences or longer extracts are written in their original form as they appeared on social media. They may therefore include errors of grammar or spelling. The opinions expressed in the quotes are those of their writers alone and do not reflect the views of the author of this work.

Please also note that some of the text analyses are performed on tokenised terms. Tokens may not be immediately recognisable as words or as word stems and they may be derived from either English or Italian, depending on the context. The process for obtaining tokens is explained in [Chapter 2](#), p. 25.

Several chapters in this book make use of the adjective ‘populist nationalist’ – derived from the noun ‘populist nationalism’ – in line with existing literature on this topic.

Introduction

Aim

In the summer of 2016, while recovering from an unpleasant ankle injury and the even more painful tension linked to the recent Brexit referendum, I came across a curious Facebook page entitled *Celtic Britain First* (2016). A satirical post published on 28 June showed the picture of an angry and half-naked Celt, sword in hand, accompanied by the text ‘Celebrate! Finally, Britain has seen sense, and left the Roman Empire! Celts have got our country back!’ (Fig. 1.1). That was the moment when I realised that, despite the breadth and depth of the literature available on the relationship between our perception of the past and contemporary politics, nobody had yet reflected systematically on how people’s experience of ancient periods might influence neo-populist sentiments in this age of networked web infrastructures and data profusion.

Nor had there ever been a coordinated study investigating the circulation across different countries of myths derived from the deep past. How are the Romans invoked in Brexit Britain compared to Donald Trump’s United States of America, for example, and to what purpose? And why is it critical to answer these kinds of questions? One might think that decisions relating to matters such as being part of a supranational project like the European Union or electing the US head of state would be predominantly based on the assessment of economic and political factors. But is this in fact the case? What if, as time has proved, arguments rooted in identity and feelings of belonging were at least as compelling to human hearts and minds? It surely then becomes paramount to know who people identify with, where they place their origins and the language and images they choose – more or less consciously – when thinking and speaking of present-day political issues



Fig. 1.1 Satirical post published on 28 June 2016 on the public Facebook page *Celtic Britain First*.

and social challenges. In order to build shared ground for citizens to engage democratically in public life and to improve decision-making processes, it is important that we understand each other better and acknowledge the motivations that drive us as individuals and collectives. The study of the human past and its present-day currency, or heritage, can offer a significant contribution towards moving in precisely this direction.

These are some of the considerations and questions that prompted me to add a bespoke line of inquiry focusing on heritage and populist nationalism to the *Ancient Identities in Modern Britain* project. This collaboration between Durham University and the University of Stirling

had just been funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council.¹ In this context I began a large-scale and joint programme of research that used data-intensive and qualitative methods to establish how objects, people, places and practices from Iron Age to early medieval times have become rhetorical tools through which populist and populist nationalist views are framed and communicated today.

References to later periods were also examined when entangled with those concerning the chronological span from 800 BC to AD 800. Concentrating on this time frame was primarily the consequence of a fundamental desire to explore dualities that set ‘contiguous periods’ in opposition to one another – for example in relation to ideas of civilisation and barbarism, or of freedom and domination. This interpretative lens is centred on the notion of ‘insistent duality’ originally coined by Beard and Henderson (1999) with reference to Boudica/Boadicea in a chapter that addresses the presentation of the Roman past through museum displays in Britain. The authors ask whether Roman Britain is perceived as ‘Roman or native’, ‘British or foreign’, ‘part of a seamless web of our island story or an ignominious period of enemy occupation’, ‘the origins of (European) civilisation on our shores or an unpleasant, artificial intrusion that actually managed to postpone (British) civilisation for almost a thousand years’ (Beard and Henderson 1999).

In presenting the results of this work I will focus particularly on populist nationalistic uses of the pre-modern past by politicians, political parties, broadcasters, press institutions and private individuals involved in political activism on social media. As discussed in further detail in Chapter 2, studying this kind of activism can provide powerful insights for understanding the political futures that people hope for and the make-up of their political identities (Marichal 2013). Importantly, it can also help us to comprehend how such identities and imagined futures relate to both variable ideas of ‘nation’ and to different perceptions and experiences of the past. As well as being a pervasive reality in the everyday lives of a large part of the Western world, social media are a natural ally for populist politics (Gerbaudo 2018) – and nationalism, in the age of the interconnected web, globalisation and neoliberalism, is often populist (Brubaker 2017; De Matas 2017). It has cultural, economic and political dimensions, defining ‘a collective inside against an outside and proclaim[ing] pride in and the need to defend “our economy”, “our country” and “our way of life”’ (Fuchs 2018, 42). As such, it is ultimately based on an ‘exclusive’ conception of nation (Delanty 2017), while displaying global reach and interrelations.

Inside–outside demarcations typical of populist nationalist discourse can be fuelled by the equally binary ways in which the pre-modern past is frequently leveraged in the present (Bonacchi, Altaweel and Krzyzanska 2018; Hingley, Bonacchi and Sharpe 2018). Notions of ‘us’ and ‘otherness’ are constructed through processes of identification with, for example, either the ‘Romans’ or the ‘barbarians’, native Iron Age tribes or Germanic peoples. When invoked, each of these collectives symbolises sets of values that may vary dramatically from one person to another and even within the same individual conscience (Beard and Henderson 1999; Kristiansen 1996; Hingley and Unwin 2005; Hingley, Bonacchi and Sharpe 2018).

These issues are addressed here via a study of populist nationalist positions expressed on social media and linked to the Brexit referendum of 2016, Italian populist politics in the last decade and up to the 2018 General Election and the United States in the ‘Trump era’. These case studies were selected for three main reasons. First, they all draw on ideas, people and materials from the Iron Age to the early medieval past of Europe, although in different ways and to variable degrees. Second, they allow a comparison of how this same past is leveraged in Western Europe and across the Atlantic, two geopolitical areas experiencing populist nationalism today (Brubaker 2017). Third, they make it possible to observe how some of the oppositions that fundamentally revolve around parallels between the Roman Empire and the European Union are played out in a territory that was once the imperial core (Italy) and in another located at the Empire’s periphery (Britain). Findings from this primary research are situated in the wider international landscape of contemporary nationalisms and contextualised in deeper time, in relation to published works on the late twentieth- and twenty-first-century nationalism that has flourished in the UK, Italy and the US, as well as to literature regarding political uses of the past more generally.

The politics of the past

I began this chapter by stating the novelty of a book that systematically and comparatively studies heritage and populist nationalism via social media. However, in the last few years the number of publications and initiatives concerned with the interlinking of heritage and politics has without doubt suddenly increased. Within public archaeology, heritage studies and classics, the latest debates have been centred on four central and partly overlapping themes: Brexit, populism, mobility and discrimination, with the last being mostly tied to gender or race.

Researchers have examined uses of the past in online exchanges about Brexit (Bonacchi, Altaweel and Krzyzanska 2018); the relation between imperialism, regional and national identities and Brexit (Gardner 2017); and the present and possible future impact of Brexit on the heritage sector (Gardner and Harrison 2017; Pitts 2017; Schlanger 2017; White 2017; Pendlebury and Veldpaus 2018). They have also begun not only to scrutinise the ways in which archaeological and heritage professionals might have created some of the conditions for Brexit to unfold, but also to explore the kinds of agendas that may mitigate tensions and extremism going forward (Jorayev 2017; Richardson and Booth 2017; Bonacchi 2018; Bonacchi, Altaweel and Krzyzanska 2018; Brophy 2018; Gardner 2018; Hingley, Bonacchi and Sharpe 2018; Moore and Tully 2018; Schlanger 2018).

A connected line of research has focused on archaeology and populism, reflecting on the extent to which contemporary populist sentiment has been fed by the rise of post-modernist and post-colonial philosophical stances. In a rather controversial piece, González-Ruibal, González and Criado-Boado (2018) argue that the people who public archaeology and critical heritage studies have worked to ‘empower’ are now ideologically turning against scholars, to the point that the latter no longer recognise them as ‘their’ public. The same authors believe that embracing post-expert positions in heritage (e.g. Schofield 2014) has contributed to the fostering of distrust and that such viewpoints should therefore be replaced with more decisive communications of scientific narratives. According to the authors, archaeologists should focus on provoking people and teaching about and through archaeology, in order that epistemic authority can ultimately be re-established (González-Ruibal, González and Criado-Boado 2018). Others have independently argued on similar grounds, critiquing those academics who have been complying with neoliberalist demands and the marketisation of higher education, ‘happy for so long to fuel social “impact” indicators while relinquishing hard-earned “authorised” expertise to the lures of bottom-up, re-empowered multivocality’ (Schlanger 2018, 1665; see also Brophy 2018; Barclay and Brophy 2020).

However, this overall view has also encountered various degrees of resistance. Together with other colleagues I have stressed that the role of public archaeology, public history and heritage studies is in fact to expose appropriations of the past of all types, so that citizens are aware of them and their social and political implications, and are thus able to make more fully informed decisions (Bonacchi 2018; Harrison 2018). Additionally, as noted by Hamilakis (2018, 520), participatory approaches to the study and

interpretation of the past undertaken with a view to confront issues of race and diversity are key to the development of ‘inclusive emancipatory politics’. Finally, with a memory studies perspective and embracing a vision of the past that does not focus specifically on the pre-modern period, a very recent book has significantly investigated how heritage features in populist narratives in European countries, using a collection of examples not centred on the systematic analysis of social media data (De Cesari and Kaya 2020).

Borders and frontiers, and their political relevance from past to present, have also been the subject of renewed investigation since 2016 (see for example McAtackney and McGuire 2020). Alongside the Brexit referendum and Donald Trump’s election as the 45th US President, the year 2016 saw the culmination of a powerful rhetoric central to both events: regaining control over national borders. Drawing on the tradition of border studies and intertwining it with historical and archaeological literature, Hingley explores the similarities between the frontiers of the Roman Empire and those of Europe in terms of supranationality, porosity and integration (Hingley 2018). Further work has addressed the topic of heritage and borders in the US, for example via a recent special issue of the *Review of International American Studies* on *Walls, Material and Rhetorical: Past, Present, and Future* (Mariani 2018; Tóth 2018). In this collection Mariani observes the parallels between ‘Trump’s projected wall and fantasies of a fortified Europe’, whose limit is the Mediterranean Sea that divides southern European territories from North African regions (Mariani 2018, 76). Going beyond the analysis of migration structures, infrastructures and characteristics, a corpus of research has finally captured and analysed the heritage in – and of – human mobility and forced migration (Beard 2015; Hamilakis 2016; Colomer 2017; Hingley, Bonacchi and Sharpe 2018).

Occasionally in dialogue with archaeology and heritage, the field of classics has also been reasoning with the ways in which the past features in political discourse today. However, this has mostly been achieved via reception-based approaches rather than by unpicking the human aspects of assigning political meanings to the past in a more anthropological and sociological vein. Published works have touched upon themes that include the leveraging of classics by white supremacist, misogynist and racist groups (McCoskey 2012; Zuckerberg 2018) and the influence of the Greek and Roman worlds on our ideas of gender, equality and opportunity (Beard 2017). The workshop ‘Claiming the Classical: Classics and politics in the 21st century’ was particularly effective in highlighting the substantial geographic variability of the use of antiquity and, indeed, of its non-use today (Mac Sweeney et al. 2019).

We can ultimately conclude that after a period of relative plateauing, compared to trends in 1990s scholarship, discussions around the political uses of the past have been re-burgeoning in various research traditions and fields, albeit in rather fissiparous and not always coordinated ways. This book will build on such literature through two newly developed frameworks outlined in the remaining pages of this chapter.

Social heritages

As highlighted by Gardner, there has been an inescapable bond between ideas of heritage and political legitimisation since at least modern times (Gardner 2018). But has anything changed recently in this respect? This book seeks to answer this question, beginning from two main hypotheses. The first is that new digital media (Lister 2009) can make more apparent the international viability of sets of ideas and myths about the past that contribute to the definition of inward-looking but globally interconnected populism. The second hypothesis postulates the submersion or erasure of heritage – particularly of the deep past – in some of the newest forms of populism. If both hypotheses were proved, could we conclude that populism is actively working to create societies that do not share or engage with an ‘official’ past to the same extent? Is this operation of rejecting ‘public’ heritages positive? Or could it introduce real dangers to the development of tolerant societies who are in communication with one another and able to appreciate diversity?

Studies in the heritage domain may help to answer these questions and to placate a looming sense of uncertainty and precariousness that has led some to compare our present anxieties with those evident during the two World Wars (White 2017). A positive outcome will be possible if, on the one hand, we re-establish the intrinsic value of research about the human past and, on the other, we focus on identifying the potential applied contribution of public intellectuals and the ways in which this could be implemented in practice.

In a short but powerful book, the philosopher Nuccio Ordine discusses the ‘utility of inutility’, explaining that subjects such as classics and the arts have intrinsic value because they generate those creative stimuli that nurture us as humans (Ordine and Flexner 2014). In his view, in the same way that a child is brought into the world just to be, not simply as a means of serving society, so a work of art must first be conceived and created; only then can it be ‘appropriated’ by society. The gratuity of knowing aligns with life representing our essence and mission, as

expressed in condensed form by the Delphic instruction of γνῶθι σεαυτόν ('know yourself') (Ordine and Flexner 2014). Ordine's argument supports disciplines that are often viewed as marginal and punished with more limited funding; he encourages us to revisit the true utility of what is widely and often a-critically considered to be useful. His thinking follows the lines of an elegant essay in which Abraham Flexner (1866–1959), the founding father of the Institute of Advanced Studies at Princeton University, underlines how all the major discoveries subsequently destined to have a substantial applied impact have derived from pure research, undertaken with the sole aim of satisfying one's curiosity and with no other agendas (Flexner 1939; Flexner and Dijkgraaf 2017).

Concerns towards the excessive metrification of the benefits of arts and culture within public policy have grown (O'Brien 2015, 79; Belfiore and Upchurch 2013), but new economic theory opens up spaces for different logics ultimately to prevail. Developing her argument from Keynesian thinking, Mariana Mazzucato (2014; 2018) highlights the value of patient investment by an 'entrepreneurial' state that both supports pure research and strategically invests in mission-driven and socially valuable and achievable initiatives. This position invites us to reflect on the social mission of the humanities and social sciences that deal with studies of the past.

Public humanities can, and should, further our awareness of the public experience of the past, including its emotional and cognitive components, to improve the construction of civic consciousness and democratic decision-making. I articulate this vision for public archaeology and heritage going forward by proposing the concept of *social heritage* as a viable and valuable framework on which to lead future research with social purpose. In using the label *social heritage*, I refer to those studies that aim specifically to understand the processes and results of people's use of the past to interpret the reality in which they live, as well as to help in (or abstain from) resolving situations perceived as problematic at a group or societal scale. Digital methods and big data can offer unique insights into social heritage, particularly – I would argue – if we take an approach to digital heritage such as that proposed in the next section.

Digital heritage in a world of big data

The research area of digital heritage started to emerge in the 1990s, when it focused chiefly on examining the impact of digital technologies both within and for the Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums sector

(GLAMs) (Fahy 1995; Arvanitis 2004; Galani and Chalmers 2002; Parry 2005; 2007; 2010; Cameron and Kenderdine 2007). Over the course of almost three decades, digital heritage has expanded significantly. Until very recently, however, it has remained primarily concerned with just two closely linked topics: the digitisation of analogue resources and digital engagement with the past (recently: Bonacchi et al. 2019; Kidd 2011; Geismar 2012; Were 2015; King, Stark and Cooke 2016; Díaz-Andreu 2017; Jones et al. 2017). Literature concerned with digitally-born and digitally-implemented heritage research has been, and remains, very limited; the few studies of this kind that exist tend to follow one of two directions. As I began to discuss in a previous article (Bonacchi and Krzyzanska 2019), a first group of publications deals with broad concepts and problems without being substantively grounded from an empirical point of view (e.g. Bonacchi and Moshenska 2015; Perry and Beale 2015; Richardson 2018). A second group is centred on digital tools and methods without an overly extensive treatment of theory (e.g. Marwick 2014; Wevers and Verhoef 2017). While each of these two strands is entirely legitimate, neither seems sufficient to advance the field of digital heritage today, during a time of data deluge.

Arguably, a more fruitful approach to digital heritage is one that combines a rich understanding of heritage theory and practice – necessary to inform meaningful research questions and interpretations – with an immediate engagement with technicity, the ‘technology considered in its efficacy or operating functioning’ (Hoel and van der Tuin 2013, 187). In a world of big data, technicity is, at the same time, part of both the methodology that we use and the subject that we study; for this reason we cannot simply omit a consideration of direct interactions with it. On the one hand, we are faced with the pressing need to overcome the issue of theory being detached from the substance of practice and existing only in its formal essence. On the other, we must address the problem of a-critical focusing on applications and research that is devoid of the anthropological, archaeological, sociological and philosophical core that constitutes the breeding ground of public archaeology and heritage scholarship. This book aims to express and exemplify a theoretically and technically rich kind of digital heritage research by drawing on big data to examine how aspects of the past may appear in populist nationalist discourse on social media.

Big data is the product of the shift from a more informational web to a more interactive and collaborative one. It has often been defined as possessing qualities such as very large volume, exhaustive scope, relationality, high velocity, great variety and flexibility, as well as fine granularity (Kitchin 2013; 2014b). Recently, however, Kitchin and

McArdle (2016) have clarified that a big dataset will feature most of these properties, but not necessarily all of them. While big data is transforming a number of different facets of our daily lives, it also challenges existing and established paradigms of scientific investigation. Over the last few years a growing body of literature has examined both the potential and the limitations of big data for research in the social sciences. Social researchers have tried to understand whether – and how – the availability of this material of unprecedented kind is, in actual fact, changing the questions that they ask, the methods, technical *apparata* and practices they adopt, not to mention the knowledge they produce and the ways in which they communicate it (Kitchin 2014b; Leonelli 2014; Schroeder 2014a; Felt 2016; Youtie, Porter and Huang 2017; Lipworth et al. 2017; Lauro et al. 2017). This level of critical scrutiny into the methodologies, epistemologies and ethics of research informed by big data is unparalleled in the humanities (Eijnatten, Pieters and Verheul 2013; Schoch 2013; Schroeder 2014a; Schäfer and Van Es 2017; Schiuma and Carlucci 2018), and the specific contribution of heritage scholars to discuss the topic has been especially limited (Bonacchi, Altaweel and Krzyzanska 2018; Richardson 2018; Bonacchi and Krzyzanska 2019; Altaweel and Hadjitofi 2020; Bonacchi 2021a; Bonacchi 2021b; Bonacchi and Krzyzanska 2021; Marwick and Smith 2021). The next chapter is dedicated to addressing these omissions.

Structure of the book

The monograph is written for a wide audience of researchers, professionals and a more general public interested in heritage, archaeology, history, anthropology, sociology, political science and the digital humanities. Its structure is articulated in three main parts. The first part is more theoretical in nature and comprises this introduction, together with Chapters 2 and 3. Chapter 2 reflects on the use and value of big data in and for heritage research, and on the ways in which social media big data is transforming digital heritage as an area of study. In doing so, it also examines how social media are utilised for purposes of political activism today and presents different theoretical stances on the subject, spanning functionalist and more identity-focused approaches. Furthermore, the chapter introduces the reader to the datasets, data collection methods and analyses that were used for the research presented in Chapters 4 to 7. Chapter 3 provides an extensive and diachronic review of literature published in heritage, archaeology, history, anthropology,

sociology and political science about the concepts of populism, nationalism and Euroscepticism, with reference to the UK, Italy and the US, as well as other countries internationally. In introducing these works, an emphasis is placed on those that have engaged with uses of the past for the construction of populist nationalist narratives.

The second part of the book constitutes its analytical core and encompasses [Chapters 4, 5 and 6](#). [Chapter 4](#) is concerned with the Eurosceptic and nationalist tendencies expressed in the period leading up to and immediately following Italy's General Election in March 2018. The chapter draws on Facebook pages of populist political parties and party leaders who played a key role in the election. This analysis illuminates how new forces in politics have framed concepts of nation through heritage in ways that differ profoundly from established parties. [Chapter 5](#) deals with uses of the ancient past, from the Iron Age to the early medieval period, in the context of discussions about Brexit on social media. The chapter builds on the analysis of a dataset of over 1.4 million posts, comments and replies extracted from 364 public Facebook pages containing the word 'Brexit' in their title or description ([Bonacchi, Altaweel and Krzyzanska 2018](#)). This research is substantially expanded with further investigation into the ways in which heritage objects, places, people and practices have been mobilised by key politicians, political parties, broadcast media and the press to construct narratives about Brexit through their official Facebook pages. [Chapter 6](#) explores pro- and anti-populist nationalist discourse within the US–Mexican border and other immigration policy debates in the run up to, during and shortly after the US Presidential Election of November 2016. This case study allows comparisons with uses of the European past that relate to issues of border control and mobility, especially those that emerge from discussions about Brexit. This is achieved through the study of the public Facebook pages of the main US political parties, party leaders and presidential campaigns, and of relevant Twitter collections. Prominence is given to the parallel established between Trump's wall and Hadrian's Wall in media discourse and Twitter exchanges.

Part 3 of the book, comprising the final two chapters, seeks to connect the interpretations emerging from the analysis presented in Part 2 with the conceptual and theoretical reviews of Part 1. More specifically, [Chapter 7](#) discusses the impact of work undertaken by experts in the study of the human past on the current uses of heritage in contemporary populist nationalist narratives. It assesses how expert interpretations and expert authority are leveraged within public discourse by focusing on a specific case study: the phenomenon referred to as the end of the Western

Roman Empire. This chapter turns to philosophy, political science, history and archaeology to re-examine ideas of trust and their meanings for populist nationalists. It also reflects on the relationships between the historic consciousness evidenced in populist nationalist discourse, distributed expertise, mediation practices and the societal fabric of Italy and anglophone countries such as the UK and the US.

Finally, [Chapter 8](#) identifies the heritage narratives that may be considered characteristic of new populist nationalism, in Europe and overseas, and the specificities of the times in which we are living. Based on an analysis of the cultural substratum of new nationalisms, this chapter attempts not just to underline the novelties of contemporary uses of the past in this context, but more effectively to unpack the notion of populist nationalism today. I argue that deep-rooted cultural and historical motifs have not been adequately taken into account in the process of constructing supranational polities such as the European Union. [Chapter 8](#) demonstrates the importance of considering these factors. It critiques current policy-making models, often built on very technical evidence but rarely informed by arguments developed by those who study the human past. The chapter also proposes a middle-range theory to understand the construction and propagation of expert influence on the generation of people's historical sense. It concludes with reflections on the future of social heritage research.

Notes

- 1 The *Ancient Identities in Modern Britain* project was funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council from 2016 to 2019 (reference: AH/N006151/1). It was carried out by a team of researchers based at Durham University, UCL (from July 2016 to March 2018) and the University of Stirling (from April 2018 to December 2019): Professor Richard Hingley (Principal Investigator), Dr Chiara Bonacchi (Co-Investigator Researcher), Professor Thomas Yarrow (Co-Investigator), Dr Kate Sharpe (Post-doctoral Researcher) and Ms Marta Krzyzanska (Research Assistant).

2

Using big data

Social media, political activism and populism

Social media are valuable to explore how the past is leveraged to frame populist nationalist sentiments. This is for two main reasons, each related to the twofold nature of such media as both spaces and data. I begin by discussing the first of these motivations, then turn to the second in the subsequent section.

Social media are ideal fields of investigation for studies concerned with populism because they offer *loci* where this ideology is cultivated by certain politicians and political parties. Views here are openly expressed by some of their sympathisers, as well as by other disgruntled users of the internet. As noted in [Chapter 1](#), the political sociologist Gerbaudo (2018, 745) has argued that, for populist movements, networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are both ‘the people’s voice’ and ‘the people’s rally’; they allow the immediate dissemination of information to millions of individuals. A recent publication has reported that around 63 per cent of users gain their news from social media, commenting that ‘these news stories undergo the same popularity dynamics as other forms of online contents such as selfies and cat photos’ (Newman, Levy and Nielsen 2015; Del Vicario et al. 2017).

Social media also enable forms of direct communication that bypass journalistic gatekeepers, even though they remain linked to traditional mass media (Engesser et al. 2017; Postill 2018, 756; Hallin 2019). They can therefore easily host rebellious narratives often crafted through ‘acerbic’ messages. These do not need to be negotiated with newspaper or broadcasting editors, but circulate freely between echo chambers of like-minded individuals (Bartlett 2014, 94; Gerbaudo 2018; KhosraviNik 2018). Social network analysis by Del Vicario et al. (2017), for example, has

proved that the debate about Brexit on public Facebook pages was driven by two polarised communities. Each shared its own position on the subject, consistently supporting the idea of either remaining in the European Union or of leaving it.

Even though social networking platforms may potentially be useful to any politician, they are particularly instrumental to populists, because they provide them with ‘direct, unmediated access to people’s grievances’ and the opportunity to alleviate these grievances by acting on behalf of supposedly ‘burdened’ individuals and against the ‘elites’ (Kriesi 2014, 363). This is heightened by the fact that populist sympathisers living in Western European countries, including Italy and the UK, show particularly high levels of discontent towards mainstream news media, as reported by a survey undertaken from 20 October to 20 December 2017 (Sumida, Walker and Mitchell 2019). However, Govil and Baishya (2018, 67) have noted that the link between populism and social media is also strong in non-Western politics and that, for this reason, it should not be considered ‘contextual’ but internationally ‘constitutive’. How should we go about researching this relationship, powerfully characterised by Gerbaudo (2018) as an ‘elective affinity’?

Scholarly approaches to the study of political activism on social media have varied greatly. Most researchers in the field have taken a functionalist perspective, looking to assess the effectiveness of networking platforms in mobilising people offline and so introducing change in the physical world (Morozov 2009; Shirky 2011; Gerbaudo 2012; Velasquez and LaRose 2015). At one end of the spectrum are optimistic views, such as those highlighting the utility of social media to create social capital that may be directly leveraged for activist purposes, often with fruitful outcomes. Shirky (2011), for example, has argued that greater amounts of information unlocked by the social web automatically translate into considerable social action. Gerbaudo (2012) has offered a more nuanced view, underlining the role of emotions and the fact that social media activism contributes to the creation or reinforcement of a sense of ‘togetherness’ that may impact on mobilisation in a profound manner.

By contrast, and at the other end of this discussion, we find technopessimists such as Morozov (2009). He uses the term ‘slacktivism’ to describe social media activism as a ‘feel good’ form of activism that has no ‘real world’ impact (Morozov 2009). In Morozov’s opinion, Gerbaudo neglects the fact that ‘the process of mobilisation cannot be reduced to the material affordances of the technologies it adopts, but also involves the construction of shared meanings, identities and narratives’ (Johnston and

Klandermans 1995; Gerbaudo 2012, 9). A middle-ground position – and the one I will adopt here – is supported by Marichal (2013), who refers to a ‘political micro-activism’ performed on social media that may or may not translate into social change. Marichal (2013) has given prominence to the fact that, through political micro-activism, people manifest their identities and the kinds of political futures they hope to see materialised.

Social media as ‘found data’

There is a second reason why social media offer an ideal field of investigation for studies of populism: they produce big data that is organic and generated in real time (Housley et al. 2014). From a researcher’s point of view, this data is effectively just ‘found’. Working with material spontaneously created by people in the course of their lives has major advantages for research concerned with social heritage, particularly for addressing the questions posed by this book. Heritage is not a priority topic in most people’s minds, in contrast to issues such as welfare, taxes, public health services or security. As a result, it may be difficult to question the respondents of a social survey on heritage themes adequately. Found data allows us to capture and examine occurrences that would be otherwise difficult to research, such as those rare instances when individuals give voice to a process usually internalised: that of drawing on the past to relate to the present and make sense of social, economic and political problems.

Since big data is big, it is possible to find traces of such verbalisations within it. Being unsolicited, these expressions are more likely to reflect accurately how people reason about the contemporary world through their experiences of heritage. In addition, as a result of a phenomenon known as context collapse, online users are more prone to share opinions they would probably only disclose offline within their private communications (Williams, Burnap and Sloan 2017). Although this may unlock interesting research opportunities, it also requires extra levels of care and attentiveness in dealing with the ethics of data analysis and publication (pp. 26–8). Finally, found data enables researchers to undertake data collection tasks at a larger scale in relatively short periods of time compared with more traditional social research methods – whether cross-sectional or longitudinal, quantitative or ethnographic (McCormick et al. 2017). These reasons combine to demonstrate the value of social media data for heritage studies. However, big data is never ‘raw’ but rather ‘pre-cooked’, often with business agendas in mind (Rieder et al. 2015). It is assembled, maintained

and made accessible for commercial reasons, and so must be closely assessed and manipulated before any meaningful research operation may take place.

My collection of found data focused mainly on two social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter. As of October 2020, Facebook was the most popular social network for active users worldwide, followed by YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, WeChat, Instagram, Tik Tok and other platforms including Twitter ([Statista 2020](#)). Twitter was included in the research design despite its lower number of active users compared to Facebook (300 million against 2.7 billion) because it is used extensively for political activism (see e.g. [Steinert-Threlkeld 2017](#); [Robertson 2018](#)). It should also be noted that both Facebook and Twitter had, at the time of data collection, the advantage of allowing researchers to access data relatively easily through public Application Programming Interfaces (APIs).

Each analytical chapter in this book uses slightly different kinds of data while sharing a ‘common core’ that enables comparisons between case studies. This ‘data core’ consists of the public Facebook pages of leading politicians and political parties, which are then integrated with public Facebook pages and Twitter collections relating to political events and themes deemed central to the analysis of populist nationalism (Brexit, the Italian General Election of 2018 and the US–Mexican border debate, particularly in the context of the US Presidential Elections of 2016).

[Chapter 4](#) focuses especially on the analysis of posts and comments extracted from the public Facebook pages of the Italian political parties Lega (League) and Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement), and of their respective leaders, Matteo Salvini and Beppe Grillo. Posts and comments published on the public Facebook pages of other parties who participated in the 2018 Italian General Election, and those of their leaders, were also examined to provide context for the techno-populist and populist nationalist political forces on which the chapter concentrates.¹ This data was mined via the Facebook API between February 2018 and July 2018 – that is, shortly before and after the election of 4 March 2018. The earliest posts and comments date back to 2008 while the most recent document was published on 2 July 2018.

[Chapter 5](#) draws on posts, comments and replies extracted from public Facebook pages that contained the word ‘Brexit’ in the title or description field and which had been published in English since 6 May 2010. This was in fact the day of the UK General Election from which the Coalition government emerged. The prime minister of this government, David Cameron, later proposed holding a referendum on the UK’s

membership of the EU. The chapter also leverages posts extracted from the public Facebook pages of UK political parties and politicians, as well as comments and replies published under posts that feature the word ‘Brexit’.² The data gathering, through the Facebook API, began in March 2017 and was completed in April 2017.

Chapter 6 utilises existing collections of tweet IDs provided by Harvard Dataverse and relating to the 2016 United States Presidential Election and to the US immigration and travel ban (Littman 2016; 2018) (Table 2.1). These IDs were hydrated in July 2018 (Documenting the Now 2020), although it should be noted that a number of them were no longer available by that time. Furthermore, the tweets that were mobilising the comparison between Trump’s Wall and Hadrian’s Wall were streamed in real time in the first quarter of 2017. Such tweets were identified as those containing either the terms ‘trump’ and ‘hadrian’, or ‘hadrian’ and ‘USA’.

The analysis undertaken for this chapter also investigated the public Facebook pages of US politicians and of the Republican and Democratic parties, as well as those pages related to the presidential campaign of 2016 and to the US–Mexican border issue (documents extracted from March

Table 2.1 Existing Twitter collections used in Chapter 6

US immigration and travel ban
‘This dataset contains the tweet ids of 16,875,766 tweets related to the immigration and travel ban executive order announced by the Trump Administration in January 2017. They were collected between January 30, 2017 and April 20, 2017 from the Twitter filter stream API using Social Feed Manager. The terms used for the filter were: #MuslimBan, #NoBanNoWall, #NoMuslimBan, #JFKTerminal4, #RefugeesWelcome, muslim ban, immigrant ban, immigration ban, travel ban, immigration order, #ImmigrationBan, #TravelBan.’ (Littman 2018)
2016 US Presidential Election
‘This dataset contains the tweet ids of approximately 280 million tweets related to the 2016 United States Presidential Election. They were collected between July 13, 2016 and November 10, 2016 from the Twitter API using Social Feed Manager. These tweet ids are broken up into 12 collections. Each collection was collected either from the GET statuses/user_timeline method of the Twitter REST API or the POST statuses/filter method of the Twitter Stream API.’ (Littman 2016). The specific subcollections that were used are listed in Chapter 6, Table 6.1, under ‘2016 US Presidential Election’.

2017 to June 2017). However, themed public Facebook pages dedicated to US border and immigration policies were very few. As will be discussed in [Chapter 6](#), mentions of the past were virtually absent from the posts published on all the Facebook pages examined for this case study.³

To identify Facebook and Twitter texts containing references to the times under examination, we employed a set of keywords comprising terms that captured people, places, material features and ways of expressing ‘periods’ pertaining to the Iron Age, or to the Roman and medieval past of Britain and Europe.⁴ Further details of the collections used are presented in subsequent chapters. This data constituted the starting point for the research. It was then integrated with additional sources of information, such as the web links and mentions of media content present in the social media documents collected; these proved useful in investigating the kinds of expert or non-expert voices that resonated with specific forms of political activism. All operations of data mining were conducted with R Free and Open Source Software, and data was stored, managed and analysed in the non-relational database MongoDB.

Digital heritage ontologies

From an ontological point of view, the object of the analyses presented in the following chapters is digital heritage, defined as the processes and outcomes of interacting with the past through the internet and assigning social and cultural meanings to those engagements ([Bonacchi and Krzyzanska 2019](#)). However, digital heritage is not produced in a vacuum. In her book *Ethnography for the Internet*, Hine (2015) explains that human activities may unfold through both online and offline fields. Ethnographic investigation undertaken online – and interpreted by Hine as a broad range of qualitative methods – should therefore be conceived as potentially interlinked with offline ethnography rather than as detached from it. Such a position has been echoed by Postill and Pink (2012), who work with the notion of ‘ethnographic places’ to stress that social media ethnography creates spaces that cross both online and offline contexts.

Expanding on this idea, a context for heritage production may be defined as any activity in which people engage with the past more or less incidentally ([Bonacchi and Krzyzanska 2019](#), 1237–8). The making – and thus the study – of digital heritage develops within a given context of heritage production, with the understanding that ‘this may cut across “digital” and “analogue” *loci*, each of which becomes a field of investigation’ ([Bonacchi and Krzyzanska 2019](#), 1238). The following

chapters are concerned with a specific context of heritage production, that of political activism, which – as we have already seen operating through social media – will be explored primarily through the field sites of Facebook and Twitter. But exactly whose involvement with heritage are we examining in this way? I will address this question through several related points.

The first factor to note is that there is no way of knowing whether the same people who have exhibited specific views and behaviours on public Facebook pages and via tweets have also participated in offline political activism by drawing on born digital data alone. It is only possible to use high-level proxies derived from the available metadata to make general observations, for example regarding the extent to which public Facebook pages were set up by groups who are also established in the physical world. At the scale of the individual, however, this type of investigation cannot be undertaken in any systematic manner without adopting more traditional and direct forms of questioning that would entail ethically problematic personal targeting based on the authorship of specific texts.

The second aspect that is important to bear in mind relates to the profiles of the human subjects with whom we are working, and to the fact that these people may utilise one or more social media platform for a series of potentially different reasons and in variable ways. Being social media users, they will be likely to possess certain socio-demographic characteristics, digital knowledge and skills. For instance, both Twitter and Facebook users in the US and Britain tend to be younger and to have attained higher levels of formal education than non-users (see e.g. [Mellon and Prosser 2017](#); [Gramlich 2019](#); [Wojcik and Hughes 2019](#)). There is also evidence that the motivations for sharing information on social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter are influenced by a number of possible factors including prior experience of social networking sites and internet use, and specific social media properties ([Syn and Oh 2015](#)).

In addition, there is variability depending on the platforms that a person has joined. Facebook is not only the most used social networking site, but also the most popular across all demographics ([Perrin and Anderson 2019](#)), with a slightly higher use by women ([Gramlich 2019](#)). As regards Twitter, a study undertaken by the Pew Research Center via a representative survey of US adult users who had agreed to share their Twitter handles revealed key aspects of their profile and attitudes ([Wojcik and Hughes 2019](#)). The research showed that, as well as being more likely to be younger, and to have higher incomes and levels of formal education, respondents were more likely to identify themselves as Democrats, to

perceive immigrants as a source of national strength and ‘to see evidence of racial and gender-based inequalities in society’ (Wojcik and Hughes 2019). The report also highlighted another important trend relevant to our discussion: while the median user tweets twice per month, 10 per cent of Twitter users are responsible for about 80 per cent of all the tweets published by US users (Wojcik and Hughes 2019). This 10 per cent of most prolific Twitter users publish a median of 138 tweets monthly; they are more frequently women and microbloggers of political content (Wojcik and Hughes 2019).

A third issue to reflect upon is that of agency, both human and non-human. There is extensive evidence that some of the content published on Facebook and Twitter is not produced by ‘genuine’ users but circulated through bots and fake accounts. The literature includes discussions of the role of ‘trolls’ in spreading disinformation in events such as the 2016 Presidential Election in the US, the Brexit referendum and the 2018 General Election in Italy – the three case studies with which this book is concerned (Howard and Kollanyi 2016; Stieglitz et al. 2017; Badawy, Ferrara and Lerman 2018; Gorodnichenko, Pham and Talavera 2018; Stella, Cristoforetti and De Domenico 2019). Some of this research has also shown that heritage and the past are sometimes leveraged to mould political ‘fake news’. Simon Willison, for example, has identified evidence of this kind – coded as ‘ancient’ content – in a collection of 3,517 Facebook ads reportedly purchased by the Russian Internet Research Agency and released by the House Intelligence Committee.⁵ Rather than describing this type of agency as ‘non-human’, however, it seems more appropriate to refer to it as that of ‘augmented humans’ – those who utilise automated agents to maximise and magnify their influence online (Stella, Cristoforetti and De Domenico 2019).

How can we deal with the great variabilities and multiple personae of the human subjects whose opinions and behaviours were captured and analysed? A substantial body of literature has shown that, to a large extent, people carry their identities online and that online fields do not have the levelling ability that early studies were keen to hypothesise (Hargittai 2007). The research presented here aims to expose a range of uses and meanings of the past that people have expressed, in English or Italian, in relation to contemporary political events that have taken place in the UK, Italy and the US. I will not attempt to link these uses or values of heritage to specific segments of the population of a particular country or a region of the world. Rather, the analysis of Italian populist nationalism will refer to sentiment expressed by people who speak Italian and are close to Italian politics – individuals likely to have been born or to have

lived in Italy. By contrast the discourse, in English, that focuses on Brexit and on the 2016 US Presidential Election and immigration policies is substantially more international in nature. However, we may hypothesise a majority of contributors having close ties to the UK and the US respectively, either because they were born in these countries or because they have lived there. Evidence to characterise these contexts further will be provided in [Chapters 4 to 6](#).

A quali-quantitative approach

To study digital heritage as processes, or interactions with the past, I have drawn on digital heritage as outcomes or big and ‘found’ social media data. When the practice of repurposing web platforms into web archives used for research was still in its early development, Anderson boldly stated that big data-driven analyses could exist without the need to be supported by theory ([Anderson 2008](#)). The rationale for his claim was that the data deluge was making the scientific method, based on hypothesis modelling and testing, ‘obsolete’; masses of information could now be computed to reveal trends in a new world where ‘correlation supersedes causation’ ([Anderson 2008](#)). This argument went hand in hand with the assumption that web interactions are unmediated, captured as they come into being ([Breiger 2015](#)); they are therefore more real, true, accurate and reliable than other kinds of data.

Anderson’s words, and the supportive literature that followed his publication, have led sociologists such as Burrows and Savage to denounce the risk that big data might pose a challenge to the authority of social scientists in their studies and to allow ‘a dramatically increased range of other agents to claim the social for their own’ ([Savage and Burrows 2007; 2009; cit. Burrows and Savage 2014, 5](#)). Today there is widespread agreement that big data research does not operate towards a post-theory kind of scientific production. Data cannot speak for itself; it is neither unbiased nor comprehensive, never panoptic or a perfect reflection of social life, even in the case of social media ([Kitchin 2014a; Leonelli 2014; Wagner-Pacifici, Mohr and Breiger 2015](#)). Starting from this assumption, what kind of methodological approaches does big data require?

According to Housley et al. ([2014](#)), the distinctiveness of social media data is that it is big and broad, allowing research designs to merge properties that were previously characteristic of either quantitative or qualitative methods. In particular, the authors stress that this data enables scholars to undertake studies that are both locomotive and extensive.

This means that they investigate social phenomena as they unfold and, rather than being concerned with individual cases, reveal trends and patterns that may be generalised to represent a 'universe' (Housley et al. 2014). Let us now review the overarching methodologies and specific methods chosen by researchers who have leveraged big data to explore political or social campaigning and activism on social media, so that we may then reflect on the extent to which they implement the vision of Housley et al. (2014).

Some of these studies have chosen typically qualitative methods, such as three-dimensional critical discourse analysis (Azmi, Sylvia and Mardhiah 2018), hermeneutic analysis (Engesser et al. 2017) or semi-quantitative and simple quantitative types of content analysis including chi square tests and similar (Brown et al. 2017; Colliander et al. 2017; Di Giammaria and Faggiano 2017; Bronstein, Aharony and Bar-Ilan 2018; Das 2018; Enli and Simonsen 2018). Other research has opted for network analysis (Lukamto and Carson 2016; Del Vicario et al. 2017; Badawy, Ferrara and Lerman 2018; Jost et al. 2018), geospatial analysis (Badawy, Ferrara and Lerman 2018), regression (Bobba 2019), time series or sentiment analysis (Gorodnichenko, Pham and Talavera 2018). Most published works, however, have focused on examining relatively small data subsets extracted from a wider social media datascape; they have then drawn conclusions referring to a specific universe of social media activists or campaigners. On the whole they do not seem to implement those systematic as well as locomotive kinds of research that have been outlined and offered by Housley et al. (2014), and the same will be the case for this book.

As Couldry and Kallinikos (2018, unnumbered) remind us, we are in fact faced with the 'perennial challenge of how to demarcate meaningfully and study empirically digital infrastructures and ecosystems in which large numbers of actors, technologies ... and processes are connected'. Contrary to what is argued by Housley et al. (2014), social media data is difficult to investigate in traditionally quantitative ways because it is very hard to define a 'universe' that can then be sampled. Our understanding of the kinds of data we can access via the API of a social media platform relies on information released by the platform itself; it is often reported to consist of a small and random subset of the entire database content.

The documentation made available by Twitter at the time of writing, for example, states that the standard Search API lets developers extract incomplete sets of tweets containing a certain keyword and published up to seven days previously. This API is said to be built on the principle of relevance, although there is no indication of how 'relevant' content is

identified by the company ([Twitter 2019b](#)). Twitter's Post/Statuses Filter API is even more conservative, permitting users to mine 'public statuses that match one or more filter predicates' and 'up to 400 track keywords, 5,000 follow userids and 25 0.1–360 degree location boxes' ([Twitter 2019a](#)). In addition, social media companies may modify the policies for mining data via their APIs; some platforms such as Facebook are subject to particularly frequent changes compared to relatively more stable ones such as Twitter. Furthermore, content may be deleted by both users and platforms at any given time and for a range of reasons that we do not always have means of understanding. At the same time new content is continuously generated.

For all these reasons, operations of social media data extraction can only hope to return snapshots of relevant information. As discussed, it is virtually impossible for academic researchers to qualify these snapshots by discovering either the socio-demographic profile of the agents who created them or in-depth information about the context of their production. Unless the data obtained from social media APIs is integrated with other datasets, we do not have substantial opportunities to characterise it in terms that would allow meaningful segmentations. We cannot therefore claim that certain attitudinal or behavioural trends that have emerged from analysis of posts published on a public Facebook page relate to a specific universe of Facebook users who prevalently tend to be of a particular gender, ethnicity, age, economic background, etc. Arguably attempts to remedy this issue by determining and quantifying social dimensions 'manually' or in semi-automated ways, for instance through analyses of users' names, are subject to questionable ethics and variable degrees of accuracy (e.g. [McCormick et al. 2017](#)).

In studies that consider complex social research questions, it is especially difficult to ensure that social media data is representative of a certain universe ([González-Bailón et al. 2014](#); [Schroeder 2014a](#); [Tufekci 2014](#); [McFarland and McFarland 2015](#)). An interesting example is that of a study by Ruzza and Pejovic ([2019](#)) which examines people's interactions with the European Commission and the European Parliament on Facebook in relation to Brexit. The authors found that the focus of the discourse on Facebook revolved mainly around issues of supranational governance. This contrasted with coverage by the press, which focused primarily on migration ([Ruzza and Pejovic 2019](#)).

Ruzza and Pejovic ([2019](#)) explained the difference as being due to the distinctiveness of the Facebook user group they were considering. If we were interested in looking at how the past featured in the content of public Facebook pages dedicated to the Brexit referendum of 2016, could

we claim that the results of the analysis of all posts, comments and replies extracted from Facebook's API in March and April 2017 may be meaningfully extended to the whole of the population who participated in such discussions on Facebook? Do the views that emerged from the study of this group of people represent those of all Facebook users? In both cases the answer is negative. The data I have worked with is not the total amount of data produced between 2013 – when the term 'Brexit' began to be used publicly – and April 2017. Facebook posts, comments and replies are constantly being created and deleted, leaving us with no way of knowing the actual nature of the overall population of activists participating in Brexit-related discussions on public pages.

Arguably, however, it is still very important to uncover the diversity of perceptions and attitudes towards the past that influence current thinking on topics such as nation or migration. Quantifying the exact recurrence of the themes we have identified in the data and their distribution among a specific, well-defined and sampled population may be done subsequently via social surveys. I will call this approach 'data-intensive ethnographies' to signify that the use of data-intensive methods is not aimed at generalising findings for a given population; it seeks rather to uncover a range of variable uses of the past and develop contextual understanding of the data examined qualitatively (Bonacchi and Krzyzanska 2019).

Furthermore, as has been argued by McCormick et al. (2017), there is an intrinsically ethnographic element in found data by virtue of the fact that this data is naturalistically collected rather than solicited (see also boyd and Ellison 2007). Rather than following the destiny of individuals as they move through their links and relationships, connections and interactions online, I have concentrated on how uses of the ancient past are featured and mobilised. Research proceeded deductively, inductively and abductively. It started from a set of hypotheses to be tested, but also moved from the data to formulate new hypotheses, remaining open to information of an unexpected nature that might inspire additional routes of investigation. Both close and distant 'reading' were leveraged to analyse textual material. This usually began with mapping the themes that featured in a specific collection of Facebook pages or tweets via topic modelling and then progressed to basic term frequencies and associations and cluster analysis. These concepts provided information for contextualising the observations made qualitatively.

More specifically, topic modelling is a 'suite of algorithms' that is useful 'to discover hidden thematic structures in large collections of texts' (cit. Blei 2012, unnumbered; Brett 2012) and Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) is a simple, three-level Bayesian topic model that has been

frequently and effectively applied to analyse historical sources as well as social media documents (Marwick 2014; Bonacchi, Altaweel and Krzyzanska 2018). This technique is based on two core principles: (1) there is a given and fixed number of patterns of word use or topics; (2) these topics recur to different degrees in each document (Blei, Ng and Jordan 2003; Blei 2012). For each topic in a pre-defined number of topics, LDA outputs scores representing the probability of each word being contained within that set or topic (Blei, Ng and Jordan 2003).

In the analysis reported in Chapter 5, a label was assigned to each topic, selecting those that most closely described the association of the 20 words that returned the highest scores. Topic modelling was executed using the Python Natural Language Toolkit and Gensim library (Rehurek and Sojka 2010; Bonacchi, Altaweel and Krzyzanska 2018). In Chapters 4, 5 and 6, term frequencies helped to identify the number of times that period-specific keywords recurred within a corpus. Term associations served to reveal the tokens most strongly associated with these top-recurring keywords and other relevant tokens. Tokens are the strings of characters that constitute the smallest semantic units identifiable in a text. They were identified after excluding punctuation, numbers and so-called 'stopwords' (words that are relatively uninformative such as 'and', 'the' or 'for'), and after stemming terms.⁶

These operations were conducted with R packages 'tm', 'rJava' and 'SnowballC'. In Chapter 4 hierarchical cluster analysis was used to integrate term associations by investigating the relative distance between tokens in a corpus and visualising the clusters into which they were grouped (Marwick 2014). Term frequencies, term associations and hierarchical cluster analysis were completed in R (packages 'tm' and 'pvclust').⁷ Such quantitative analyses provided the insights needed strategically to orientate more qualitative explorations of the data (Marwick 2014; Bonacchi, Altaweel and Krzyzanska 2018; Bonacchi and Krzyzanska 2019).

The qualitative analysis of uses of the past to support or oppose populist and populist nationalist positions on Facebook and Twitter followed the approach applied by Fuchs (2018) to investigate nationalism and the making of Brexit on social media. Fuchs's study drew on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which is concerned with how 'power and ideology are discursively enacted, produced, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk' (Colombo 2018, 5). I applied CDA in three steps. First, while reading the texts, I created a list of discourse topics, which are 'semantic macro-proposition[s] that relate to key aspect[s] of a particular topic' (Fuchs 2018, 22). Second, I generated a list of examples for each discourse

topic. Third, I analysed how populism and populist nationalism were expressed through the specific mentions of the Iron Age, Roman and early medieval heritage that featured, by referring to the critical theory on populism and nationalism illustrated in [Chapter 3](#).

Ethics

Several ethical considerations underpinned all operations of data gathering, selection, manipulation and analysis.⁸ Ethics in a time of social media is a vast and relentlessly expanding maze that has only recently begun to be explored, both in terms of the novelty of social networking infrastructures and of the big data they generate ((AoIR) Association of Internet Researchers 2012; [The British Psychological Society 2014](#); [Schroeder 2014b](#); [Zwitter 2014](#); [Davisson and Booth 2017](#); [British Sociological Association 2017](#); [Lipworth et al. 2017](#); [Williams, Burnap and Sloan 2017](#); [Woodfield 2018](#)). Although discussions on this topic may usefully draw on literature about the ethics of internet research in a period of more markedly informational web, social research that leverages primarily social media data also has unique characteristics and must be scrutinised adequately. Situational ethics naturally suits big data research because it stresses the importance of setting guiding principles that may inform ethics assessments on a case by case basis, a practice generally recommended by learned societies ([British Sociological Association 2017](#); [The British Psychological Society 2014](#)).

Following this approach, the study reported here has ensured that the purposes and contexts of data extraction and use would not cause harm, whether physical or psychological, to any of the human subjects involved. The idea that, just because it is publicly shared, content on social media may be extracted and directly utilised in research tasks has, fortunately, been critiqued during the past decade. The basis for this shift has been the recognition that social media, and online spaces more generally, are not necessarily public or perceived as such by their users, even if this may seem intuitively to be the case ([Townsend and Wallace 2018](#)).

A forum that requires a user to login in order to post content, for example, is not fully public; it would therefore be advisable to seek either opt-in or opt-out consent to use such content, depending on the degree of sensitivity of the topic and the potential vulnerability of the subjects contributing to the forum. In the case of social networking sites, tweets are more 'public' than the posts published on a private and personal Facebook page. A tweet that includes a hashtag may arguably be considered to be

even more public than one that does not; the hashtag signals an attempt to seek public visibility and to connect with people interested in a specific theme or debate. Similarly, those who post on a public Facebook page may 'reasonably expect to be observed by strangers' ([The British Psychological Society 2014](#), 25). This makes the page fit for online observation under the ethics code of The British Psychological Society.

Taking all of this into account, the data collected for this monograph was gathered exclusively from public Facebook pages and from tweets that contained relevant hashtags. Data extraction was undertaken via the APIs of Facebook and Twitter. Under these circumstances, seeking consent for data extraction and analysis was not deemed necessary. However, the data collected was anonymised by deleting handles and usernames, with the exception of texts published by politicians, political parties or public media organisations and journalists. All of these have an expressed and precise desire to interact with the largest possible audiences through their public profiles and pages ([Townsend and Wallace 2018](#)).

The results of the analysis are reported and discussed in aggregated form and, in the case of public figures exclusively, via attributed direct quotes. Observations deriving from the qualitative analysis of textual material by non-public figures are offered without the backing of the original text for Twitter data. Facebook data is summarised or paraphrased and presented in English, with only single words or very short non-identifiable sentences being quoted in a fully anonymised manner.

This is in consideration of the fact that social media data is produced for a rather ephemeral online field ([Williams, Burnap and Sloan 2017](#)). While users may expect that such material will be viewed widely on the social platform where it was shared or elsewhere online, they less frequently consider that such data could be repurposed so as to appear in another online context or offline ([Williams, Burnap and Sloan 2017](#)). This arrangement also protects the individual's so-called 'right to be forgotten', although it undermines the right to be remembered and the importance that some people attach to having their opinion preserved in a non-anonymous way. Tweets cannot be paraphrased, according to Twitter's terms and conditions, and are therefore not included unless they specifically originate from official and public accounts of the kinds specified above.

Regarding aggregated data, it has been proved that, in some cases, even this may lead to conclusions that are intrusive and detrimental to the life of one or more individuals ([Metcalf and Crawford 2016](#)). In a study of emotional contagion, for example, Facebook injected a higher quantity of positive messages into the newsfeeds of one group of subjects and a higher amount of negative ones into the newsfeed of another in order to

assess the impact on the resulting tone of messages posted by members of the two cohorts (Schroeder 2014a). In this experiment, the emotions of Facebook users were manipulated covertly. A further case is that of the graffiti artist Banksy, allegedly identified by a team of researchers using geospatial data (Hauge et al. 2016; Metcalf and Crawford 2016). Whether true or false, this claim certainly had a disruptive effect on the artist, who had been adamant about keeping her or his identity concealed. Under the arrangements made and explained previously, however, the possibility that the aggregated data in this book may be of harm to individuals, researchers or third parties has been removed.

A final point remains to be addressed regarding power relationships. Zwitter (2014) identifies three groups of stakeholders implicated in the making and management of big data: generators, collectors and utilisers. Among them, collectors are rarely researchers and mostly consist of large businesses; they possess the greatest epistemological weight because they decide what material should be gathered and how it will be structured and made available (Rieder et al. 2015, 30). The kind of knowledge we are producing in our research is reliant on these structures; it is therefore largely directed or constrained by collectors. Additionally, corporate ventures and utilisers with larger digital competencies or economic means have a competitive advantage in acquiring and using big data. It is therefore important to apply data science methods to heritage research to unlock insights that would not otherwise be publicly available to citizens. As social media move towards increasingly closed 'black boxes', there is also an emerging and robustly justified practice that favours non-API-mediated web scraping as a way of protecting the public interest and for purposes of academic research (Rogers 2019).

Notes

- 1 The public Facebook pages of political parties and party leaders (as of 2018) that were analysed are: Movimento 5 Stelle (party) and Beppe Grillo (party leader); Lega (party) and Matteo Salvini (party leader); CasaPound Italia (party) and Simone di Stefano (party leader); Forza Italia (party) and Silvio Berlusconi (party leader); Partito Democratico (party) and Matteo Renzi (party leader); Fratelli d'Italia (party) and Giorgia Meloni (party leader).
- 2 The list of terms used to identify relevant public Facebook pages of UK political parties and politicians is available from https://github.com/ChiaraBonacchi/SearchKeywords/blob/main/searchkeywords_UK.
- 3 The list of terms used to identify relevant public Facebook pages for the US case study is available from https://github.com/ChiaraBonacchi/SearchKeywords/blob/main/searchkeywords_US.

- 4 The list of period-specific keywords used for both the Brexit and US–Mexican border case studies is available from https://github.com/ChiaraBonacchi/SearchKeywords/blob/main/Period-specific-keywords_UKUS. Additional period-specific keywords were used for the US–Mexican border case: https://github.com/ChiaraBonacchi/SearchKeywords/blob/main/Additional-period-specific-keywords_US. The period-specific keywords used for the Italian case study are available from https://github.com/ChiaraBonacchi/SearchKeywords/blob/main/Period-specific-keywords_Italy.
- 5 Simon Willison's software repository aiding the exploration of the datasets of Facebook ads purchased by the Russian Internet Research Agency is available on GitHub from <https://github.com/simonw/russian-ira-facebook-ads-datasette>.
- 6 Please note that terms in lower case were stemmed via a rule-based process in R. As a result tokens may not always coincide with the grammatical word stems that you could find in a dictionary. They are also not always easy to 'recognise immediately as words' (Marwick 2014, 83).
- 7 For these three kinds of analysis I followed the methods and documentation presented in Marwick 2014.
- 8 Ethical clearance was sought, and granted, in the context of the *Ancient Identities in Modern Britain* project, of which this study formed a significant part.

Nationalism, populism and the past

Debates on nationalism

Nationalism is a mutable but persistent phenomenon that has assumed different meanings over time ([Anderson 1991](#)). In the modern era it has been linked to modernism, the rise of capitalism, imperialism and the construction of nation-states, while in the years after the Second World War it became interwoven with the destiny of post-imperial societies worldwide. Towards the end of the twentieth century nationalism became the face of divisive separatist events that had emerged from a growing discomfort with large-scale mobility and economic shifts occurring in the context of supranational creations such as the European Economic Area. Today the phenomenon is connected with neoliberalism, globalisation in its tension with localism, the resurgence of regional identities and an increasing rejection of supranational ones ([Gardner 2017](#); [Fuchs 2018](#)).

The terms ‘nationalism’ and ‘populism’ now appear repeatedly in our everyday lives. They are frequently referred to by politicians, journalists and commentators, sometimes in a casual manner. In entering common use, however, such complex concepts are often diluted, so it is important to review key theoretical contributions that have attempted to articulate these ideas. This overview does not seek to be all-encompassing, but rather to focus selectively and strategically on fundamental aspects and perspectives that are important in order to understand the interpretations that will be proposed in the following chapters.

Nationalism has been the subject of numerous studies since the last century. It has been variously described and explained by researchers working in a range of different fields and scholarly traditions ([Smith 1998](#); [Bonikowski 2016](#)). For example, political psychologists have

tended to define nationalism more narrowly as a set of ‘prideful or protective feelings toward the state’ (Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016, 975). Sociologists have often framed it as an ‘ideology mobilised by political elites’ and ‘a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent’ (Gellner 1983, 1; Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016, 952). By contrast the sociologist Brubaker (2004, 10) has described nationalism as ‘a heterogeneous set of “nation”-oriented idioms, practices, and possibilities that are continuously available or “endemic” in modern cultural and political life’ (see also Billig (1995) on ‘banal nationalism’).

It is evident that this term does not have a single meaning that has been unanimously agreed upon. It has been argued that attempts to reach an overarching theory of nationalism would indeed be misguided, as the deeply contextual nature of the phenomenon changes according to both the spatio-temporal niche in which it unfolds and in relation to social conditioning (Gellner 1983; Brubaker 1998; De Matas 2017). As Brubaker (1998) has underlined, it would be wrong to hope that we may reach a final resolution of nationalist claims by addressing and trying to correct the overall institutional and territorial architecture that underpins them.

In his extensive theoretical treatment of nationalism, Smith (1998, 8) highlights how scholars’ positions have differed depending on how they have framed the role of the nation from ethical, philosophical, social and historical points of view. Primordialist and perennialist approaches were the first to become established and emerged from organic ideas of the nation as a natural presence within humanity (Smith 1999). Primordialism holds that nations are rooted ‘in kinship, ethnicity, and the genetic bases of human existence’ (Smith 1999, 4) and may be subdivided into three main strands. The first conceives of nations as part of nature and subject to its laws, rather than of history; the second is socio-biological and considers nations as deriving directly from kinship units; the third is cultural and stresses the power of bonds such as blood, language, territory, religion, etc. (Shils 1957; Geertz 1963; van den Berghe 1978; 1995; Hoben and Hefner 1991). Perennialism, however, does not necessarily regard the nation as a historical phenomenon intrinsic to the natural order of humanity. In particular, scholars in support of continuous perennialism have argued that certain nations, such as England, Scotland and France, have existed for centuries or millennia (Seton-Watson 1982; Hastings 1997; Grosby 2015). Conversely, those favouring recurrent perennialism have highlighted the intermittent character of nations and the fact that they appear and disappear at different times and in different regions of the world (Smith 1999; Grosby 2015).

Primordialism and perennialism were first opposed by the currently dominant modernist paradigm of nationalism (Brubaker 1998; Smith 1998). This paradigm took form primarily due to the seminal work undertaken by scholars such as Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm, who respectively coined the labels ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 1991; 2016) and ‘invented traditions’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), claiming that ‘nations’ were constructed. Under modernism both nations and nationalism were conceived of as recent and the result of modernisation (Smith 2009, 6).

Smith (1999) argues that there are three distinct variants of modernist interpretations of nationalism. The socio-economic perspective postulates that nations and nationalism derived from a response to the unequal developments of capitalism (Hechter 1975). In contrast, the socio-cultural variant believes that they resulted from a process of cultural homogenisation undergone by masses of people who had re-settled in towns and cities (Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1990). The political variant sees nationalism as ‘a political argument and movement’ introduced to resolve the division between absolutist powers and civil society (Smith 1999, 7). In addition, Kedourie’s ideological version of the modernist paradigm attributes a key role to intellectuals in the shaping of nationalism on the basis of folklore, philology and culture (Kedourie 1960).

Differing from the variants described above, Anderson’s deeply influential work identifies a number of associated causes that, in his opinion, led to the surfacing of nationalism in the later eighteenth century (Hobsbawm 1990; Anderson 1991). According to his analysis, nationalism followed the two large cultural systems of the dynastic realm and the religious community. Anderson argues that it came to the fore because of the diffusion of print capitalism and its corollaries, which included the forging of a new notion of simultaneity, the formation of languages at an intermediate level between Latin and vernacular, and the establishment of a certain fixed character of such languages. In this situation, the nation could be imagined – and was imagined – as limited, sovereign and a community. The fact that nations are finite, separating insiders from those outside, is an essential feature of nationalism – a key reason for both its powerful appeal and its philosophical poverty. Owing to the latter attributes, nationalism has also been considered by some to constitute a ‘thin ideology’ (Heinisch, Massetti and Mazzoleni 2018).

Anderson particularly notes the paradoxical nature of the modernity of nations and the belief, of nationalists, in their antiquity (Anderson 2016; also Gellner 2007). Researchers embracing ethno-symbolism, however, have helped to balance and nuance this perception. They have

drawn attention to the *longue durée* processes of formation, transmission and modification of myths and symbols that were core to bringing together imagined communities linked to subsequent ideas of nation (Hutchinson 1987; Smith 1999; Leoussi and Grosby 2007; Anderson 2016). Ethno-symbolism has been used to argue that myths and memories confer power to nationalism – which has in turn been seen not only or exclusively as the creation of elites, but also as a concept deriving from longer-term structures and existing in popular sentiment (Smith 1999). Leoussi and Grosby (2007, 24) recognise that this theoretical approach remains largely unchallenged, but note that it has not succeeded in explaining the transformation of nations.

Towards the end of the 1990s postmodernism substantially influenced thinking on nationalism, inviting reflections on the destiny of nations in a context of liberal economies and multiculturalism. Some hypothesised that globalisation – understood as ‘the compression of the world and the intensification of the consciousness of the world’ (Robertson 1992, 8) – would have logically led to the death of the nation, but in fact the opposite has occurred. De Matas (2017, 20) stresses that ‘the contemporary nationalist claim that overlays the isolationist and anti-globalist policy of what we can consider to be revolutionary political ideologies is unrivalled in its both scope and consistency’. The increasingly interconnected (Western) society is now fully exposed and open; intellectual and material ‘outsides’ have faded away.

While power is global, however, politics and decision-making have remained local, and consequently incapable of devising effective solutions to world-scale problems (Bauman 2007). This has activated a trap of frustration that, coupled with the anthropological uncertainty deriving from neoliberalism and economic globalisation, may generate escapism. People retreat to mental spaces where they feel safe, erecting frontiers in the form of ‘asymmetric boundaries’ that may be crossed to exit but not to enter these domains (Bauman 2007). Finite communities are then re-imagined and nations resurrected, while politicians exploit this ‘capital of fear’ in order to maintain control (Bauman 2007, 12).

Exactly who is admitted within these boundaries may change, depending on an individual’s identity and the socio-cultural context. On the back of constructivist theory and the cognitive turn, scholars have attempted to deconstruct the idea of nationalism into several possible dimensions and combinations of these. For example, Bonikowski and DiMaggio (2016, 949) define American nationalism as ‘the complex of ideas, sentiments, and representations by which Americans understand the United States and their relationship to it’. They then proceed to conduct

an inductive study through which they isolate four classes of nationalism determined by the clustering of certain levels of national identification, criteria of legitimate membership, national pride and national hubris (Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016). In this way the authors are able to distinguish between ardent nationalists (people who scored highly in all the categories mentioned above); the disengaged (those who scored low in all categories); restrictive nationalists (respondents who showed moderate levels of national pride but who defined being truly American in very restrictive terms, such as being Christian, being born in the US and respecting its institutions); and creedal nationalists possessing a national self-understanding related to a set of liberal principles comprising universalism, democracy and the rule of law. This research was seminal because it examined the distribution of 'nationalist' dimensions and highlighted the correlation between nationalism, on the one hand, and attitudes towards borders, immigration and foreign policy on the other.

As identities are fluid, multifarious and often overlapping to various extents, not only may 'the other' be differently characterised, but multiple notions of 'us' and 'others' co-exist. The term 'inclusive nationalism', for example, has been used to describe the reality of those citizens (the majority of European citizens, according to studies undertaken by the Eurobarometer) who have claimed attachment to their nationality as well as to Europe, but less to the latter than to the former (Wodak and Boulaka 2015). For some, however, Euroscepticism is undoubtedly 'a particular expression of state nationalism' (Heinisch, Massetti and Mazzoleni 2018, 930). This correlation has become stronger in recent years, as regionalist parties and movements have acquired nationwide currency and have begun to consider 'statewide nationalism as being less of a threat to regional interests than EU-promoted policies and politics' (Mazzoleni and Ruzza 2018, 976). Kallis (2018) argues that populist movements on both the left and the right side of the political spectrum in Europe have been opposing globalisation through the rhetoric of controlling borders and 'taking back control'. In so doing they have re-established a form of popular sovereignty that is highly territorialised to match the extension of the nation-state.

European identities tend to map to very specific socio-demographics, with pro-European sentiment less diffused among older, so-called blue collar workers who have attained lower levels of formal education and seldom travel (Fligstein 2009); this section of the population is also more likely to be pro-Brexit (Fuchs 2018). In an attempt to understand the links between nationalism, Euroscepticism and populism, it might be useful to recall the argument of Checkel and Katzenstein (2009). They claimed

that the European project has been defined as originating from the needs and wishes of those intellectual and business elites whose work and life transcended national borders and was supranational in nature.

In line with Taguieff (1995), Brubaker expands the notion of nationalism. He describes a 'national populism' marked by a division between 'us' and 'them' that acts both vertically, separating 'the people' and 'the elite', and horizontally, dividing a 'civilisation' on the inside from a sort of barbarism on the outside (Brubaker 2017). Brubaker suggests that, in Northern and Western Europe, the nation should be 're-characterised in civilisationalist terms' – as opposed to Trumpism, for example, which is purely nationalist (Brubaker 2017, 21). Such a shift has been brought about by a perceived 'civilisationalist threat' coming from Islam. This is then challenged through the combination of identitarian Christianity and secular and liberal values, including the protection of issues such as gender equality and gay rights (Brubaker 2017).

The past is often invoked by those seeking to define the boundaries that 'protect' the members of an imagined community from those regarded as 'outsiders', whether on a religious, cultural or ethnic basis. In Bauman's analysis this occurs because the past offers a stable, predictable and therefore secure space; it provides a retrotopia which, in fluid and fast-moving times, holds much greater appeal than any future and risky utopia (Bauman 2017). This book investigates how the ancient past – within the geographic and chronological limits I have presented – has been leveraged to create or propagate divisions that generate nation-like imagined communities as well as other 'tribes'. For example the concept of Europe, despite being supranational, may be constructed in very divisive ways – such as by emphasising the important historical role played by Islam in Spain, a country whose membership of Europe as a continent and the European Union as a political entity has never been in question. As has been argued by Dennell (1996), both extreme nationalism and extreme supranationalism may actually be exclusive.

Narratives of heroism

Through what dynamics does heritage become conducive of pro- or anti-national(ist) and supranational(ist) identities? In the following chapters I will address this question with reference to contemporary nationalisms alive in the current social, political and technological environment. Behind aspects of the past chosen either to support or oppose nationalist agendas lie human values, fears and aspirations; behind these fragments

of imagined reality are men and women with their individual dreams, hopes and fragilities.

This is partly the reason why certain ideas and ideals about heritage appropriated by nationalists have a tendency to recur in formulaic and almost cyclic ways, even though they might be differently framed depending on time, place and social context. The past feeds into interlinked grand narratives that help to trigger and sustain nationalist mobilisation; these include heroism and imperialism, which feature prominently in [Chapters 4 to 6](#) and are therefore introduced here. Each grand narrative resonates with the societal needs that nationalisms have sought to address since the end of the eighteenth century, albeit using different methods over the centuries.

Heroism speaks of hope and example. For the Founding Fathers of the United States of America, prominent figures from the Roman Republic represented civic virtue and bravery. Malamud (2009, 13–4) reminds us how, in 1778, George Washington requested a performance of Joseph Addison’s play *Cato*, written in 1713, to motivate his troops to fight with valour and self-abnegation in a forthcoming season of military campaigns. In their struggle for independence revolutionary colonists identified with Cato and other opponents of Caesar, regarding the latter as a tyrant whose ambition had brought about the end of the Republic (Malamud 2009; Dyson 2001).

It is from the Republican period of Rome that late eighteenth-century Americans borrowed models to create a new and independent polity (Dyson 2001). This repertoire – filled with Republican stoicism, military bravery and openness towards the ultimate sacrifice in the pursuit of liberty – was shared by men and women of different social and economic backgrounds; it became more fragmented only during the first half of the nineteenth century. At that point, following a democratic shift and the development of labour policies, a new and specific set of ‘working men’s heroes’ emerged in the form of the tribunes Tiberius Sempronius and Caius Sempronius Gracchus, celebrated for the reforms they put forward to the advantage of plebeians (Malamud 2009, 34–69). Far from being fixed, however, such ‘heroic repertoire’ was to change again in subsequent times, as will be discussed in [Chapter 6](#).

Roman Republican ‘heroes’ were equally important in the making of the new French nation-state, as leaders of the French Revolution sought models and inspiration to shape the emerging Republic (Dietler 1994). It is for this reason, for example, that participants in the *Directoire*, the governing committee of the French First Republic, wore Roman togas when legislating (Séguy 1989). Perhaps not surprisingly, a similar trend

may be observed in the forming of the Italian nation-state. This was established in 1861 and drew strongly on heroic figures from the Roman Republic to highlight and acknowledge the only other period when the territories of the Italian peninsula had been united (Terrenato 2001).

While during the first phase of American nationalism the figure of Caesar was characterised negatively, his contemporaneous reception in Europe was more ambivalent. In France, for example, the image of Caesar appealed to Napoleon III (1808–73) just as much as the ‘Celtic’ national hero Vercingetorix, believed to have defended the region of Gaul against the Roman armies (Dietler 1994). Napoleon III also wrote a history of the life of Caesar, *Histoire de Jules Caésar* (1865–6), and promoted a number of other activities that celebrated Vercingetorix. He funded excavations at the Iron Age sites of Bibracte, Alésia and Gergovia, in contemporary central France, where key events regarding the rebellion of Vercingetorix and the tensions between Gauls and Roman legions had taken place. Napoleon III also founded the Museum of National Antiquities and erected a bronze statue of Vercingetorix, the face of which resembled his own (Dietler 1994).

At the same time national sentiment in the Italian peninsula took inspiration from the Roman world in ways more similar to those characterising the formative stages of the new American state and the French Republic (Wyke 2006). Prompted by his reading of *Histoire de Jules Caésar*, the work of Italian poet and patriot Giosuè Carducci employed subtle forms of condemnation towards Caesar and the absolutism that the Roman ruler was seen to represent. In 1868 Carducci completed two sonnets on Caesarism which referred to Caesar as ‘*dittatore universo*’ (universal dictator) and to Cato as ‘*santo*’ (saintly) (Baehr 1998).

Literature is full of other cases of pre- and post-Roman heroism, both in the ‘Old World’ and the ‘New World’. Morris (1988) highlights how, during the twentieth century, cultural-historicist archaeological research devoted to ‘identify distinctive types of artefacts and artefact assemblages in an effort to relate them to historical peoples’ sought the origins of what was believed to be the ‘Celtic character’ (Trigger 2006, 215); as a result the Bronze Age was framed as a ‘Celtic/heroic model’ that celebrated ‘the values of competitive individualism and nationalism’ (Morris 1988, 69). In this respect, the case of Boadicea is key. The queen of the Iceni played a core role as a national hero who represented indigenous resistance to Roman rule; she was a symbol of the greatness of British imperialism from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries (Hingley 2000; 2001; Hingley and Unwin 2005) (Fig. 3.1). In Italy, however, the pre- and post-Roman past remained more in the background

during the period of the formation of national unity. Etruscan and other local heritages became less prominent at a time when significant attempts were being made in order to overcome regional fragmentation. Such pasts resurfaced and were foregrounded in the context of separatist and federalist agendas, including those pursued during the late 1990s towards the establishment of the nation *Padania* (see [Chapter 4](#)).

Heroism, as exemplified by the case studies mentioned above, constitutes an important component of nationalism: it acts simultaneously to drive collective aspirations and actions and to stimulate an individualistic desire for eternal consecration in a collective memory. In so doing it expresses a shared heritage and consciousness, as well as the celebration of singularity. In their recent review of the concept of heroism from the point of view of humanistic psychology, Franco et al. (2018, 382) argue that heroism aligns with ‘ethical self-actualization in its highest form, personal meaning making, and social good, and can also involve profound existential costs’. It has recently been proposed that



Fig. 3.1 Part of the statue of Boadicea and her daughters, completed in 1883 by Thomas Thornycroft and located at the western end of Westminster Bridge in London, UK. Photo © Richard Hingley (from [Hingley and Unwin 2005](#)).

people intrinsically need heroes; they are thus motivated to seek them in search for responses to human necessities: ‘enhancing and uplifting others, modelling morals, values and ethics, and protecting the physical and psychological well-being of others’ (Allison and Goethals 2014; Franco et al. 2018). All of these functions may be potentially linked to nationalism as a situated and contextually framed phenomenon.

If we define heroism as a natural tendency towards both individual self-actualisation and the redemption from individualism through behaviours of social value, we can further understand its close relationship with modern life. As stressed by Miller et al. (2016), most social theorists have embraced a grand narrative according to which, since the nineteenth century, modernity has brought about a rise in individualism and a weakening of groups built around kinship. Such a development has been interpreted as a consequence of phenomena such as capitalism, industrialisation and urbanism. The popularity of heroism may be viewed as both a symptom and as a cure for these aspects of modernity, and the picture is complicated even further by some of the most recent shifts in the world of media and communications. Scholars have reflected extensively on the impact of the diffusion of the internet and social media on individualism and sociability – in other words, on the relationship between the individual and the group. Different positions have emerged, including that of Rainie and Wellman (2014), who argue that social media have led to the emergence of ‘networked individualism’, the formation of networks around the individual. This is a situation that may nurture and enhance the appeal of heroism together with populist nationalism.

Imperialism and civilisation

The second macro-theme through which the past frequently features in nationalist sentiment, in the pages that will follow, is imperialism, also defined as ‘the practice, theory and attitude of a dominant metropolitan nation or people in establishing control over and ruling another nation or people’ (Said 1994, 9; Hingley 2000, 7). Nationalists have treated the historical structure of the ‘empire’ as either a model to adopt and imitate or as a symbol of dominance that should be resisted. Scholars within the post-colonial Roman archaeology movement, for example, have exposed the profound power of early ideas of British imperialism in the making and shaping of Roman archaeology (Webster and Cooper 1996; Hingley 2000; 2015; Mattingly 2006; 2011; Gardner 2013; 2016). Hingley has written extensively about the connections between the nascent and

consolidating British Empire and archaeological research concerning the Roman Empire. He stresses the circular processes through which the world of Roman officers was used to shape that of English gentlemen, and how the latter interpreted the former through their Victorian and Edwardian perceptions (Hingley 2000).

Hingley further explores the link between imperialism, civilisation and 'Celtic subaltern' others, drawing attention to specific images from the past of Rome used to define British imperial destiny and the internal power balances between the English, on the one hand, and the Scottish, Welsh and Irish on the other (Hingley 2000, 2). Late Victorian writers focused on examples taken from the Roman Empire in terms of administration, border and military policy, reflecting on its course from rise to decline in an attempt to establish the moral standards that the British Empire should follow (Hingley 2000). Such standards were important to the British, seeking to distance themselves from what they saw as a despotic kind of imperialism expressed by the French Napoleonic empire (Hingley 2000). At the time similar sentiments were animating people in the US, Germany and Italy, while mid-nineteenth-century discoveries of graves and burial 'interchangeably ascribed to "Saxons", "Anglo-Saxons" or "Teutons"' were also nationalistically framed as those of the earliest English (Williams 2008, 50).

One of the most curious paradoxes on which the reception of the classical world in the US rests is the co-existence of a 'resistance to the traditions of Europe', on the one hand, and the significant extent to which American culture has leveraged aspects of the Greek and Roman past, particularly in arts and architecture (Dyson 2001, 57), on the other. Over time North American culture has drawn upon both Republican and Imperial Rome, reflecting a dualism latent in US society between the Republican ideals of integrity, productivity, abnegation, piety and patriotism and the ideas of consumption, abundance and wealth expressed by a specific understanding of Imperial Rome (Malamud 1998). As we have seen, the Republican period was a stronger 'image' during the American Revolution and the nineteenth century, although Imperial Rome became a powerful reference in the twentieth century. Even the rise and fall of the Roman Empire was differently perceived, being sometimes admired and at other times feared and rejected.

Following independence, some critics began to draw parallels between US expansionism and the territorial acquisitions of Imperial Rome, and to hint at the possibility that the former would experience a similar end (Dyson 2001). This comparison also emerges, for example, in *The Course of Empire* cycle of paintings. Completed by Thomas Cole at the



Fig. 3.2 *The Course of Empire: Destruction*, painted by Thomas Cole, 1833–6. Held by the New York Historical Society. © Public domain.

time of the Andrew Jackson presidency, it consists of five works of art, variously entitled *The Savage State*, *Arcadian or Pastoral State*, *The Consummation of Empire*, *Destruction* and *Desolation* (Fig. 3.2). The series has been interpreted as a critique of President Jackson's promotion of a very decisive economic and territorial expansionism (Barringer 2018, 49). Furthermore, even though several scholars have identified the city portrayed in *The Consummation of Empire* with Rome, the painting includes several references to London – a city that was, at the time Cole was working on this piece, at the peak of its imperialism (Barringer 2018).

Before the surge of Romantic nationalism, the Roman conquest of the Italian peninsula was viewed in a negative light by historians such as Giuseppe Galanti (1743–1806) and Giuseppe Micali (1768–1844) (Terrenato 2019, 16); all were concerned about the suppression of local identities. Subsequently, from the second half of the nineteenth century – due especially to the work of the German classicist Mommsen – the Roman world became a suitable model for the emerging nation-states of Italy and Germany and for their subsequent growth (Hingley 2000). Niebuhr and Mommsen in particular stressed that expanding beyond the Alps had been the seed for the Roman Empire's subsequent decline, and therefore a strong reason not to adopt imperialistic aims (Terrenato 2001). Arguably, a nostalgia for Rome had always been present in the Italian people and had informed the re-framing of new and emerging

political constructions throughout post-classical times (Terrenato 2001). Undoubtedly, however, it was especially key to the forging of the Kingdom of Italy and the fascist state (Terrenato 2001). In the latter case, Imperial Rome was presented as an invigorating example as well as the desired 'place of arrival' (Fig. 3.3). It was viewed very differently from the early twentieth-century city, depicted as weak and decadent by fascist publicists (Gentile 2010; Giardina and Vauchez 2008).

This contrast is emblematically expressed by the speeches given by Mussolini in April 1924 when he received his honorary citizenship of Rome, as well as those dating from years before when he was still a young socialist. For Mussolini, condemning Rome was a way of criticising the 'central state' and all those acquired class privileges with which he considered it to be associated (Giardina and Vauchez 2008).

Sino dai giorni della mia lontana giovinezza, Roma era immensa nel mio spirito che si affacciava alla vita. Dell'amore di Roma ho sognato e sofferto, e di Roma ho sentito tutta la nostalgia. Roma! e la semplice parola aveva un rimbombo di tuono nella mia anima. Più tardi, quando potei peregrinare fra le viventi reliquie del Foro e lungo la Via Appia e presso i grandi templi, sovente mi accadde di meditare sul mistero di Roma, sul mistero della continuità di Roma. (Mussolini 1924, quoted in Spinetti, Piraino and Fiorito 2015, p. 124)

Since the days of my distant youth, Rome has been immense in my spirit that was approaching life. For love of Rome I have dreamt and suffered, and for Rome I have held nostalgic desires. The simple word resounded like a thunderclap in my heart. Later, when I could wander among the living relics of the Forum and along the Via Appia and around the great temples, it often happened that I would meditate on the mystery of Rome, on the mystery of the continuity of Rome. (Author's translation)

Roma, città parassitaria di affittacamere, di lustrascarpe, di prostitute, di preti e di burocrati, Roma – città senza proletariato degno di questo nome – non è il centro della vita politica nazionale, ma sibbene il centro e il focolare d'infezione della vita politica nazionale. (Mussolini 1910, quoted in Salvatori 2016, p. 36)

Rome, parasitic city of room renters, of shoe polishers, of prostitutes, of priests and bureaucrats, Rome – city without a proletariat worthy of this name – it is not the centre of national politics, but rather the centre and the infectious outbreak of national political life. (Author's translation)

Mussolini's use of archaeology and ancient Rome was symbolic and in step with his view of history as an assemblage of myths that could be mobilised to trigger action (Gentile 2010). As Nietzsche observes, 'If men want to create great things they usually need the past, they take possession of it through monumental history' – a process that entails a selection of embellished information and events at the expense of others (Nietzsche 1974, 23; Gentile 2010, 81–2). Initially fascist Italy cited a combination of decontextualised elements from the Republican and imperial periods of Rome. After the conquest of Ethiopia, however, the prevailing exemplar was that of the Roman Empire (Giardina and Vauchez 2008). This appealed for a number of reasons including its projected power – belligerent but civilising – and its disciplined approach (Figs 3.3 and 3.4). The ability of Romans to integrate newly conquered territories effectively was also stressed. However, this was withdrawn when racial laws started to be promulgated in 1938 and ancient Roman people started to be described by Mussolini as '*razzistissimi*' ('very racist' – without the term being attributed the negative meaning it has today) (Giardina and Vauchez 2008).

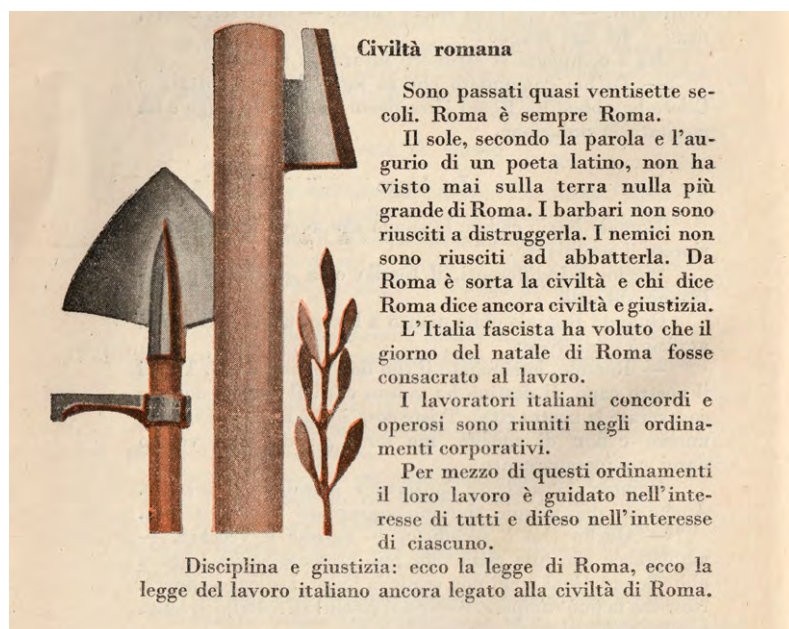


Fig. 3.3 Passage from the *Literature Handbook* designed for the fourth grade of primary school. Rome, Libreria dello Stato, XVII year of the fascist era (that is, between 28 October 1938 and 27 October 1939).



Fig. 3.4 Passage from the *Literature Handbook* designed for the fourth grade of primary school. Rome, Libreria dello Stato, XVII year of the fascist era (that is, between 28 October 1938 and 27 October 1939).

Importantly, the Roman Empire has been deployed both as an image of nationalist construction and as one of post-nationalist integration. For instance, it served as a point of reference in the formative stages of the European Union, beginning with the ratification of the Treaty that established the European Economic Community, inspired by principles of porous borders and frontier regions (Hingley 2018). Similarly underpinning the development and idea of the European Union is the Holy Roman Empire. Marks, for example, attributes imperial traits to the five largest polities in the history of Western Europe – including the Roman Empire, the Frankish Empire and the European Union – by virtue of the fact that they all ‘exert imperium (power, authority) over a great territory containing diverse communities’ (Marks 2012, 1). In his analysis, the ‘territorial structure of government results from a tension between scale and community’ (Marks 2012, 1).

The political scientist Zielonka argues that both the US and the EU ‘justify their power politics by references to noble norms and values’ and this *civilising mission* characterises them as empires (Hall and Jackson 2007; cit. Zielonka 2011, 337). He identifies a core difference, however, describing the US as a ‘classical federal state’ and the EU as a ‘neo-medieval ... polity with no single centre of government’, similar to the Carolingian state (Zielonka 2011, 342). It is precisely the polycentric nature of the European Union’s system of governance and its soft borders

that have led some researchers to believe that parallels between the European Union and the Holy Roman Empire are actually much more pertinent than those between the EU and the Roman Empire. The concept proposed by Zielonka, in which the EU may be seen as a neo-medieval empire because of its governance 'based on devolution, deregulation and competition', has also been discussed by Henry (2010, 266).

Dualities and myth-making

How are the meta-narratives introduced in the previous sections leveraged to mould nationalist discourse? The concept of 'myth' is key to understanding this process and central in the thinking of ethno-symbolist theorists of nationalism (Smith 1999; 2009; Armstrong 2008). Smith (1999) has proposed a categorisation of component myths of ethnic descent that comprises myths of origin, location and migration, ancestry, heroic age, decline and regeneration. According to his analysis (1999, 62), these components are woven together in different ways to shape variable kinds of nationalisms which are nevertheless comparable in terms of overall structure and purpose. More specifically, Smith (1999) explains that myths of temporal origins are, as the name suggests, focused on establishing the ancestry of a given community and on anchoring its foundations in time. Myths of location and migration refer to spatial origin, operating towards a legitimisation of 'control over land and scarce resources, even when mass migration memories are lacking' (Smith 1999, 64).

These kinds of myth are crucial to providing homelands and rootedness in 'liquid times' (Bauman 2000; 2007). Myths of ancestry are centred on people and draw links and connections between the members of a contemporary community and its most distant forebears. Myths of heroic age relate to the macro-theme of heroism, introduced in the second section of this chapter. They usually situate heroes in an idealised time when such figures apparently abounded, drawing a stark contrast with a modern situation of decadence in respect of virtues and customs. Linked to this dynamic of involution are the myths of decline, often connected in turn to a dualism between civilisation and barbarism. Finally, myths of regeneration are those that provide the opportunity for redemption and a chance to fulfil a 'quasi-messianic' promise of salvation (Smith 1999, 68). Furthermore, each component myth is aimed at creating narratives in support of what Smith (1999, 68–70) defines as special identity or dignity, specific territories or autonomy.

Coakley (2004) similarly proposes a typology of myths that draws on the past to generate nationalist mobilisation. He stresses how the chosen images are effectively those that respond to the needs of either the state or of political elites and distinguishes between the myths of origin, development and destiny that are first created and then disseminated in support of nationalist ideologies. In explaining *myths of origin*, Coakley (2004, 453) underlines how, even though few scholars would now disagree on the fact that nations and nationalisms are not modern constructs and phenomena, 'the nationalist image of national origin is simpler: a single group or people is identified as the prime ancestor'. Smith (1999) states that myths of origin are either based on the claim that a particular nation had been physically present in a territory for a very long period or that they moved to that area at a particular point in time.

Myths of development – which may be compared to Smith's (1999) myths of the heroic age, myths of decline and myths of regeneration – encompass respectively what Coakley (2004) calls the 'primitive Golden Age' when development blossomed, a 'Dark Age' of crisis, recession and oppression, and a subsequent time of 'struggle' to achieve a new Golden Age through nationalist efforts. Celebrated heroes who act against traitors, achieving memorable victories yet also incurring 'glorious defeats', are all part of those myths of struggle (Coakley 2004, 549). Finally, *myths of destiny* consist of both national missions – such as a civilising mission, which may be politically, socio-economically and culturally defined and is usually underpinned by imperialist visions, as we have seen – and the drive to re-establish presence in the national territory that is viewed as being illegitimately occupied by others (Coakley 2004).

Although the two authors mentioned above have been perhaps the most effective in proposing categorisations and syntheses of myth-making for nationalist purposes, the concept of heritage-based myths has been utilised effectively by other scholars with a long-lasting impact. For example, one strand of research has reflected on the myths attached to European origin. Although Europe may be considered a supranational identity, it may also be viewed as the womb that hosts a particular kind of tribalism that excludes non-European nations and – as we have discussed for the most recent period – primarily Islamic ones. Indeed a prolific body of literature has unpacked myths of European origin, especially since the 1990s. Graves-Brown, Jones and Gamble (1996) remind us how these myths may be rooted in both prehistoric and historic periods such as a 'Celtic' past, classical civilisation and the Middle Ages. Others have articulated the importance of the opposition between civilisation and barbarism that has been played out in different ways in order not only to

shape European identities, but also to resist them (Kristiansen 1996; Beard and Henderson 1999; Geary 2003; Hingley, Bonacchi and Sharpe 2018).

It is striking that such myth-making usually functions through the incorporation of a wide array of possible oppositions. In addition to civilisation–barbarism, other dichotomous ideas that are moulded into myths supporting or obstructing nationalist ideologies are multiculturalism and cultural homogeneity; cultural integration and insularity; peacefulness and militarisation; and being indigenous or exogenous (Bonacchi, Altaweel and Krzyzanska 2018; Hingley, Bonacchi and Sharpe 2018).

Dualities are particularly powerful in the context of nationalist myth-making for several reasons. First, a widely shared narrative in the form of a myth requires very high degrees of simplicity that are enhanced by oppositional tones and images. Second, and related to the first point, the idea that pure oppositions are pivotal for the making of meaning, with one of the two poles dominating the other, has been central to much of Western philosophy from Plato to twentieth-century structuralism. Derrida's deconstruction theory critiques such a notion, instead articulating a response that serves neither merely to neutralise those oppositions nor simply to reside within them (Derrida and Bass 1998). Largely deployed also in post-colonial thinking, deconstruction has denounced the problematic nature of binaries and their fictitious simplicity, highlighting rather their complexity, nuances and interplay (Goss 1996; Syrotinski 2007; Hiddleston 2011). Despite this, leveraging binary oppositions as part of formal education has been encouraged on the basis that – together with myths – dichotomies may act as powerful cognitive tools to support very emotional kinds of meaning-making (Judson 2010). Such use has been contested, but remains present in large pockets of history teaching practice, for example in England (Hingley, Bonacchi and Sharpe 2018). Third, if, as we have seen, nationalist tendencies are often imbued with myths of oppression and liberation and are founded upon a division between 'us' and 'them', dichotomous alterity may be considered inherent in this phenomenon.

Myths, the dualities they contain and the aspects of the past they feature may, at times, be deployed in apparently incoherent or even in contradictory ways. People do not necessarily mind contradictions, of course. They may choose models selectively and arbitrarily, depending on their aims and agendas, as examples presented in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 will reveal.

Italian populism and the 2018 General Election

Introduction

This chapter examines uses of the ancient past in the Facebook discourse of the populist parties that entered a coalition government after Italy's General Election of 2018. In particular, the analysis focuses on posts published by the public Facebook pages of the League and Five Star Movement and by their respective leaders, Matteo Salvini and Beppe Grillo. Their leveraging of heritage is compared to that of an electorally marginal nationalist party (CasaPound Italia, led by Simone di Stefano) and of other, more major parties. The chapter subsequently investigates the ways in which the Iron Age, Roman and post-Roman past was leveraged by those who commented on the Facebook discourse of the governing parties and their leaders. It identifies and discusses the ways in which this heritage was moulded into myths of origin, decline and collapse, and resistance to draw divisions between 'us' and 'them' horizontally. In so doing such heritage excluded specific groups of people and vertically separated 'the people' from 'the elite'.

Electing a populist government

In recent years the Italian party Northern League, now commonly referred to as 'League', has progressively moved towards the right of the political spectrum. It emphatically marked oppositions between two main kinds of 'in groups' and 'out groups': the people against the elite and natives

against immigrants. This chapter will discuss the League’s use of the ancient past compared to that of the Five Star Movement (5SM), the populist and Eurosceptic party with which the League formed a government coalition following the General Election on 4 March 2018 and until 20 August 2019 (Valbruzzi 2018). At the poll Italian citizens could demonstrate their political support for one of three blocks in a tripolar party system that had emerged in 2013 (Chiaramonte et al. 2018) (Fig. 4.1). The centre-right block was led by Silvio Berlusconi and Matteo Salvini and the centre-left coalition by Matteo Renzi, while a post-ideological alternative was offered by Beppe Grillo’s 5SM.

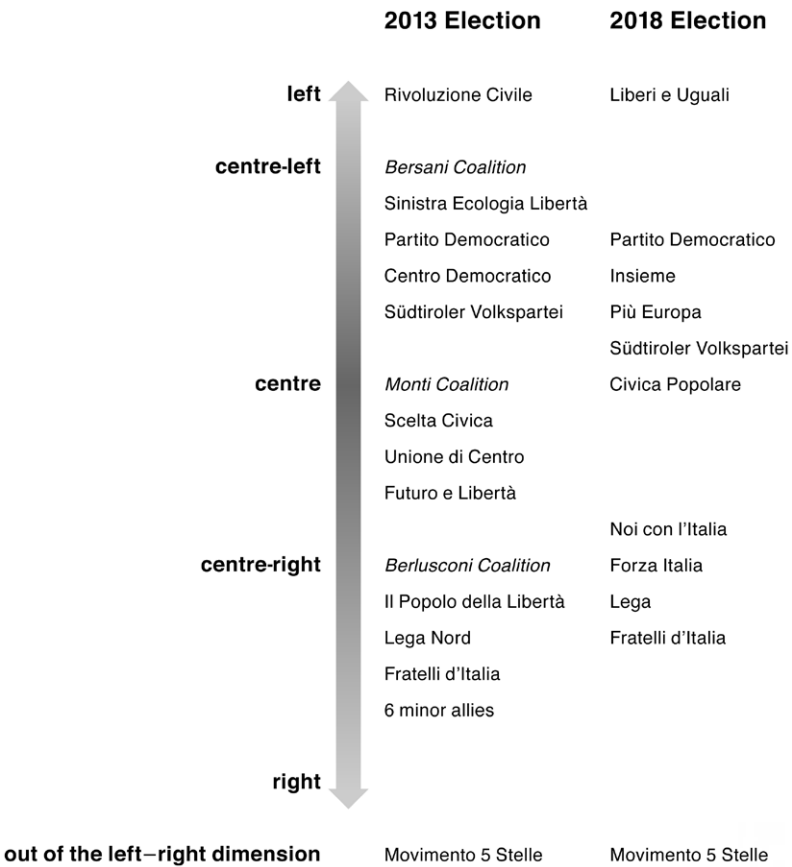


Fig. 4.1 Comparison between the coalitions running in the Italian General Elections of 2013 and of 2018. © Christina Unwin, using information from Chiaramonte et al. 2018.

The 2018 elections resulted in a hung parliament, although the League and 5SM achieved an overwhelming success while more mainstream parties – those characterised by Valbruzzi (2018) as deriving from nineteenth-century ideologies – attracted substantially fewer votes (Ivaldi, Lanzone and Woods 2017; Pasquino 2018). Based on this outcome, four possible party alliances were entitled to form a government: 5SM with the League; centre-left with centre-right; centre-right with 5SM; and centre-left with 5SM (Valbruzzi 2018). After difficult negotiations a League–5SM coalition took power; the Democratic Party (PD) and Forza Italia formed the opposition (Valbruzzi 2018). The new government was brought together by a fundamentally Eurosceptic attitude shared by 5SM and the League in 2013 and 2018, as well as by the ‘challenger party’ image that they were both eager to project (Hobolt and Tilley 2016; Valbruzzi 2018). It has been argued, however, that anti-European tendencies have been stronger in the League than in 5SM, and the latter has therefore been characterised by some as ‘Eurocritical’.

These political parties also differ on two further macro-dimensions. The League is far-right and strongly conservative, defending values such as those related to the traditional family, while 5SM does not have a clear position along the left-right spectrum and is more progressive (Valbruzzi 2018). Italy constitutes a unique case study. Two populist parties in power together, both pursuing Eurosceptic, anti-immigrant agendas, was at that time a novelty not only for Italy but also for the context of Western Europe (Chiaramonte et al. 2018, 19; Valbruzzi 2018). To comprehend this situation more fully, the historical developments of the ‘winners’ of the 2018 elections, the League and the 5SM, will now be introduced (Pasquino 2018, 356; Pritoni and Vignati 2018).

The League was founded by Umberto Bossi in 1991, building on a tradition of separatist movements such as Lega Lombarda and Liga Veneta (Albertazzi, Giovannini and Seddone 2018). In this early phase the Northern League (NL) was a populist and regionalist party advocating a separation of the northernmost regions of the peninsula from Rome and the south of Italy. The scathing epithet of *Roma ladrona* (‘Rome, the Big Thief’) resounded in Bossi’s rhetoric throughout the 1990s, together with NL’s protests and attacks against the supposedly corrupted South of Italy. At that time NL was proposing to defend the interests of the people of Padania (a name for the geographic region roughly corresponding to north and centre-north Italy) from politicians residing in the capital city and identified by NL as enemies (D’Alimonte 2019). The Northern League considered the ruling political class guilty of exploiting the hard-working inhabitants of the northern territories – described as the real producers

of wealth in Italy – by redistributing the resources they generated to those living in the South of Italy, depicted as idle and apathetic.

When NL entered a long-lasting government coalition with Forza Italia in 2000, they were faced with the need to change their secessionist objectives in a way that would suit a governing party and opted for a move towards a federalist agenda (D'Alimonte 2019). A further transformation followed in 2013 when, after the scandals that tainted Umberto Bossi and his *cerchio magico* (inner circle of close acolytes), NL members elected a new leader, Matteo Salvini. He soon realised that additional changes were required in order to attract votes at a national level. One of his first steps was to apologise to the people of the South of Italy for having antagonised and insulted them throughout his political career (Albertazzi, Giovannini and Seddone 2018). Salvini then proceeded to forge a new League, conceived as a national party (D'Alimonte 2019) that presented itself as defending and protecting the Christian people of Italy from so-called 'invasions' of Muslim immigrants (Schwörer 2018).

By 2018 NL had become a right-wing party focused on issues of sovereignty. It espoused anti-immigration and Eurosceptic positions while maintaining an aversion against variously characterised 'elites' (Zazzara 2018). The party has often invoked the slogan 'Italians First', echoing stances adopted in other parts of the Western world. Furthermore, Salvini stopped using the word 'Northern' when referring to the 'League' and eliminated it from the party symbol, although the term remains in the party name officially deposited in 2018. However, there are several contradictions between the League's new nationalist identity and its surviving localist urges. The latter have proved especially persistent in territories where the party secured the largest electoral success in 2018 (D'Alimonte 2019).

In contrast to the League, with its nearly three decades of history, in 2018 5SM was the newest party in the Italian parliament. It was led by the Italian comedian, Beppe Grillo, who had made frequent television appearances during the 1980s before being sidelined – possibly due to the politically-heated content of his satire that addressed difficult themes such as corruption and pressing environmental issues (Caruso 2017). During the 1990s Grillo began performing in theatres. Here he met with increasing success that has lasted until the present day (Caruso 2017). After one of his performances, the comedian encountered the web marketing expert Gianroberto Casaleggio, who subsequently began to manage the blog beppegrillo.it. Casaleggio also encouraged Grillo to use the meetup.com platform to launch the network *Friends of Beppe Grillo* (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2015; Caruso 2017; Tronconi 2018).

From this point onwards, 5SM embarked on a journey that would take them ‘from the people to the institutions’ (Lanzone and Morini 2017, 395). The period between 2005 and 2008 was an ‘incubation’ phase that saw the emergence of a mixed online and offline approach to ‘digital democracy’. This led Grillo to move his interventions from theatres to blogging, enabling geographically ‘local’ groups, mediated by *meetup.com*, to interact, promote and participate in activities (Tronconi 2018). Following the success of these initiatives, Grillo and Casaleggio founded the Movement in 2009, in Milan (D’Alimonte 2019); they perceived it as a grassroots operation fed by growing distrust of politics and politicians (D’Alimonte 2019). The Movement proposed to combat both the political classes and the mainstream media through web-based forms of direct democracy (D’Alimonte 2019). Since then 5SM grew relatively rapidly, participating in regional (2010), local and regional (2011 and 2012), national (2013 and 2018) and European Parliament elections (2013 and 2014) (Bailo 2015; Lanzone and Morini 2017).

In 2012 the Movement became a party and benefited from the crisis of two subsequent governments: one led by Silvio Berlusconi, which ended in 2011, and the other guided by Mario Monti, which fell on 21 December 2012 (Maggini 2014; Conti and Memoli 2015; Passarelli and Tuorto 2018; Tronconi 2018). Monti’s executive exacerbated the disaffection for traditional leaders and experts within large pockets of the general public, partly as a result of the tough measures of austerity adopted by his ministers in response to the financial and economic crisis that had erupted in 2008 (Maggini 2014). Following these events, 5SM competed in the 2013 national elections and became the largest single party in the Chamber of Deputies, the Italian Lower Chamber (Maggini 2014; Lanzone and Morini 2017).

Both 5SM and the League are underpinned by a populist ideology comprising a horizontal opposition between the ‘elite’ and the ‘people’ (Mudde 2004). Qualitative analyses of a sample of manifestos, speeches and public interventions by party leaders have shown that the League and 5SM share an idea of ‘caste’ at national and European levels, understood as a group characterised by corruption and expressive of neoliberal and globalist interests (Ivaldi, Lanzone and Woods 2017). However, the two political parties differ in their ways of framing the ‘people’. The League regards this notion as informed by nativism and defined on ethnic and cultural grounds, whereas 5SM perceives the people as the citizens of Italy. Furthermore, whereas the League supports forms of nationalist protectionism over economic measures, at least as far as import into the Italian market is concerned, 5SM is post-ideological in this respect (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2015; Ivaldi, Lanzone and Woods 2017; Lanzone and Morini 2017).

The Five Star Movement has also been defined as a techno-populist party since it favours the “competent” resolution of practical problems’ over and beyond any ideological positions (Bickerton and Accetti 2018, 133). A number of additional terms have been used, including ‘movement party’ and ‘personal party’, when emphasis is placed on Grillo as a political leader, and ‘business party’ to underline the influence of Casaleggio Associati (McDonnell 2013; Caruso 2017; Tronconi 2018). The 5SM has also been referred to as expressing, at least in part and in a non-exclusive way, the characteristics of being ‘anti-system’, ‘anti-establishment’ and ‘populist’ (one or more of these labels have been used by commentators (for example, Corbetta 2013; Tarchi 2014; Bordignon and Ceccarini 2015; Franzosi, Marone, and Salvati 2015; Lanzone 2015; Bickerton and Accetti 2018; Passarelli and Tuorto 2018)). Vignati (2013) has reflected on the co-presence of both a populist and a participatory component, and D’Alimonte (2019) has highlighted the utopianism of M5S. However, none of these single terms sufficiently captures the essence of the 5SM’s creation of an original and novel political party (Bickerton and Accetti 2018; Tronconi 2018).

Heritage in political Facebook discourse

Social media played a major role in the campaign that paved the way to the 2018 national elections in Italy; most candidates and parties used sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube systematically and strategically to communicate directly with voters (Chiaramonte et al. 2018). A number of studies have examined the official social media presence of political forces and their representatives in order to understand the messages that these platforms helped to convey. Chiaramonte et al. (2018), for example, analysed the tweets published by competing parties and party leaders in the two months prior to 4 March 2018 and found that each coalition adopted a similar strategy, positioning itself in relation to the other blocks by discussing two topics in particular: the economy and immigration.

The Five Star Movement advocated a so-called *reddito di cittadinanza* – a form of basic income that, if approved and implemented, would be funded by the government – while maintaining a less clear stance on immigration in order not to alienate its base, believed to have mixed views on this matter (Chiaramonte et al. 2018). The centre-right and centre-left coalitions had different propositions on economic themes, but both called for greater control over migrant flows, though in different terms. Albertazzi, Giovannini and Seddone (2018) have carried out further research on posts

published on the official Facebook pages of Matteo Salvini and the League. The authors assessed the process of transformation that the League has undergone over time, from a regionalist and secessionist organisation into a nativist nationalist and populist party.

In the case of 5SM, it has been critical to study use of the blog. The latter constitutes the online space through which the Movement expresses its identity, communicating goals and initiatives and enabling public participation. Information published on the blog was often distributed further and more widely via Facebook and Twitter (Bailo 2015; Bordignon and Ceccarini 2015; Di Giammaria and Faggiano 2017). Pareschi (2020) has recently undertaken topic modelling of the posts published from 2013 to 2019 on the public Facebook pages of the League, 5SM, PD and Forza Italia. The results show that, among the 16 topics that were identified, immigration characterised the discourse of the League and socio-economic issues that of 5SM, more than in the case of any other party. We will now examine the ways in which heritage features in the Facebook pages of the League, Matteo Salvini, 5SM and Beppe Grillo, from their inception up to the point of the extraction of the data (Table 4.1, Fig. 4.2).

Using cluster analysis, five large thematic clusters were identified in the posts published on the public Facebook page of the League that contained period-specific keywords. Two of these clusters are relevant to our discussion. The first (Fig. 4.3, reading from top to bottom) focused on nationalism and encompassed notions of respect towards one's own 'culture' and 'traditions', which together form a small subgroup; it also defined a notion of 'country' as being strongly characterised by religion, as well as the need to say 'enough' [is enough] and to push [others] to get 'out' and go 'home'. The second cluster was centred on the opposition through which the League presented itself to 'citizens' as an alternative to the left and 'communists'. These two clusters reproduced similar content to the last cluster in the subset, published on Salvini's Facebook page (Fig. 4.4, reading from top to bottom). Here we may observe subgroups relating to the 'Italian people' and government, the 'real' 'problem' of immigration and the issue of living in a way that shows 'respect' for the law and the 'culture' of the 'country' [Italy]. There are, however, no references to 'traditions', which are more celebrated on the Facebook page of the party than through that of its leader – a fact also noted by Albertazzi, Giovannini and Seddone (2018).

By comparison, the Facebook page of 5SM showed a smaller thematic cluster that explicitly addressed the idea of bringing 'change' and of the Movement 'writing' 'new' 'history' 'today' (Fig. 4.5). A second cluster was concerned with the 'greatness' of Italy that was also expressed through its

Table 4.1 Posts and comments extracted from the public Facebook pages of the League, Matteo Salvini, 5SM and Beppe Grillo between February and July 2018

Facebook page	Number of posts	Number of comments
League	4,529	211,435
Salvini	5,379	6,609,052
5SM	4,899	1,481,380
Grillo	5,895	1,272,251

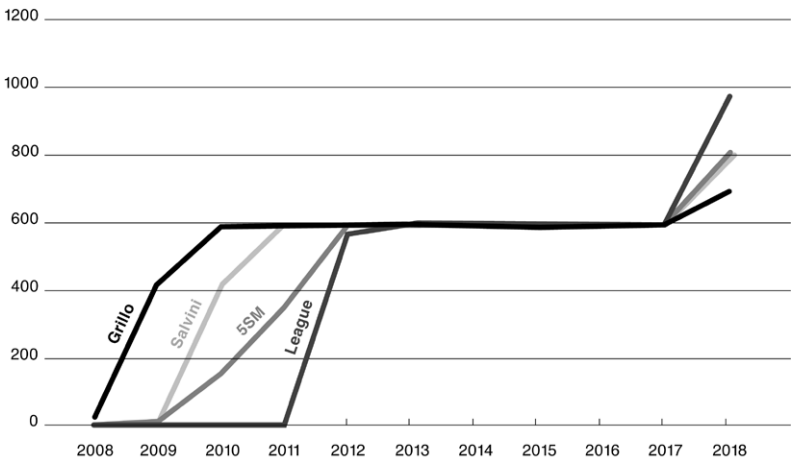


Fig. 4.2 Yearly frequencies of posts published by the public Facebook pages of the League, Matteo Salvini, 5SM and Beppe Grillo, extracted between February and July 2018.

‘culture’. A third cluster marked a division between ‘past’ and ‘present’ times (grouped together) and stressed the necessity to put a ‘stop’ to [parliamentarians’] lifelong pensions. The term ‘*cultura*’ (‘culture’) recurred in all iterations of cluster analysis conducted and reported above. The tokens (see [Chapter 2](#), p. 25) that are more strongly associated with ‘*cultura*’ in the posts, containing period-specific keywords and published on the official Facebook pages of the League, are connected with schooling, education, Christianity and the ‘nativity scene’; by contrast, in the subset posted on the Facebook page of the 5SM, ‘*cultura*’ is mostly linked with ‘*valorizzazione*’ (‘cultural enhancement’), tourism and development ([Table 4.2](#)). It may therefore be concluded that, although the League, Salvini, 5SM and Grillo invoked culture and heritage in equally ‘thin’ ways, they leveraged them to support profoundly different narratives.

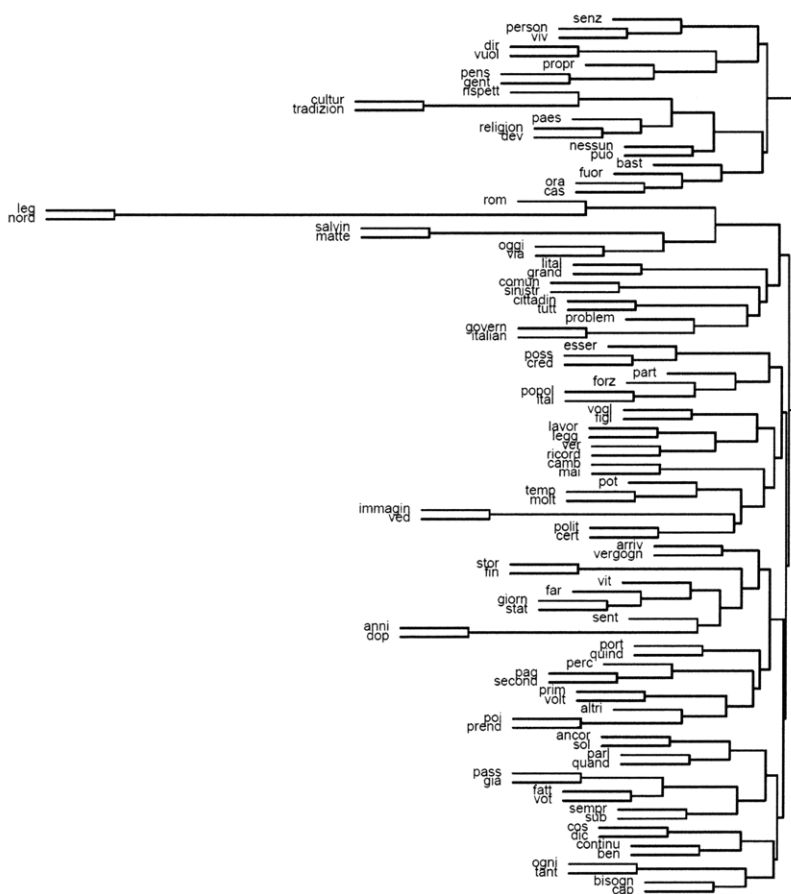


Fig. 4.3 Hierarchical cluster analysis undertaken on the subset of posts containing period-specific keywords and published on the public Facebook page of the League.

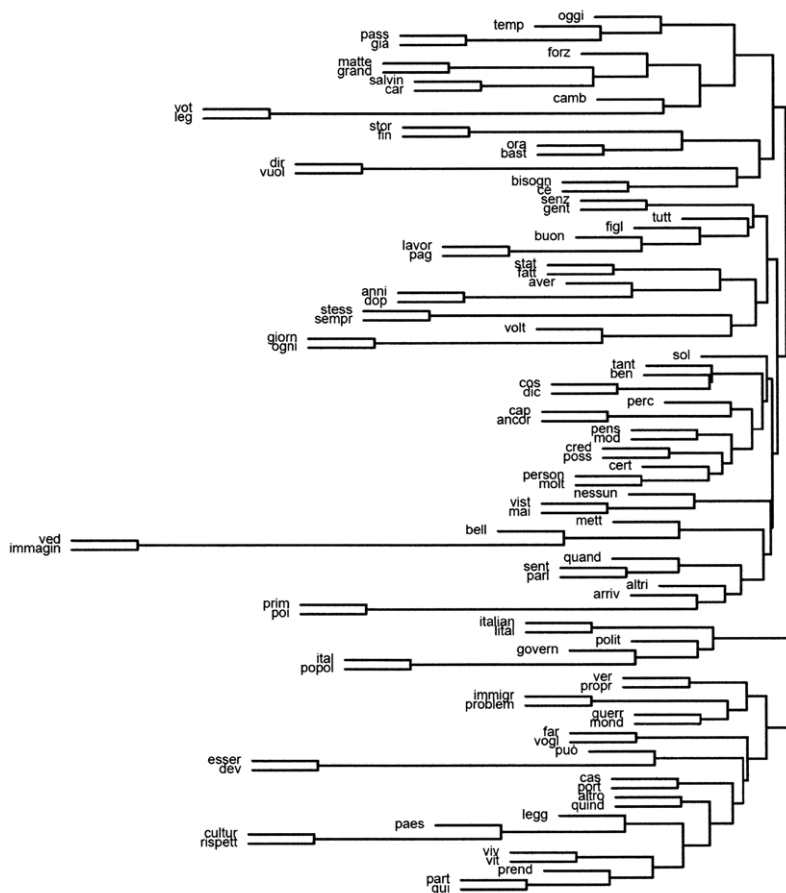


Fig. 4.4 Hierarchical cluster analysis undertaken on the subset of posts containing period-specific keywords and published on the public Facebook page of Matteo Salvini.

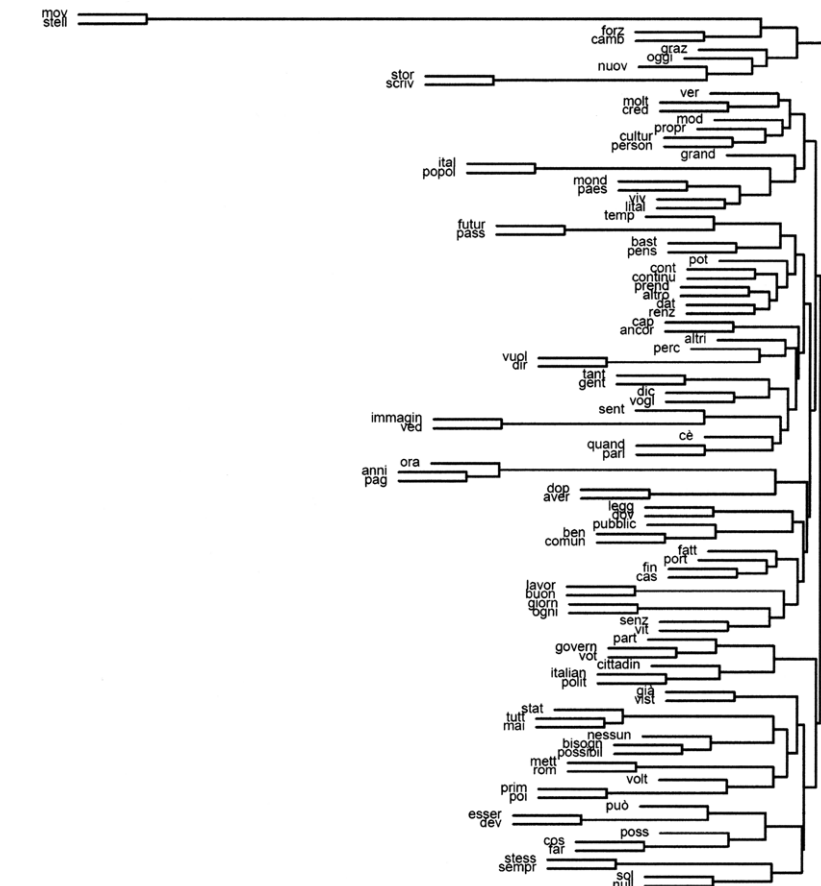


Table 4.2 Tokens in Italian that are most strongly associated with the token *cultur* (correlations >0.30) in the posts published on the public Facebook pages of the League and 5SM that contained period-specific keywords

Term associations for the token <i>cultur</i> in posts published by the League (correlations >0.30)
scuol, presid, dover, rimuov, togl, alunn, appartien, cristianesim, divid, educ, favolett mastrorocc, pied, allistit, amicis, presepe, riten
Term associations for the token <i>cultur</i> in posts published by 5SM (correlations >0.30)
esalt, inimmagin, italiastell, maltratt, pern, ricordat, sostenitor, tassell, valorizz, vorrem, trascur, finor, turism, cambier, categor, central, rimin, piccolissim, assiem, sfrutt, insiem, piccol

Erasing memory and redefining ‘civilisation’

In recent years the League and its current leader, Matteo Salvini, have tended to leverage the recent past substantially more than ancient periods as part of their official Facebook discourse. This constitutes a significant change from the rhetoric that the party had been adopting until 2013, when Salvini transformed the League into a national political force that aspired to cater for the whole of the Italian peninsula. Since its establishment in the 1990s, the League had appropriated images linked to the Roman, pre- and post-Roman world. Initially, Alberto da Giussano was core to its repertoire. This legendary figure was said to have won the battle of Legnano against Federico Barbarossa in 1176, defending the independence of the *Lega Lombarda* (Lombard League), and had featured prominently in Italian collective memory, for example at the time of the *Risorgimento* and the unification of Italy. Alberto da Giussano and the values he expressed were also critical to the League during its early days, but were soon integrated with additional references to the ancient past.

When it became a political party, the League required a more powerful set of images to support its secessionist agenda and heated rebellion against Rome convincingly. For this reason the ‘Celtic sun’ was added to the party symbol, as a direct reference to the supposed Celtic past shared by the people of Padania. The latter were now presented by the League as originating from the free and ‘good’ Celts who – in the interpretation proposed by the party – used to inhabit the northern

regions of Italy, defended themselves and resisted Roman expansionism and domination. The autonomist Leagues from which the League project initially took inspiration were separatist movements, claiming freedom for entities that they defined on ethno-linguistic bases. By contrast, Bossi's League shifted away from these instances. Instead it built an argument that leveraged economic and political motifs to justify the importance of separating from the South of Italy (Cavatorta 2001).

Following reports in the press that high-ranking members of the party had been involved in financial scandals and dealings with organised crime, the League entered a period of severe crisis regarding its popularity (Cento Bull 2013). In April 2012 Bossi resigned from his role as Federal Secretary and Roberto Maroni took control of the party, which he rebranded as 'League 2.0'. Thereafter, in June 2012, Salvini became Secretary of the Lombard League (Cento Bull 2013) (Fig. 4.6). Maroni's League 2.0 gave prominence to the concept of 'The North First' and to the territorial nature of the party, in an attempt to revamp it with a fresh and positive image (Cento Bull 2013). In step with these transformations, the party's heritage-themed rhetorical arsenal also required deep cleansing and was announced through the following post, published on 6 October 2012 by the Facebook account of the League:



Fig. 4.6 Matteo Salvini's speech at Pontida, Italy, 7 April 2013. The image shows the party symbols of the League: the Celtic sun and Alberto da Giussano (central part of the photo, also on both left and right). Photo © Fabio Visconti, CC BY-SA 3.0.¹

LEAGUE: CARROCCIO 'INVADES' VENICE, MARONI WILL CLOSE THE PARTY (ANSA) – VENICE, 6 OCT – Following the scandals of *Carroccio*, the Northern League returns to Venice. The *padano-celtic rituals* of the recent past have been eliminated – from Monviso to the Lagoon via the Po river with the *round-bottom flask*² – in Riva dei Sette Martiri we will talk about the North following the line of the new secretary Roberto Maroni. (Facebook page of League – Salvini Premier, 6 October 2012)³

This change in narrative was described very incisively by one of Salvini's supporters in 2014 as the ceasing of talks of secessions and Celts aimed at a nationalist electorate. In fact the party's Facebook posts published after 2012 showed that the League proceeded to stress an opposition between the Italian people and immigrants, antagonistically defined as 'others' in cultural and religious terms. As anticipated before, the heritage drawn on in this context is not period-specific, connecting more generally with traditions and Christian festivities. Such heritage was leveraged to frame a Catholic kind of 'Italianness' in striking contrast to previous celebrations of pagan Celts. Having reached Altamura, in the South of Italy, on 19 December 2017, for example, Salvini shared a post that celebrated 'the spectacle of the landscape changing in the joyfulness of *Christmas*' and in which such spectacle was dedicated 'to those who would like to erase our *history*, our *civilisation* and our *values*', with a final 'Hooray for the *nativity scene*!' to end the communication. The idea of 'civilisation' acclaimed by Salvini comprises a Christian component interlinked with additional distinctive features pertaining to language, arts and *cuisine*.

On 4 October 2017 Salvini posted a comment about a pregnant woman who he described as 'unpunishable'. He claimed that she was dressed up like a street artist 'to approach tourists and steal their wallets', setting her in opposition to the place where this scene was said to have taken place: Florence, a 'cradle of art and civilization'. Salvini argued that this kind of civilisation is under threat and at risk of being 'erased' by immigrants. He therefore pleaded to 'stop invasions and stop Islam', a religion that he repeatedly portrayed as violent. The party leader stated, for example, that it was inaccurate to compare the contemporary movement of people 'who are bringing us war at home' with the flows of Italian migrants who had peacefully reached foreign shores in the twentieth century. In his view, only those respectful of Italian culture were welcome and should be allowed to remain in the country; he

maintained that he did not ‘hate anyone and appreciate[d] the many foreigners who are good people and work and respect our laws and our culture’. However, this supposed tolerance towards foreigners should not be confused with multiculturalism, a concept openly condemned by Salvini. He referred to the case of the ‘Islamic Republic of Dewsbury ... the English town that has become the cradle of terrorists and the symbol of the failure of forced multiculturalism’, asking ‘How is it possible to make any integration happen if those who are “guests” become the majority and want to ERASE your culture???’

However, the nationwide type of cultural and religious nativism that the League and Salvini had come to advocate continued to co-exist with expressions of admiration for local heritages – exemplified primarily by those legacies of the past that exhibit connections with northern Italian places. This local heritage was also described as endangered by European Union policies and the agency of globalisation invoked through a reference to ‘mega malls’, as shown in the two texts below. Both were published in 2018.

++ THE EUROPEAN UNION IS DESTROYING THE FOOD HERITAGE OF ITALY! ++ For example, there are bottles of oil that have Italian names but contain oil from Tunisia. If we do not protect our food and do not control what gets to our supermarkets we risk ruining our wealth. (Facebook page of Matteo Salvini, 28 January 2018)

Here in Tolmezzo (Udine) there is a small supermarket with spectacular local products! Much better than those mega malls, let’s defend and value our rich resources – culture, foods and traditions! (Facebook page of Matteo Salvini, 23 April 2018)

Salvini mobilised cultural heritage carefully but superficially, rejecting citations of the deep past and established origin myths without replacing them; instead he focused on driving civilisational claims built around religion and a very broad interpretation of culture. This is very different from the narratives embraced on Facebook by the (minority) populist nationalist and extreme-right party, CasaPound Italia, for example (Bulli 2019; Bialasiewicz and Stallone 2020). This party and its leader, Simone Di Stefano, have called themselves ‘Fascists of the Third Millennium’ and are hostile towards immigrants (Bulli 2019). However, they construct their nationalist discourse through the direct and nostalgic recalling of aspects of the ancient past – and, on one occasion, by discussing the meaning of an origin myth tied to the figure of Aeneas:

Info for the semi-cultured who parrot back the story that *Aeneas* was Turkish: *The Trojans were Etruscans*. (Facebook page of Simone Di Stefano, 19 June 2017)

CasaPound Italia contrasts supposedly glorious and foregone times with the decadent present and argues, on this basis, for the need to preserve the monuments that were left to us as a legacy of that past. As we have seen in Chapter 3, this idea is also a recurring topos, albeit of course not exclusively so, in the rhetoric of Mussolini.

It is necessary to go back to the sources of our *history* as Italians in order to stand up and *oppose these decadent times*. (Facebook page of CasaPound Italia, 13 December 2016)

The propaganda considers voting for an extremist party as the birth of totalitarianism, fascism, nazism / the reality is different: we often forget the *glorious origins of Italy, deeply rooted in culture for millennia*. (Facebook page of CasaPound Italia, 3 March 2018)

While references to the ancient past were virtually absent from the Facebook pages of Salvini and the League, the Greco-Roman world was referred to as an aspect of the cultural distinctiveness and make-up of Europe as a whole by two major parties on the centre-right and right of the political spectrum: Berlusconi's Forza Italia and Brothers of Italy, led by Giorgia Meloni. In both cases such cultural roots are leveraged in divisive ways, despite being mobilised in relation to the 'Europe' collective. Berlusconi re-ignites the separation between peoples and bureaucrats; Meloni concentrates on that between native insiders and immigrant outsiders, as evidenced respectively by the two following posts.

We need to rethink the very idea of Europe, if we want to save this great dream. The Europe that our founding fathers wanted was a great space of freedom, not a bureaucratic cage. It should have been based on shared values, on *shared Jewish-Christian and Greco-Roman origins*. (Facebook page of Silvio Berlusconi, 11 June 2017)

Turkey threatens: "soon religion wars will start in Europe". This is the natural consequence of the irresponsible policies of those who have governed us until now and who have favoured uncontrolled immigration and the process of islamisation of our Nations. ... There is only one way to stop religion wars from exploding in Europe: *stopping*

the invasion of fake refugees and confirming again our Greek, Roman and Christian origins. (Facebook page of Giorgia Meloni, 16 March 2017)

Making history 'in the now'

In a similar case to the presentations of the League and Salvini, the deep past of Italy and Europe was virtually absent from the political discourse published by 5SM and Beppe Grillo on their official Facebook pages. When they did feature, the Iron Age and the Roman and medieval periods were leveraged in one of three main ways. First, we may find generic and negative references to medieval times whenever there was a desire to describe something as old, obsolete and morally corrupt. For example, elites were portrayed as 'repeat[ing] the mistakes of their ancestors' and 5SM harshly condemned the 'hideous' privileges of the 'caste' – especially parliamentarians' pensions:

HERE WE ARE NOT TALKING ABOUT A "HUNT FOR THE RICH",
HERE WE ARE TALKING ABOUT PARASITES: PARLAMENTARIANS
MUST HAVE A #PENSIONASEVERYONE ELSE. We must eliminate a
hideous and *medieval* privilege. (Facebook page of 5SM, 28 February
2017)

Second, if 5SM rejected the ancient past on the one hand, on the other it proposed to establish a new order described as '*patrimonio del paese*' ('heritage resource of the country') to be enacted by the new government team. In step with this narrative, the 'Activism' function of the online platform Rousseau, which assisted in collecting stories, events and significant battles of 5SM, was described as the 'past, present and future of the Five Star Movement' in a post published on the Movement's Facebook page on 8 February 2018. The intention was to present Rousseau for the first time, with a heritage-making function being attributed to this online space. Even as 5SM projected a self-image of being both a heritage resource and a heritage creator, so did the party frequently use the expression 'making history'. This was particularly the case in Facebook discourse, where people were invited to support 5SM at the General Election of 2018 (for example, through posts published on 19 January 2018 and 4 February 2018).

Third, 5SM stressed the importance of preserving Italy's '*patrimonio*' ('heritage') in its diversity and various facets: naturalistic, artistic, architectonic, industrial and more generally cultural. References to this aspect featured in a broad and non-descriptive manner, echoing the

interests and issues pursued by Grillo through his satire. A Facebook post published by 5SM on 24 August 2017, for example, stated:

In the last few years the Five Star Movement has been at the forefront of the battle for the protection of our historical, artistic and natural heritage. However there is still a lot to do in order to make culture the social engine of this Country. (Facebook page of 5SM, 24 August 2017)

The only references to the deep past that related to a specific period were found in Beppe Grillo's early Facebook discourse. They served to mark the figurative distance between a once great past and the present-day decadence, depicted as being in urgent need of attention. This opposition is played out through the example of Ravenna, whose past glory as 'yesterday's capital of the western Roman Empire' was set in antithesis to the contemporary 'poisons of Petrolchemical plants' in a post published by Beppe Grillo's Facebook account on 10 May 2011.

'The people' respond

The previous section has revealed the superficial nature of the ways in which the parties that formed a coalition government in Italy following the General Election of 2018 used heritage as part of their populist discourse on Facebook. In contrast, mentions of the Iron Age, Roman and medieval past of Italy and Europe were more specific and tailored in comments by Facebook users who wrote on the Facebook pages of the League, Salvini, 5SM and Beppe Grillo, and of the nationalist party CasaPound Italia and its chief representative, Simone Di Stefano. Facebook comments including one or more of a pre-defined set of period-specific keywords showed a general prevalence of references to aspects of the Roman world (Table 4.3). I will begin by examining these references and then explore how objects, places, people and practices from pre- and post-Roman times were enlisted to mould oppositions and myths in narratives that either supported or attacked populist and populist nationalist antagonistic othering.

The majority of the comments drawing on 'images of Rome' (Hingley 2001) refer to the Roman Empire ('*impero romano*' in Table 4.3) and were published on Salvini's page (213 out of 365) by people who were supportive of him and the League. In these texts, the idea of the Roman Empire was deployed with meanings directly tied to the concerns voiced through the official posts – in which, however, references to the ancient

past were absent. In some cases such references were introduced by the authors of the comments in ways that echo political media coverage, print or broadcast. When this occurred, the themes addressed and the expert views leveraged in the comments tended to be very similar or the same as those featuring in the media outlets. Furthermore, comments that rehashed existing online media content were richer in historical details and explanations than those that did not. The rehashing of media content will be examined in detail in [Chapter 7](#).

The comments containing the term ‘Roman Empire’ posted on the pages of the League and Salvini were primarily centred on the issue of immigration and articulated in an array of topics. These included the nature and implications of immigration as a phenomenon, whether

Table 4.3 Number of comments containing period-specific keywords published under the posts extracted from the Facebook pages of the League, Matteo Salvini, 5SM, Beppe Grillo, CasaPound Italia and Simone Di Stefano

Note: only terms recurring more than 10 times have been shown.

Terms	Number of comments
Medioevo/medio evo	1,964
Cesare	1,728
Crociat/o/i	502
Impero Romano	365
Medieval/i/e	334
Giussano	246
Antic/o/a/hi/he Roman/o/a/i/e	141
Enea	124
Barbar	110
Romolo	95
Bizantin/o/a/i/e/	62
Carlo Magno/Carlomagno	58
Celt/i/e	53
Goti	37
Sacro Romano impero	25
Roma antica	22

immigrants should be welcomed or not, citizenship policies, the difference between multi-ethnicity and multiculturalism, the notion of a decadence said to be affecting Italy and the corruption of the political class.

By contrast, comments published on the Facebook pages of 5SM and Beppe Grillo containing the words '*impero romano*' addressed a substantially narrower range of topics through a more limited repertoire of images and arguments. These comments focused particularly on direct democracy and the importance of 'listening to the people', as well as discussing Italy's relations with the European Union. Immigration, ethnicity and the legal basis on which migrants may have the right to apply for citizenship – the *vexatae quaestiones* of *ius soli* and *ius culturae* – were not covered. Sympathisers of both parties and party leaders mobilised ideas of *impero romano* by comparing this concept either to contemporary Italy or to Europe and the European Union. Comments published on the Facebook pages of the League and Salvini leveraged these parallels to express four main oppositions between civilisation and barbarism, greatness and decadence, militarised 'tough' Romans and weak contemporaries, and between multicultural societies and culturally homogeneous ones. The first two dualities also recurred on the pages of 5SM and Beppe Grillo, and binaries were used to construct component myths of origin, decline, collapse and regeneration across all Facebook pages (Smith 1999).

Myth-making on the pages of Salvini and the League

Myths of origin

The myths of origin invoked in the comments written under the posts published by Salvini or the League principally placed the roots of the Italian people in the Roman Empire, in step with the transformation of the League from a secessionist to a nationalist political party. There is no way of establishing, however, whether this is the outcome of the party now appealing to a different cohort of people or of the myths previously mobilised by longer-standing supporters having been sidelined. For example, in 2017, a Facebook user commented on a video shared by Salvini about what he had described as the 'invasion of North-African delinquents in Sardinia' by reminding others that 'we descend' from the 'powerful' Roman Empire.

The myth of Roman origin was also leveraged specifically to underline a supposed state of decline in which Italy may be found today and the consequent need for a rebirth. Such a concept is shown by a comment written in 2018 in relation to a video published by Salvini that strongly associated criminality with illegal immigration. The author of the comment stressed that Italians ‘were’ the Roman Empire and used to ‘strike fear’ everywhere; he or she then asked how it could happen that they ended up ‘humiliated at home’. The Facebook user finally urged Salvini to allow full freedom of action to law enforcement agents and to hire new police forces ‘with attributes’ – so that they could help Italy, a country depicted as being about to collapse.

In some cases the Roman Empire was identified as a point of origin for contemporary Italians together with Christianity, arts and subsequent periods – particularly the Renaissance and *Risorgimento*, a period in the nineteenth century when Italy was unified. In other cases there were expressions of sympathy towards a Greco-Roman culture in terms that are similar to those that characterise the posts by Giorgia Meloni and Silvio Berlusconi examined on pp. 63–4. To critique the more open position of the politician Laura Boldrini⁴ towards migrants, in 2016 Salvini published a post in which he accused her of wanting a future where “‘migrants” are an “avant-garde” and offer their “lifestyle” for us to imitate’. He quoted some of the words used by Boldrini, but largely decontextualised them. A Facebook user responded to his comment by noting that ‘we’ Italians are the ‘heirs’ of the Roman Empire as well as of the Renaissance and the *Risorgimento*, and of famous artists and poets such as Michelangelo and Dante; he or she then argued that there is no reason why the ‘heirs’ of those who ‘made history’ should ‘adapt to’ migrants’ culture.

In another example, published in 2017, a Christian Greco-Roman culture and its modern legacy were openly contrasted to Islam and portrayed as projecting opposite behaviours and values, particularly in relation to women’s rights. Following these considerations, the Facebook user exhorted another user of Muslim faith and born in Italy to practise her religion but study Italian history, including religious, art and music history. This comment was prompted by a video shared by Salvini, which accused ‘the new Italians’ (referring to Muslim migrants) of wanting ‘women submissive and veiled’. This kind of argumentation has also been described as pertaining to the realm of racism disguised as feminism (Scrinzi 2017).

Fewer comments referred to mixed origins or viewed ‘barbarian’ peoples as the forebears of present-day Italians. Such origin myths were mobilised to express one of two possible and conflicting hoped-for futures, dismissing the idea that Italy was presently subjected to invasions

of migrants-barbarians and encouraging action against incoming flows of migrants. The first 'imagined' future was framed by people who tended not to support Salvini and the League; in some cases it was tied with the rejection of Christian roots as well, as evidenced by a comment published in 2018, under a post in which Salvini invited his Facebook followers to vote for him on 4 March 2018 and 'defend our culture', also identified with the crucifix, Christmas and the nativity scene. The author of the comment responded by stressing that Italian roots are not Christian, but 'pagan' and lay in the Mediterranean, which was defined as 'a crossroads of people'. Consequently – according to the Facebook user – Italians should regard themselves as a 'mix of cultures' including ancient Greeks and Romans, Etruscans, Phoenicians, Celtic peoples and Samnites.

The myth of Aeneas was also mobilised to emphasise the highly mobile origins of contemporary Italians. In 2015 a Facebook user expressed his or her disagreement with a post in which Salvini encouraged Italians to 'take back the pride in our history'. The author of this text underlined that the founder of the Roman Empire came from Asia Minor and was therefore an individual that Salvini would call 'immigrant'. This user then argued that history and 'cultural identity' are the product of thousands of years of exchanges between different people inhabiting the regions that today we consider to be Europe. In other posts where Facebook users distanced themselves from Salvini's anti-immigration stance Italians were variously defined as the descendants of 'barbarian hordes' of invaders, or a mixture of Romans and barbarians. Traces also remained in some comments – including more recent ones – of identifications with pre-Roman and indigenous peoples, in line with the separatist agendas advocated by the League before 2013. For example, the author of a comment written on Salvini's Facebook page in 2014 identified the origins of Leagueists with the Celts. Furthermore, in 2018 a Facebook user responded to the content of a newspaper article shared by Salvini on Don Giorgio de Capitani's stance to exclude Leagueists from churches; he or she stated that this did not constitute an issue since Leagueists were Celts and Lombards, uninterested in de Capitani's 'Middle-Eastern God'.

Finally, the idea of Roman origins was also used to express, and in some cases explain, the distance between civilised Italians and barbaric (non-Italian) Europeans, primarily in support of Eurosceptic views and of resisting certain positions that the European Union was seen as wanting to impose. This was shown in a number of comments posted on Salvini's Facebook page in 2018, after the 5SM-League Coalition government had been formed. In one of these posts a Facebook user

highlighted that ‘Europe’ exists because the Roman Empire ‘brought civilisation to them’ (the countries that make up the European Union). In another comment we read that Spain and France used to be ‘colonies’ of the Roman Empire and will now return to that condition, thanks to the newly established Italian government.

Myths of decline and collapse

The Roman Empire constitutes a powerful image through which myths of decline and collapse were created, and the ‘fall’ of Rome plays a critical role in the populist nationalist discourse expressed on the Facebook pages of Salvini and the League. In this context, the reasons identified as having caused the decline and collapse of the Roman Empire were presented in variable ways that will be explored in depth in [Chapter 7](#). The openness that was construed as having allowed barbarians inside the borders of the empire through ‘uncontrolled forms of migration’ was frequently defined as a problem in posts published from February to June 2018.

For example, a post commented that ‘the great’ Roman Empire ended when it ‘opened its borders’. This remark was a reaction to the video shared by Salvini, where he is said to be ‘honoured to have brought [...] the support of the government and the Italian people to the men of the Marine corps who coordinate rescue operations in Libya’. The comment also drew a parallel between the socio-economic needs invoked to justify an ‘open border’ policy in the final centuries of the Roman Empire with those of the present, with the aim of denouncing the dangerous nature of such a decision. The fear of being ‘substituted’, for example by people who ‘work more and earn less’, also features in relation to this topic.

While these texts have critiqued immigration policies, others have focused on foregrounding the peril of the ‘invasions’ that are in progress, by comparing the movements of people towards Europe today with those considered by Facebook users as having led to the end of the Roman Empire. In 2018 one user commented that ‘invasions of migrants’ caused the empire to ‘crumble’, predicting that Europe would experience the same fate and become ‘a Caliphate’. A supposed unwillingness of ‘Muslims’ to ‘convert’ was also referenced as contributing to the contemporary ‘fall’ of Western civilisation, and contrasted with the acceptance of Christianity by ‘all barbarians’. Through this reference, others were excluded on the basis of religion.

Finally, for some commentators on posts published by Salvini, the granting of citizenship to migrants was a root cause of the end of the Roman Empire – Italy – which, in turn, was linked to the frame of

‘uncontrolled immigration’. For example, in 2017 a Facebook user responded to a video in which Salvini accused the Democratic Party of ‘giving away citizenship to immigrants’. The author of this comment wrote that the ‘real end’ of the Roman Empire began when the inhabitants of ‘external colonies’ were made citizens. In the Facebook user’s view, the Romans believed that this decision would strengthen the frontiers of the empire, but it led instead to their weakening and to ‘invasions’ from the north, described as ‘barbaric’. In another comment, published in the same year, the historic decision to allow ‘all barbarians’ from ‘outside the *Limes*’ to become Roman citizens was described as the first mistake that eventually led to the ‘decline’ of the Roman Empire.

Myths of resistance

The myths of origin and collapse we have examined were played out in ways that may be considered as serving a purpose of resistance. For some people they provided a retrotopia, a refuge from a hopeless present that was not seen as offering opportunities of improvement (Bauman 2017). For others, however, these myths were means of nostalgic resistance; they represented exemplar contexts, people and actions which were perceived as still viable, findable and performable. The past was evoked not as a lost place, where solace could be found through remembrance, but as a source of inspiration for present and future-oriented action.

Those who supported exclusionary views of society of a populist nationalist kind privileged specific aspects and values that they attached to the Roman Empire; these were then central to their retrotopias and nostalgic resistance (Fuchs 2018). Some within these groups described the Roman Empire as a period of greatness, as highlighted, for example, by a Facebook user who despaired about the situation of Italy today. He or she characterised the country as ‘poor’ and ‘helpless’, claiming that long ‘lost’ were the ‘fasts’ of the Roman Empire. This comment was written in 2014, under a post by Salvini attacking the centre-left party for what he perceived as the paradoxical placing of a notice forbidding camping at the entrance of an illegal Rom camp.

Furthermore, Imperial Rome was presented as a symbol of physical and military strength and of machismo; it expressed the sentiments of those who wanted decisive and belligerent anti-immigrant action. For example, in a comment published in 2015, in response to a post by Salvini hinting that the issue of immigration was linked with terrorism, a user wished to have back the ‘old’ Roman Empire but with ‘present-day weapons’. Another post directly referred to the ‘*antico spirito guerresco e*

dominante’ (‘ancient belligerent and domineering spirit’) of the Romans, regretting that it had disappeared in the late imperial phase, when the ‘decline of the Italian people’ was believed to have begun. Italians were encouraged to attempt to recuperate this ‘ancient spirit’ so that future generations would not have to witness a country ‘deprived of its original identity’.

The values of violence and forcefulness attributed to the Roman Empire were longed for in the present and called upon as a solution to the matter of citizenship rights. In particular, Rome’s practices of confiscation, exile and deportation were identified as the right approach to punish ‘others’ who had more open views on the matter of immigration and would be in favour of granting citizenship to immigrants based on *ius soli* legislation. For example, in 2017 a user published a comment on Salvini’s Facebook page, stressing the need to ensure that those who voted in favour of *ius soli* and their children would not be able to do any further harm in future. This could be achieved – according to the author of the comment – by confiscating their patrimony and exiling them ‘like they used to do at the time of the Roman Empire’.

These uses of Imperial Rome are reminiscent of the symbolism of the Roman Empire that was articulated during the Fascist Ventennio (see [Chapter 3](#)). Significantly, the corpus of texts we are examining also includes instances where the two periods were mentioned together and idealised as ‘golden ages’. This occurred in a comment written in 2017, as a reaction to a post where Salvini stated that ‘we’ Italians were ‘letting immigrants invade us’. The commentator said that if ‘the Uncle’⁵ could come back he would ‘cleanse’ Italy of illegal immigrants and ‘vagabonds’. Then he or she continued by reminding readers how the Roman Empire ‘teaches’ to do ‘*tabula rasa* of the old’ every time something new is built.

Finally, the Roman Empire was praised as an image of limited tolerance towards cultural diversity in contrast to its multi-ethnic character. This image was used in anti-Islam discourse, for example to encourage the closure of ‘all mosques’ in a comment published in 2017. This comment was made in response to a post in which Salvini claimed that, if elected to government, he would not allow the construction of mosques unless Islamic communities agreed that ‘women have the same rights as men’. One year later, when the 5SM–League coalition was in power, Salvini returned to the topic of mosques by sharing a newspaper article reporting the Austrian Home Office’s decision to expel several imams and close seven mosques. Referring to this text, a Facebook user responded by nostalgically noting that the Roman Empire, described as the ‘greatest empire of history’, was multi-ethnic but not multicultural

– that everyone was required to accept Roman law, to use the Latin language and to ‘live according to Roman customs’, being respected ‘without distinction of race’. The author of the comment then concluded that, when this situation ended, the empire fell.

Multiculturalism, however, was also invoked by those who expressed opposite views and who objected to the anti-immigrant narratives proposed by Salvini and the League, favouring *ius soli* legislation. Evidence of this is provided by a comment published in 2017, where a Facebook user urged Salvini to study history, reminding him that Italy had been ‘multicultural’ since the times of the Roman Empire. In addition to the idea of the Roman Empire, specific historical figures and discrete peoples were elevated to the rank of heroes and evoked as myths of resistance, particularly to immigrant others and immigration as a phenomenon. A user, for example, gravely expressed the wish to have back that Italy which belonged to the Celts, the Latins and the Samnites, and which he summarised as being a country of ‘illustrious dead’. This text was published in 2014 as a reaction to a post shared by Salvini announcing that, after a number of protests organised by the League, 40 immigrants had been asked to leave the ‘hotel’ where they were staying.

Both Caesar and the ‘Celts’ – and pre-Roman peoples more generally – featured as myths of resistance. The hero figure of Julius Caesar was frequently used to describe Salvini, or to refer to his promising future political destiny and long-lasting memory, with recurring formulaic expressions such as ‘*alea iacta est*’ and ‘render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s’. The phrase ‘*veni, vidi, vici*’ was also leveraged frequently to stress the conquering and rapidly victorious trajectory of the League’s leader, paralleling it to that of Caesar.

We have seen how the simultaneous leveraging of myths of origin and resistance, despite their apparent irreconcilability and dissonance, had already been mobilised, for example by Napoleon III in nineteenth-century France (see [Chapter 3](#)). In our case, however, the two remained distinct in people’s words (and minds). Furthermore, the heroic symbolism adopted by those who had stayed close to the secessionist narrative supported by the League until 2013 could be substantially different. This is shown in a text published in 2017 by a Facebook user who stated that Leagueists had become ‘slaves’ and needed a ‘Spartacus’. The author of the comment remarked that Spartacus had ‘attributes’ and did fight against the Roman Empire, even though he eventually lost.

A comparison with the pages of Grillo and 5SM

Comparing uses of the ‘Roman Empire’ by people who commented on Facebook posts published by Salvini and the League with those by users who wrote on the pages of 5SM or Beppe Grillo allows us to identify a number of similarities and core differences. References to the Roman Empire and Caesar as symbols of greatness, and as either retrotopias or vehicles of nostalgic resistance, featured in Facebook comments published on the pages of both 5SM and Grillo. For example, responding to a post written by Grillo in 2010, where the comedian shared a blog post arguing that China was ‘buy[ing] Europe’, a user stated that today Italians were ‘the last of all’ whereas once they had been the great Roman Empire. In a similar vein, under a post by Grillo asking why Italy looks like ‘a petrified castle’ and why there is no revolution unfolding in this country, a comment of 2011 stressed that there had been no ‘real Italians’ ‘with fuming balls’ since the end of the Roman Empire, after which Italians had been conquered and subdued for centuries.

In other cases, as on the pages of the League and Salvini, the identification with the Roman Empire – an origin myth – was utilised to justify and urge a rethinking of the authority of the European Union. In 2018, commenting on a post where 5SM opposed the EU Commissioner Oettinger’s declaration that ‘the markets will teach Italy to vote right’, a Facebook user stated that ‘these Northern barbarians’ had been responsible for destroying Greece, ‘the cradle of democracy’, and were now ‘offending’ Italians who ‘brought civilisation to them’ through the Roman Empire. Consequently, the author of the comment thought it necessary to start devising plans for leaving the Eurozone.

The prevalent narrative of Facebook users writing on the pages of 5SM and Grillo was that of a nation – Italy – affected by decadence. The latter was expressed through the myth of decline and collapse represented by the end of the Roman Empire. Contrary to the comments published on the Facebook pages of Salvini and the League, however, this myth was not drawn on exclusively to frame immigrants as negatively connotated ‘others’. Only six comments published on the pages of Grillo and 5SM contained both the terms ‘Roman Empire’ and the word stem ‘migr’. In these texts, the Roman Empire was described as a polity that either embraced slavery – and whose legacy was maintained and expressed through the treatment of migrants – or that was affected by the corruption of elites and their mishandling of migration flows. In other words, when we find a negatively connotated ‘us–them’ divide, this works primarily,

although not necessarily exclusively, horizontally: to distance ‘out groups’ consisting of globalised powers and corrupted politicians.

Such distancing is evidenced, for example, by a comment published in 2018 in response to a post where Grillo was publicising philosophy-themed seminars aimed at facilitating future planning. Here a Facebook user emphasised that the Roman Empire fell because the Goths were ‘let in’ by the Romans in the context of a ‘humanitarian emergency’. However, the user continued, the Romans did not support the Goths but stole from them, pushing them to arm themselves, to go to Rome and kill the emperor. For the author of this comment, a similar situation could be observed in contemporary Europe. Here, in his or her view, politicians were allowing an invasion of ‘millions of Muslims, Africans, Afghans, Pakistani, etc.’ and the user believed that these immigrants would ‘destroy’ Europe as the Goths had the Roman Empire.

The idea of decline is also deemed to be a sign of a broader ‘collapsing of the world’ as a consequence of global warming and a metaphor for the failure of social welfare, the economy and the political system, which was depicted as oppressing the people of Italy. For example, in responding to a post by Beppe Grillo addressing the death of homeless people from cold weather, a user wrote, in 2010, that history repeats itself: people had starved during the Roman Empire when, he or she said, ‘Patricians and Senators’ were the only ones deemed worthy of a funeral. This Facebook user believed that large parts of the population were ‘dying in the streets’ today, as they had done then, because of the ‘selfishness’ of the rich.

Other posts focused on expressing impatience with politicians’ corruption and propensity to ‘steal’ – both traits said to have been around since the times of the Roman Empire. Inertia and abstaining from a generic concept of ‘doing’ were also referred to as consequences of a lax lifestyle through a parallel with Imperial Rome and its ‘tumbling down’.

A final group of comments mentioning the Roman Empire were centred on economic aspects – for example, the internal difficulties experienced by Italy, such as the crisis that emerged after the financial crash of 2008 and its lasting legacy on political discussions and public opinion. In this context pressure was exercised by external powers, such as China, who were interested in buying some of the country’s public assets. This was characterised as a ‘barbaric invasion’ that might lead to the end of Italy in the same way as the Roman Empire had been dissolved.

Summary

The analysis presented above has helped to document a number of key points that will be further discussed in [Chapters 7](#) and [8](#), where it will be possible to draw comparisons with the findings emerging from the case studies presented in [Chapters 5](#) and [6](#). The official Facebook pages of the League and 5SM, the two populist and Eurosceptic parties that governed Italy for about a year after the 2018 General Election, and the Facebook discourse of their respective leaders, Salvini and Grillo, made a very rarefied, ‘thin’ and non-period specific use of heritage. After 2013 the League moved from a celebration of Celtic origins to civilisationalist narratives developed from the entanglement of Christian traditions with broad ideas of Italy’s cultural and artistic greatness. However, the latter was sometimes stressed by Salvini through references to the distinctiveness and excellence of local heritage, and especially highlighted through examples from northern regions of Italy. In contrast, 5SM defined itself as national heritage and presented the Movement’s online platforms as mechanisms to shape this heritage and any future legacies. History was made ‘in the now’ by this techno-populist party and written on a form of historical *tabula rasa* (clean slate).

The perspectives of people who commented on the official pages connected to 5SM and the League, largely supporting the ideologies expressed there, were much more period-focused. Alongside vaguer statements, both supporters and opponents of these political parties mobilised particular images of the ancient world. The Roman world was generally given greater prominence compared to other periods, featuring primarily through references to the Roman Empire. This, however, was frequently cited as juxtaposed to other empires – long gone or more recent, such as that established during the Fascist Ventennio. Imperial Rome mainly recurred as a symbol in comments to posts published on Salvini’s Facebook page, despite not being referred to by the party leader himself.

The Roman Empire was central to the crafting of four core oppositions between civilisation and barbarism, military force and weakness, greatness and decadence and multiculturalism and cultural homogeneity. Such dichotomies were used to mould myths of origin, decline and collapse and resistance in a range of combinations, but usually employing language that described the past either as overlapping or in contrast to contemporary social and economic issues. The League’s base mainly leveraged the Roman Empire to stress the vertical division between indigenous ‘us’ and immigrant ‘others’, whereas comments from

SSM's sympathisers revolved more substantially around the separation between the people and political elites or supranational powers, including a globalised economic system. Temporalities tended to be either cyclical or flat, and deep-time phenomena were explained through causes that pertained more to the present than to the past. The past was used to serve ideas regarding the present world already consolidated in people's minds and only needing to be reinforced, performed and transmitted through powerful repertoires of visual and conceptual tools. Once adopted and voiced for political reasons, however, these may remain active in the medium term, haunting those who mobilise them and creating identity clashes and crisis, as in the case of the League, whose base still partly evoked roots in an imagined Celtic past.

Notes

- 1 CC BY-SA 3.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en>.
- 2 This flask had been part of the Padano-Celtic rituals that used to be held on the banks of the River Po. The flask, full of water from the river spring, was customarily emptied into the Lagoon.
- 3 As anticipated in [Chapter 2](#), all the posts and comments that feature in this chapter are an English translation of the original text in Italian. In so far as possible, the translation has sought to maintain the syntax and punctuation used in Italian.
- 4 Laura Boldrini served as President of the Chamber of Deputies (lower chamber) of the Italian parliament from 2013 to 2018.
- 5 A way of referring to Benito Mussolini.

5

The Brexit referendum

Introduction

The Facebook discourse on Brexit has helped to conceptualise nationalism today (Fuchs 2018). Such a discourse is therefore an ideal case to explore how the ancient past is mobilised in order to defend one's country, one's economy and one's way of life by means of excluding others (Fuchs 2018, 42). The chapter begins by introducing the 2016 United Kingdom European Union Membership Referendum and subsequently explores uses of the Iron Age, Roman and early medieval past by the political parties and leading politicians active when the referendum was held. It draws on the public Facebook pages of these parties and politicians since 2010, when David Cameron's Coalition government was formed and the possibility of holding a referendum on EU membership first mentioned. Against this backdrop of political discourse, the mobilisation of the pre-modern past of Britain and Europe on Brexit-themed Facebook pages is assessed to determine its values for people involved in social media micro-activism on this specific and divisive issue.

The study shows how the myths created, based on ancient identities, are centred on a broadly similar repertoire of image and ideas. However, these are played out in opposite ways from those in the Italian case assessed in Chapter 4. The analysis allows the identification of a shared 'European' heritage, as well as the understanding of differences and commonalities between the populist nationalist sentiment expressed in political debates related to Italian politics and in those associated with Brexit.

The Brexit referendum

The United Kingdom European Union Membership Referendum, also known as the Brexit referendum, was held in the UK and Gibraltar on 23 June 2016. It offered the electorate the opportunity to vote either to ‘remain a member of the European Union or to leave the European Union’ (GOV.UK 2019). Before discussing how the ancient past was moulded into arguments either in favour or against Brexit, it will be useful briefly to review the line of events as well as the critical turning points, figures and factors that led up to the referendum and its outcome.

The winding road to the Brexit vote has been a relatively long one, as Euroscepticism has been alive for decades among parts of the British population and within politics. Brexit has also been described as the reconfiguration and expression of Eurosceptic sentiment and agendas that had been in existence since the 1960s, and which have been interpreted as connected to the end of the British Empire (Gardner 2017; Fuchs 2018; Dorling and Tomlinson 2019; Maccaferri 2019). Initially populist and Eurosceptic agendas were not the prerogative of minority and ideologically more extreme parties, but rather of some in the mainstream. From the 1990s to 2006 the Conservative and Unionist Party (‘Tories’) championed these narratives, partly with a view to winning back the majority of the electorate who were then supporting Labour (Bale 2018). After becoming Leader of the Conservatives in 2005, David Cameron abandoned this kind of discourse, however, leaving a void which the UK Independence Party (UKIP) was quick to fill. UKIP also proceeded to gain increasing popularity – a substantial change for a party which, since its establishment in 1993, had played a relatively marginal role in general elections (Bale 2018). UKIP’s rapid surge in popularity ultimately led Cameron to return to a more Eurocritical rhetoric (Bale 2018).

In his EU speech at Bloomberg on 23 January 2013, Cameron promised that he would call a referendum on the UK’s membership to the European Union once he had ‘had a chance to put the relationship [with the European Union] right’ (Cameron 2013). This speech was critical in defining key aspects of the proto-discourse on Brexit. For example, Cameron stressed Britain’s identity as an ‘island nation – independent, forthright, passionate in defence of our sovereignty’, linking the decision on EU membership to ideas of sovereignty and exceptionalism (Cameron 2013; Cap 2017). Furthermore, he announced his intent to try to renegotiate Britain’s role in the European Union, a strategy successfully adopted for the 1975 referendum that voted for the UK’s continuing

membership of the European Economic Community by a majority of two to one (Saunders 2016; Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley 2017).

After winning the General Election in 2015, and ensconced as the newly appointed prime minister of a Tory majority government, Cameron gave substance to his words. He embarked on a series of negotiations primarily aimed at persuading the British public that the European Union was granting meaningful concessions to the United Kingdom and that it would therefore be advantageous to remain within the EU (Glencross 2016). When these talks ended, in February 2016, Cameron found himself unable to prove that any fundamental changes had been achieved, in particular on the issue of immigration, as the EU's commitment to freedom of movement could not be modified (Glencross 2016). Nevertheless, he announced the date of the referendum and campaigning began in earnest (Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley 2017; Evans and Menon 2017).

The political context of the Brexit referendum was not comparable to that of 1975, due to a number of factors that ultimately led to different outcomes at the ballot box. First, the EU had grown to include 28 members and the process of European integration had advanced substantially since the 1970s (Glencross 2016; Chochia et al. 2018). Second, the 1975 referendum was the first to involve the whole of the British population. The position in favour of continued membership of what was then the European Economic Community (EEC) was strongly supported by the then Labour government led by Harold Wilson, as well as by all the major parties and the media, with the exception of the socialist *Morning Star*. The opposition, on the other hand, could not count on the backing of any notable public figures (Chochia et al. 2018). In contrast, Cameron's decision to leave members of the government free to support either 'Leave' or 'Remain' split the government. The two largest parties – Conservative and Labour – were also internally divided, whereas minority parties aligned themselves more decidedly and collectively with one side of the campaign or the other.

However, most of the Members of Parliament who announced their position prior to the vote sided with the Remain campaign (479 of 637), as did the majority of Cameron's Cabinet (Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley 2017). Among the most prominent Remainers were David Cameron himself, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, and Theresa May, then Home Secretary. Distinctive personalities of the Leave campaign were the former leader of the Conservatives, Iain Duncan Smith; Chris Grayling, Lord President of the Council and a former Lord Chancellor and Leader of the House of Commons; Michael Gove, the Justice Minister; the Minister for Employment, Priti Patel; the Culture

Secretary, John Whittingdale; the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Theresa Villiers; and, from 21 February onwards, Boris Johnson, who completed his second mandate as Mayor of London in May 2016 (Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley 2017). Furthermore, whereas Harold Wilson had clear targets in his negotiations, aimed at placating specific grievances, this was not the case for David Cameron (Saunders 2016).

In April 2016 the Electoral Commission designated 'Britain Stronger in Europe' and 'Vote Leave', with their respective slogans of 'Stronger in' and 'Take back control', as the official opposing campaigns leading up to the referendum (Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley 2017). Operating unofficially, Leave.EU campaigned online to convince the electorate to opt for exiting the European Union (Evans and Menon 2017; Usherwood and Wright 2017). Cameron's communications in support of Remain focused on economic arguments, with a narrative that Leavers branded 'Project Fear' (Glencross 2016). This communication strategy was similar to the one that Cameron had successfully adopted against Scotland's Independence in 2014, and to win the 2015 General Election. More specifically, Cameron's message presented economic markets and Europe as a zero-sum argument, although the importance of the European Union for civic purposes and peace could have been emphasised to a greater extent (Zappettini 2019). Conversely, the Vote Leave campaign concentrated mainly on immigration and the importance of reclaiming independence (Zappettini 2019).

On the whole, pro-EU arguments concerned with the economy and mobility tended to come across as instrumental, whereas the Brexiteers' discourse was more powerfully value-driven and therefore engaging (Delanty 2018). Timescales also mattered. The attempt to renegotiate aspects of the relationship between the UK and the European Union meant that David Cameron could not make the case for remaining in the EU until just a few months prior to the vote (Evans and Menon 2017). Furthermore, since the Remain side won the economic argument very rapidly, substantial time remained for other reasons and propositions to gain centrality, especially during the *purdah* period when government was compelled to abstain from campaigning (Evans and Menon 2017). It is at this point that 'moral panic' towards immigration was further catalysed by Vote Leave, also with the help of prominent politicians such as Johnson and Gove (Evans and Menon 2017; Zappettini 2019).

In this context, the intra-EU immigration theme was politicised (Glencross 2016). A study by Share (2018) shows how the British press mobilised the figure of 'the migrant' in the debate about the referendum by connecting this signifier to ideas of 'threat' and 'crisis'. Moreover, presenting the economic EU migrant as almost juxtaposed to non-EU refugees

conflated these two profiles and the different mobility issues they expressed (Share 2018). These frames contributed to shape public opinion through their negative emotional charge and vividness, enhanced by actual examples (Atikcan 2015; Dekavalla 2018, 63). However, there were regional exceptions within the wider national picture. The coverage of the EU referendum in Scotland, for example, was rather different. Here substantially less reporting tended to focus on the issues at stake rather than on the campaign processes, probably as a result of the more consensual nature of the discussion about Brexit in Scotland (Dekavalla 2018).

More generally, and considering both the Remain and Leave camps, Zappettini and Krzyżanowski (2019) have identified three core themes, or discursive trajectories, around which the Brexit debate was publicly constructed: populist and nationalist ideologies, political crisis and the legitimisation of Brexit. In *Nationalism 2.0*, Fuchs (2018) unpacks the character of populist nationalism which, in his view, underpins Brexit by arguing that it can be broken down into three core components: economic nationalism (relating to the ways in which existing resources are distributed), political nationalism (linked to the ‘taking back control’ narrative) and cultural nationalism (identity-bound and coupled with a rejection of cultural others, primarily in religious terms). All three components – economic, political and cultural nationalism – aim to defend the ‘people’s economy’, country and ‘way of life’; as such they are perceived as protecting ‘us workers and entrepreneurs’, ‘us citizens’ and ‘us people’ (Fuchs 2018, 42). Although populist nationalism may be found in the Brexit camp, Fuchs (2018) noted that the notion of ‘crisis’ was central to the way in which Brexit was conceptualised and described by both sides of the campaign. For Leavers, Brexit was a way of ending an existing crisis; for Remainers, a decision to leave the European Union (Bennett 2019) would serve to trigger the crisis.

On 23 June 2016, 72.2 per cent of the British electorate (46.5 million people) voted on the future of the UK’s membership of the European Union. The outcome is well known: 51.9 per cent chose to leave the European Union and 48.1 per cent voted to remain. London, Scotland and Northern Ireland were the only larger areas to secure a majority for the Remainers (The Electoral Commission 2019). Those who voted to exit the European Union were more numerous among white voters over 45 years of age; manual, casual and retired workers; the unemployed; and people without university education (Ashcroft 2016; see also Alabrese et al. 2019). Remain voters were mostly younger than 45; they possessed higher levels of formal education and belonged to higher socio-economic groups (Fuchs 2018). Age played a more decisive role on the Leave side, however:

only one-third of people under 25 participated in the referendum, and therefore one-quarter of all those in that age bracket actually voted to Remain (Dorling and Tomlinson 2019).

In contrast, having a university degree proved the single strongest determinant for opting to Remain (Goodhart 2017). Furthermore, in areas inhabited by high numbers of unqualified or manufacturing workers the number of immigrants from Eastern Europe was directly proportional to the number of Leave votes (Becker, Fetzer and Novy 2017, 614). Another predictor of voting either Remain or Leave consisted in house prices at local authority level, and how they had changed over time (Ansell and Adler 2019, 108). In particular, a progressive increase of housing inequality in the post-war era is believed to have contributed to disaffection in some areas towards governments in general and the European Union in particular; it is significant that wards with higher house prices had a greater percentage of Remain votes (Ansell and Adler 2019, 109).

Partly linked to these socio-demographic dimensions and profiles were people's values and perceived identities. Brexit was the product of the interplay of three sets of factors (Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley 2017). The first is an assessment of the costs and benefits of the referendum, which primarily concerned issues such as the economy and immigration. The second concerns feelings of identity and community. These are very difficult to change, even with an effective political campaign, because they are embedded within the fabric of society and tend to persist in the medium to longer term. The third set of factors comprises cues that may cause rapid change and affect the outcome of a referendum in the short term, such as Johnson's and Farage's greater public appeal compared to that of Cameron (Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley 2017). The set of factors related to identity was possibly the most underestimated by Remain campaigners. Fuchs (2018, 5–6) reported that whereas a higher proportion of Leavers 'thought that multiculturalism, social liberalism, feminism, the Green movement, globalisation and immigration were forces for ill', Remainers tended to hold opposite views on these topics.

Furthermore, Goodhart (2017) has suggested that the divisions leading to the Brexit vote in the UK and to the election of Donald Trump in the US may be deemed as resulting from a dichotomy between two 'cohorts' that he termed 'Anywheres' and 'Somewheres'. These two cohorts differed substantially in terms of education, mobility and attitudes towards the future (Goodhart 2017, 23). Delanty (2018) also proposed that Brexit may be interpreted as the reflection of a division between 'cosmopoliticals', who emphasised the primacy of the individual in the tradition of liberalism and cosmopolitanism (Remainers), and 'nationals'

(Leavers), who prioritised the collective. Significantly, each of these two groups drew from both the right and left of the political spectrum. Cosmopoliticals comprised the ‘new left, the cultural left, but also include neo-liberals and Euro-technocrats’; while the Nationals encompass ‘the Old Left as well as the authoritarian nationalists’ (Delanty 2018, n.p.).

Brexit is a powerful case study, precisely because of the binaries it symbolises and of which it has often been considered to be a symptom. These oppositions are voiced and reinforced through heritage in social media discussions about Brexit. The following section will focus first on identifying the uses of the Iron Age, Roman and post-Roman past made by British political parties and leading politicians through their public Facebook pages, both before and after the EU referendum. Subsequently, this chapter will explore how this heritage was invoked in grassroots online activism through a dataset of over 1.4 million posts, comments and replies extracted from 364 public Facebook pages that contained the word ‘Brexit’ in their title.

Heritage in party discourse on Facebook

A select number of British political parties and politicians mobilised the pre-modern past as part of their public Facebook discourse, both in the run-up to and the first months after the Brexit referendum (see [Chapter 2](#) for details on the dataset and data collection). Analysis of these uses has revealed important aspects of what might be termed ‘the heritage in Brexit’ and ‘of Brexit’ (Gardner and Harrison 2017, 4). Political parties and politicians whose official Facebook pages were examined, specifically those who evoked the ancient past, included the British National Party (BNP), Plaid Cymru, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), the UK Independence Party (UKIP), Boris Johnson, David Cameron, Daniel Hannan and Paul Nuttall (see [Table 5.1](#)). References to late prehistoric, Roman and early medieval heritages may therefore be considered to be specific to the narrative of a group of nationalist parties and of several leading Conservative and UKIP politicians. This constitutes an outcome that is significant in its stark difference from the results that emerged from the Italian case study. In Italy, both the populist nationalist League party and the techno-populist 5SM rebutted the ancient past, either to re-create a new idea of ‘civilisation’ (for the League) or to reset the history clock to the present in order to highlight a transformative mission for Italy and its people (for the 5SM).

Table 5.1 Number of references to the Iron Age, Roman and early medieval past in the Facebook discourse of major British parties and politicians (only cases where such past features are shown)¹

Political parties	Posts available and extracted	References to the ancient past
British National Party	13,351	36
UK Independence Party	6,381	2
Social Democratic and Labour Party	5,167	1
Plaid Cymru	6,040	1
Politicians	Posts available and extracted	References to the ancient past
Boris Johnson	1,150	10
Daniel Hannan	1,434	2
Paul Nuttall	1,578	2

The page of the BNP was the source of the majority of references to the ancient past retrieved from Facebook. The medieval world was appropriated in both negative and exemplary terms. It was referred to negatively to mark the idea of a perceived regression to a less advanced period, underpinned by Darwinian concepts of linear history and progress (see also [Dorling and Tomlinson 2019](#)). For example, a post published on 24 October 2014 defined the decision taken ‘by the General Synod of the Church of England to prevent clergy from becoming members of the British National Party’ as ‘a *reversion to the Middle Ages* by the Reverend Robert West, moderator of the Christian Council of Britain’. This use of the medieval past is common in daily speech and has also been documented in the Italian case study (see [Chapter 4](#), p. 64).

The Middle Ages were also evoked in more positive terms, especially through references to a Crusader past, whenever the party expressed their attitudes towards people of Muslim faith and immigration policies. For instance, in explaining how ‘the authorities are considering reintroducing an ancient English treason law to prosecute Islamist jihadis which they’ve let back in to Britain’, a BNP post published on 28 October 2014 stated that ‘the medieval act was passed in 1351 during the reign of King Edward III, and would now mean that anyone who has sworn personal allegiance to the so-called Islamic State could be tried for treason’. The text continued by highlighting that, in contrast to Cameron’s government, the BNP would have

pursued the death penalty for this kind of crime. In another case, the party denounced the fact that Reverend West was 'on trial for giving a history lesson on the Crusades' and encouraged people to join the party and support him on the basis that 'to say that Christians in the Middle Ages were hostile towards Muslims is a fact'. In the BNP's rhetoric Islam was also described as a 'medieval cult', which required belligerent responses inspired by a somewhat 'Crusader spirit'. Such mobilisation of the Crusades as a phenomenon was not identified in the Facebook discourse of the Italian League.

The religious message, central to the BNP argument, was communicated through both the late Roman and medieval imaginary, particularly by drawing on stories of Christian saints. For example, in 2015, the party posted a message in which they congratulated the Royal Mail for 'producing stamps that carry the Christian message' – something that was defined as a 'small victory in this faltering Great Britain, one that supports part of our identity, culture and faith since AD 597'. Elsewhere, the BNP issued a call to adopt Saint Alban as patron of a new 'English Orthodox Church' on the basis that it was seen as better representing Britishness than the dragon which had been 'flown on the battle standards of the Anglo-Saxon army that fought and lost with William the Conqueror at Hastings, [and] thus ... is really a direct attack by Normans upon some of our ancestors'. Furthermore, the party stressed that:

the ancient Orthodox traditions of the British Isles, whether brought to us with the Legionary soldier or by the wandering priest from some far-off land where Christians had a toe hold, imposed a new and welcomed way upon the indigenous Britons. (Re-posted by BNP, 5 July 2013)

The myth of origin leveraged by the BNP was therefore one that brought together an idea of 'indigenous' pre-Roman people with the post-Roman Christianisation of the British Isles. The party's posts also celebrated country-specific Christian traditions. For example, in a post published in September 2016 on behalf of a party member, we read about an outdoor event organised by the BNP where 'some [children] sat in the marquee watching traditional stories like Beowulf and the Mabinogion', defined as 'two of the greatest tales ever told to children through medieval times by our ancestors'. Moreover, local traditions are linked to ideas of resistance to the oppression of foreign invaders, typically identified with the Normans. In a post from March 2016, the party acknowledged St David's contribution to 'spreading Christianity to the pagan Celtic tribes' and that he was 'recognised as a national patron Saint at the height of Welsh resistance to the Normans'.

The Facebook discourse of the BNP, as of the League in Italy, denounced a trend of identity ‘obliteration’ and presented it as being connected to the UK’s membership of the European Union:

This trend of obliterating our past and with it our identity is continuing with ever greater ferocity now we are part of the European Union, and in the rose coloured future of the New World Order even our national identity will be suppressed. Unless we preserve and nurture our history and traditions today all will be lost in tomorrow’s New World Order of banal economic slavery. (Re-posted by BNP, 5 July 2013)

The only antidote to such obliteration is the preservation of history and tradition, both identified with the sum of regional identities and with Britain’s imperial past. Imperialism also resonates through mentions of extracts from the lyrics of *Rule, Britannia!*, originally written in the eighteenth century by James Thomson and David Mallet as the finale of *Alfred*. This masque represented a political statement and was first performed in August 1740 for Frederick, Prince of Wales (Cox 2013). The intention, at the time, was to express a ‘Patriot opposition’ to Frederick’s father, George II, and to Sir Robert Walpole, who was pursuing a vision of European peace to the detriment of British naval expansion and trade (Gerrard 1994; Cox 2013, 933). These concerns explain the choice of Alfred as a heroic parallel to the Prince of Wales and as a king seen to have promoted commerce and established ‘the nation’s maritime security’ (Cox 2013, 938). However, *Rule, Britannia!* reached popularity and became an expression of wider and more general patriotism only later, once detached from the specific political context in which it was developed (Cox 2013, 953–4). Since then, the Ode has conveyed powerful ideas behind the British Empire consisting of a combination of mercantilism, freedom, Protestantism and nationalism (Armitage 2009, 173). Today most British citizens are probably not aware of these historical roots, but continue to recognise the nationalistic meaning of the lyrics.

This mix of localism and imperialism, wrapped up in Christianity, constituted the make-up of the BNP’s populist nationalist heritages that were mobilised as part of anti-immigration and anti-EU agendas. Three types of enemies were targeted: EU migrants (also called ‘autistic settlers’), Muslim migrants and EU elites who were said to ‘want to abolish Britain and destroy the Anglo-Saxon and Celtic identity of the people who have inhabited Britain for millennia!’ (post republished by the BNP, 22 April 2016). In two cases, posts published by the BNP attempted to

re-write histories of British origins and to articulate historical explanations for the perception that 'Islam is believed to be too different and too hostile to our [British] culture' (BNP, 27 May 2016).

To stress the need to curtail immigration, the BNP used the image of the 'fall' of the Roman Empire as an example of collapse that they directly related to the surge of Islam. On 25 October 2015 the party republished a text that welcomed the results achieved at the 2015 elections in Switzerland by the anti-immigration party led by Toni Brunner. The latter was reported by the BNP to have used the word '*Völkerwanderung*', a term they applied to the so-called 'barbarian invasions of non-Roman tribes of the declining Roman Empire in the 4th to 9th Century'. In another post, republished on the same day, the party stated:

As hordes of immigrants from Africa and the Middle East continue to flood into the West there is one major aspect to the immigration crisis that is rarely discussed: The decline of the family unit in Western societies and how this is going to shape the future of all Western nations ... the greatest civilization ever created [the West] will suffer the same fate as the Roman Empire. (Post republished by BNP, on 25 October 2015)

Compared to the BNP, the discourse of UKIP, Plaid Cymru and the Social Democratic and Labour Party featured the ancient past in more superficial and tangential ways. In particular, the Facebook pages of UKIP and Plaid Cymru referred to frontier lines as semantic carriers of division. UKIP asked Facebook users whether they agreed that 'truckloads of money shouldn't be thrown over Hadrian's Wall' as a result of the news that Ed Miliband and Cameron had made substantial promises to the Scottish people ahead of the Scottish Independence Referendum (20 April 2015). Plaid Cymru also referenced a border to mark jurisdictional divisions, stating that, 'when it comes to devolved matters their jurisdiction [of the UK government] ends at Offas Dyke and they better back off' (11 November 2010). Additional and fleeting references to the Roman past mobilised the popular notion of Nero's burning of Rome in relation to the EU crisis:

You talk about an existential crisis but you say what is needed is even more EU, you are fiddling whilst the Treaty of Rome burns. (Paul Nuttall, then leader of UKIP, 15 March 2017)

Ancient identities and political leaders

A more nuanced understanding of the undercurrents of nationalism and Euroscepticism may be gained from comparing the use of the past made by different political leaders – especially David Cameron and Boris Johnson – and exploring how such a use relates to the Facebook narratives of political parties. Cameron cited the past only once, but in substantive terms. Ahead of the General Election of 2015, he marked the return of the image of Britannia on British coinage, through a post stating ‘Britannia should never have been taken off our coins – but now the symbol of our national identity is back on the 2’ (27 February 2015) ([Fig. 5.1](#)). This contributed to expressions of support for the idea of a nation rich in imperial ties, although it did not align with the Remain position embraced by Cameron the following year in the context of the EU referendum.

This episode is significant as it reveals that nationalist sentiment was also cultivated through heritage-based symbolism by political forces eventually to side with the Remain campaign. ‘Britannia’, or a variant of this name, was used by classical authors who addressed Britain in the late first millennium BC ([Creighton 2006](#), 2; [Mattingly 2006](#); [Hingley 2022](#)). It was given to the Roman province created after the emperor Claudius



Fig. 5.1 *Left*: ‘Copper-alloy Roman as of Hadrian (AD 117–38), dating to the period AD 119’, discovered in Nottinghamshire, UK. ‘PONT MAX TR POT COS III BRITANNIA S C reverse type depicting Britannia seated’ (Portable Antiquities Scheme). Photo © West Yorkshire Archaeology Advisory Service, [CC BY 2.0](#).² *Right*: Half a penny copper coin showing Britannia leaning against a shield on the reverse, 1794, from Hampshire, UK. Photo © Jean-Michel Moullec, [CC BY 2.0](#).³

had invaded southern Britain in 43 bc and the image of Britannia was struck on coinage under the emperor Hadrian for the first time (Creighton 2006, 2; Abdy and Mittag 2020, 46–8). In 1672, under Charles II, Britannia reappeared on coinage after over 1,200 years (Davies 2013, 244; McLean 2018, 82). Following the 1707 Act of Union this image became a symbol of national unity, closely linked to the construction of the British Empire (Dorling and Tomlinson 2019, 46).

In contrast to Cameron, Johnson was not only a politician but also a prolific journalist; he wrote for the *Daily Telegraph* and often posted his articles on Facebook. Consequently there were a higher number of references to the prehistoric, Roman and medieval past on Johnson's Facebook page (10) compared with those of other British political figures. In Johnson's posts the Iron Age, Roman and post-Roman heritage featured under three main themes. A first group of posts touched upon the past only briefly, with the purpose of establishing erudite comparisons with the present in a distinctive style of writing. For example, when proposing to amalgamate local authority pension funds, Johnson claimed that this measure would help not only to 'bolster the pensioners' but also to 'cut pointless public expenditure', in a move 'away from the later Roman Empire, and forward with 21st century Britain' (6 October 2014; Johnson 2014).

The politician and journalist also shared two articles that he had written for the *Daily Telegraph*. In these he argued that contemporary journalism should offer more support to the efforts of entrepreneurs by adopting a style and an attitude closer to the positive prose of Pliny the Younger than to 'Tacitean scorn' and cynicism (15 December 2014). He critiqued the proposed celebration of Robert Gabriel Mugabe's 91st birthday as 'an event of truly spectacular moral ugliness ... reminiscent of the more disgusting and luxurious behaviour of the emperor Commodus' (23 February 2015; Johnson 2015a). References of this kind are characteristic of Johnson's presentational style, both as a politician and as a writer; they are connected with his classical studies and continued interest in ancient history and languages (see, for example, Johnson 2007).

A second group of Johnson's Facebook posts implied his positive sentiments towards British imperialism in a rather open way. For example, in a post reflecting on the rumours that Bloomberg might be interested in standing for the position of Mayor of London, Johnson declared that this was indeed the natural next step for the magnate to take – given that, in his view, London had recently re-established its primacy over New York. In doing so, he described London as 'the first city since ancient Rome to have more than a million souls, and 100 years ago ... unquestionably the

caput mundi, the centre of the biggest empire the world has ever seen' (6 April 2015; [Johnson 2015b](#)).

Based on a classical argument that justified empires through a civilising mission, Johnson also defended the repatriation of antiquities appropriated by the British during their colonial history. On 16 March 2015 he wrote a post in which he discussed the destruction of heritage sites in the Middle East and North Africa in territories that had been reclaimed by the Islamic State, stating:

In the meantime let us give thanks again for the British Museum, and the extraordinary efforts of Austen Henry Layard in the 19th century. It was Layard who moved those lamassus the huge bearded statues from Nimrud to London, where they can be seen and enjoyed to this day. They are one of the glories of the museum, and if they hadn't come to London they would now be smashed to smithereens by deranged Islamist ideologues. Think of that, next time you hear some Lefty complain that the Museum is full of stolen treasures. Britain saved those masterpieces, just as Elgin saved the marbles from the Ottoman lime kiln. Now we have to save the ancient cities from the greatest threat since the 13th-century Mongol hordes. (Boris Johnson, 16 March 2015; [Johnson 2015a](#))

However, Johnson's cultural imperialism was not informed by civilisationalist binaries. For example, he acknowledged the contribution of Muslim scholars

like Avicenna and Averroes, without whose intercessions so much of classical learning including the Platonic and Aristotelian foundations of our thinking would have been lost. (Boris Johnson, 18 May 2015; [Johnson 2015a](#))

In this way Johnson highlighted the difference between civilisation on the one hand and the nihilism of the Islamic State on the other. Nevertheless he maintained a focus on 'modern Western values' and 'our Western civilisation' expressed by Palmyra, which he defined as a 'great Greco-Romano-Semitic crossroads' that showed

the great ideas we owe to the Greeks and the Romans: openness, generosity to other cultures and above all the ideal of religious and intellectual freedom and tolerance. (Boris Johnson, 18 May 2015; [Johnson 2015a](#))

A similar narrative, in a post dated 1 September 2015, related Palmyra, whose ‘buildings stand for something remarkable, the willingness of one civilisation to learn from another’, to the destiny of the Syrian people and their economy. He also presented the protection of Palmyra as a necessary measure to mitigate ‘the number one political problem in Europe this summer ... the movement of migrants’ (1 September 2015; [Johnson 2015c](#)). These posts collectively display an intermingling of imperial pride – superficially open and encouraging of integration, but perhaps only and as long as Western-centric values and principles are preserved – with traces of hostility towards migrants who come from some of those very regions whose past and heritage were celebrated by Johnson.

The past in Brexit micro-activism

Having explored how references to pre-modern periods have become part of the discourse of British political actors in the years both preceding and following the EU referendum, I will now consider how this heritage has been articulated in posts, comments and replies on Brexit-themed public Facebook pages⁴ ([Table 5.2](#)). A qualitative analysis of the metadata of these pages has revealed the agency behind the set-up of the Facebook space used for Brexit-centred micro-activism. Approximately half of the pages were established by groups that already had an offline presence and were composed by individuals who shared party or institutional affiliation, place of origin or choice, profession, interests, social causes or political inclinations ([Bonacchi, Altaweel and Krzyzanska 2018](#)). Most of these groups were based in the UK, suggesting that the views expressed through Brexit-themed Facebook pages were voiced by a majority of individuals both resident and active in this region.

The information about these Facebook pages provided by their administrators also offered useful insights into understanding why they

Table 5.2 Posts, comments and replies extracted from Facebook pages containing the term ‘Brexit’ in their title or description field

	Total number extracted	Subset with period-specific keywords
Posts	84,578	204
Comments	1,038,733	1,671
Replies	278,007	654

were created. Of the 364 pages that were extracted, 209 pages contained period-specific keywords and 67 aimed to campaign for either Leave or Remain, while 52 sought to provide information and relevant news about Brexit without advocating a particular view. Fewer pages were set up for branding or satirical purposes, or for general discussion and debate. Most pages were therefore dedicated to communicating information and opinions, rather than to hosting exchanges and discussion.

Applying topic modelling allowed the thematic structures present in the corpus of posts, comments and replies extracted from Brexit-focused Facebook pages to be mapped. These pages featured 15 topics that ranged widely from social welfare to the economy, international relations, mobility, otherness and (in)security, assessments of the costs and benefits of the referendum and voting procedures (see [Table 5.3](#)). However, the subset of posts, comments and replies that contained period-specific keywords was less varied, despite addressing a higher number of themes, including mobility, origins, identity, cultural tension, security and ideas of nation (see [Table 5.4](#)). Most references to the past appeared to be connected to the

Table 5.3 Topics featuring in the corpus of posts, comments and replies extracted from public Facebook pages that contained the word ‘Brexit’ in their title or description field

1	UK stakeholders
2	Ambiguous
3	Economy
4	Pre-referendum evaluation: costs and benefits
5	The referendum voting process
6	Negotiations with the EU
7	Pre-referendum evaluation: evidence and statistics
8	Mobility of people
9	The political aftermath of the referendum
10	Social welfare
11	Otherness and (in)security
12	Post-referendum situation and sentiments
13	Politicians campaigning for Leave
14	International relations
15	Global politics and post-referendum protests

Table 5.4 Topics covered in the subset of posts, comments and replies featuring at least one period-specific keyword and extracted from public Facebook pages that contained the word ‘Brexit’ in their title or description field

1	Tension
2	Migration issues
3	Migratory regulation
4	Origins
5	Law and order and cultural tension
6	Identities
7	Migration
8	International politics and security
9	Social issues and threats
10	Nationalism
11	UK politics and stakeholders
12	Mobility and the make-up of Britain
13	Voting for Leave
14	British pride and the empire
15	Cultural and religious tension
16	Scotland and Brexit
17	Religion and beliefs: Islam and Christianity
18	Culture and customs
19	Referendum (ambiguous)
20	Ambiguous
21	Freedom, security and control

issue of people’s mobility and to the threats and opportunities that population movement might bring. Two further observations may be made, serving to orientate the analysis that follows. First, the ‘tension’ topic included the two terms ‘barbarian’ and ‘Britannia’, which have the highest probability of association with this theme. Such terms were critical pivots of processes of antagonistic ‘othering’. Second, Celtic, Roman, Anglo-Saxon and Norman identities were relevant to, and were found in connection with, several topics in ways that will now be characterised.

On the whole, and in a similar way to the Italian case study, the 2,529 posts, comments and replies that featured the ancient past referred primarily to the Roman world through the keywords ‘barbari’ and ‘Britannia’, followed by ‘Hadrian’ and ‘Hadrian’s Wall’, ‘Rome’ or ‘Roman’. The pre-Roman past and the medieval period were less present, if their featuring through the words ‘barbarian’ and ‘barbaric’ are not considered (Fig. 5.2). Terms that appeared less than 10 times were: ‘Londinium’, ‘Alfred the Great’ or ‘King Alfred’, ‘Boudica’ or ‘Boadicea’, ‘legion’, ‘King Arthur’, ‘ancient Rome’, ‘Holy Roman Empire’, ‘Anglia’, ‘Antonine Wall’, ‘Tacitus’, ‘Charlemagne’, ‘Claudius’, ‘Iron Age’, ‘Offa’, ‘Belgae’, ‘Augustus’ and ‘Emperor Nero’.

The term ‘Roman’ was strongly associated with tokens expressing power dynamics (for example, ‘inferior’, ‘superior’) or related to mobility and discrimination (‘xenophobia’, ‘discrimin’, ‘racism’), and to militarisation, occupation and resistance (‘occupi’, ‘soldier’, ‘victori’, ‘coloni’, ‘armi’, ‘conquer’, ‘defend’, ‘jute’) (see Table 5.5). ‘Britannia’ was consistently associated with terms in the lyrics of *Rule, Britannia!*, to which some pro-Brexit Facebook users referred in order to communicate ideas of ‘uniqueness’ and freedom. For example, a post published in March 2016 on the page *Reading for Brexit* expressed dismay at the fact that it is no longer Britannia but Brussels who ‘rules the waves’ today and emphasised that, if obliged to choose between Europe and ‘the open sea’, a Briton should always opt for the latter.

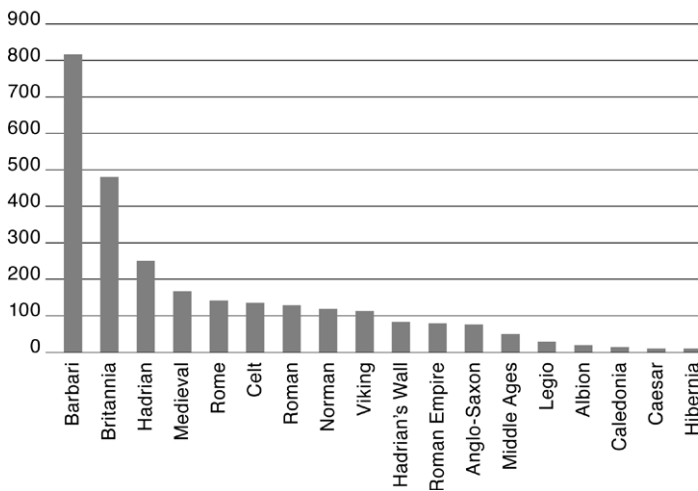


Fig. 5.2 Recurrence of period-specific keywords in the posts, comments and replies extracted from public Facebook pages that contained the word ‘Brexit’ in their title or description field.

Table 5.5 Tokens that are most strongly associated with ‘Roman’ and ‘Britannia’ (correlations >0.30)

Term associations for ‘Roman’ (correlations >0.30)
kelt, unlog, xenophobia, rude, warfar, later, northwest, bretagn, inferior, jute, larg, occupi, habit, discrimi, island, counti, soldier, background, conquer, brit, racism, defend, cathol, armi, although, victori, coloni, real, english, part, logic, wale, argument, unless, also, tradit, went, other, left, main
Term associations for ‘Britannia’ (correlations >0.30)
rule, wave, aros, matchless, stroke, slave, azur, arous, dread, briton, blast, crownd, genrous, tyrant, shall, charter, blest, haughti, majest, muse, neer, oak, shalt, thou, woe, thee, ever, bend, tame, repair, thi, command, envi, renown, never, coast, angel, flame, heaven, guardian, sang, strain, flourish, sky, tear, guard, loud, circl, happi, rural, thine, fall, isl, shine, beauti, main, nativ

Close reading helps to nuance the ways in which people, places, objects and practices from Roman times are evoked by Facebook users participating in political micro-activism either in support of or opposition to Brexit. The research revealed the centrality and recurrence of a number of component myths constructed through binaries that, for the most part, contrasted the Roman Empire with other periods and polities. While some of the dualities leveraged were similar to those encountered in [Chapter 4](#), they were played out in a different way.

Myth-making on Brexit-themed Facebook pages

Myths of origin

The first myth of origin contrasted the civilising and beneficial power of the Roman Empire and the European Union with indigenous barbarian peoples. It appeared only once in the whole corpus and was leveraged by a self-identified, non-British national who wrote in support of the Remain camp, on the pro-Leave page *Pro Britain*. This user stressed that if it had

not been for the Roman Empire British people would still be akin to 'barbarians', 'pillaging' and 'living in huts'.

This comment, and the myth it expressed, revealed the impact and currency of an idea of 'civilisation' that consisted of a linear progress brought about by 'Romanisation' and resulting in a more technically advanced and sophisticated society. Such a notion, rooted in scholarship that pre-dates the post-colonial turn of the 1980s and 1990s, also underpinned the origin myths used by populist nationalists in Italy, as shown by the analysis presented in [Chapter 4](#). Although the Roman period is not generally identified as the centre of a British or English origin myth proper, it is referred to as the starting point for a contemporary 'greatness' of the English, used in turn as a justification for deciding to 'stand alone'. A public post from January 2017, for example, suggested that the percentage of Leave voters might have actually been higher in a second referendum; it declared that the English people were 'great' and had been so since Roman times. Greatness was described in this post as a trait of national distinctiveness and evidence for this was offered: the English have developed themselves and changed the world. The author of the post finally emphasised that 'today' the English 'stand alone' again, even as they did decades ago when they fought against Nazism in Europe.

The second myth of origin connects with the people who either preceded or followed the 'Romans' and who are often described as 'free' or 'native'. An example of the emphasis on the supposedly pre-Roman origins of Britain, posted on the page *Pro Great Britain*, related to how Nigel Farage had celebrated when Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission, had admitted that Britain was 'in control'. The author of the post dismissed Juncker's words as 'bullshit', used the 'Rule Britannia' motto and wrote that 'we' (meaning Britons?) sent away the Romans and forced the French, Vikings and Normans to give up their names for 'proper', English-sounding ones.

In other cases, post-Roman origins are leveraged to legitimise the ancient roots of 'true' British or, more often, of English people. For instance, a post published on the page *Brexit News* commented on a *Mail Online* article reporting that Diane Abbott had stated that teeth checks made her 'ashamed to be British'. The post stated that Abbot is not British but African British and, because her forebearers are 'migrants', she does not have the right to comment on British matters. According to this Facebook user, the only citizens who 'have a say' were those descended from the people who 'built the nation' from the ashes of the Roman Empire.

The text above features the word 'British'. Elsewhere, however, a user chose the term 'English' and commented that he or she was proud to be both English and Anglo-Saxon and did not want his or her heritage to be 'diluted'. In a similar vein, the author of a Facebook reply dated February 2017 wrote that he or she saw himself or herself as English. They defined the term 'British' as 'bullshit' and explained that, in their view, Britannia was a 'snobbish Latin' word that belonged to the elites, as well as the name imposed by the Romans on the country before the arrival of the English. This is the only, though significant, reference to the intrinsic contradiction of using the term 'Britannia' in a nationalistic sense – despite the fact that the name was attributed by the Roman Empire which, in the Leave narrative, was mostly used as a metaphor for an oppressing European Union. Furthermore, the rejection of Latin and classical languages generally on the basis that they were thought of as 'snobbish' and belonging to 'the elites' implied a major perceived division between 'the people' advocating Brexit and those elites. This indicated that part of the population identified themselves with the pre-Roman and (even more so) Anglo-Saxon past, while others such as Johnson – viewed as a 'political elite' – pursued narratives imbued with imperialistic nostalgia and associated with both the Roman and the British Empires. The first group is further divided into two camps: those who stressed an idea of origins based on ethnic arguments and those who highlighted the cultural aspect of being aligned with a certain 'way of living'. Such division has also been documented by Fuchs (2018); this present analysis unpacks more fully what is understood by 'origins' as well as the nature of narratives concerning the imagined antiquity of the British or English nation/people.

Significantly, the myth that highlights the 'non-pure origins of Britain', to cite one of the Facebook users, is the one utilised most frequently to back Remain. In a Facebook reply we read that England was a 'microcosm' of Europe from the beginning, since – says the author – 'Britons', 'Welsh', 'Irish' and 'Scots picts' came from Greece and Scythia, while Danes, Saxons, Normans and Angles came from Germanic and other northern lands and the Romans founded Londinium. This text was published as a response to the only post which included a link to a history-themed article – one written by the historical fiction writer Martin Wall (2016) in the *BBC History Magazine* on the Anglo-Saxons (2016). The post drew on selective referencing to frame a specific narrative regarding the British and the Celts being indigenous people. It referred to the Anglo-Saxons as conquerors of the native 'British' population and ignored parts of the article that discussed how the local population might have initially invited the Anglo-Saxons to

Britain to assist them in fighting the Picts, or how Anglo-Saxon people frequently engaged in struggles among themselves.

In both mixed and pre- or post-Roman origin myths, the Viking and Norman past was considered as a more stable symbol of ‘invasion’ and incoming migration. It was utilised to support the idea of Anglo-Saxon descent or of mixed origins, as shown in two comments. In one of these, posted in March 2016, the author contested the validity of ‘true Britishness’ as a concept, arguing that not even Nigel Farage, The Queen or Priti Patel can be considered ‘true British’ since they have forebears and relatives of different origin. The Facebook user continued by emphasising that British shores were ‘invaded’ by the Anglo-Saxons as well as the Normans, Danes and Vikings. A second comment, published in November 2016, contended instead that the only ‘true natives to Britain’ are the Welsh and Scottish, while the English are a mix of ‘Anglos’, Saxons, Celts and Vikings. The author of the comment then encouraged readers to take an ‘ancestry DNA test’ and discover their many ‘ethnicities’.

Myths of union

Within the Brexit debate, myths of ‘Celtic union’ have been moulded simultaneously to exercise separatist pressures from England and advocate EU membership (Collis 1996, 172; Dietler 2006). On the Remain side, Celtic identities have been resurrected to establish bonds with other so-called ‘Celtic’ nations, both within and beyond the UK, in a distinct anti-English and pro-EU spirit. In March 2017, just over two weeks before the designated date for the exit of Britain from the EU after the triggering of Article 50, the Facebook page *Very Brexit News* published a post, saying ‘Goodbye, UK. Hello Little England’, accompanied by an image of the UK representing a new invented union between England and Wales. A comment left under this post pleaded not to consider the ‘Celts of Wales’ part of ‘little England’. The writer argued that, if Wales were to become independent, they would in fact want to create a ‘Celtic Federation’ within the EU, together with Ireland and Scotland.

The desire to establish a Celtic federation was echoed from outside the UK, for instance by a user who was probably based in (or connected with) the Republic of Ireland. In October 2016 he or she welcomed the possibility that, in future, Scotland and Wales could join the Republic of Ireland and ‘the North’ in a ‘Federation of European Celtic Nations’. The same theme of Celtic ‘partnership’ was mobilised in several other posts where the English were portrayed as ‘oppressors’. These used similar terms to those employed in pro-Brexit texts characterising the European

Union as a domineering empire. In 2017 a Facebook user quoted the words of a university professor of literature that defined Brexit as an ‘English delusion’ and the outcome of an identity crisis following the ‘loss’ of the British Empire and its ‘exceptionalism’. The post went on to suggest that ‘Celtic Nations’ should unite and act as ‘equal partners’, just like EU member countries. The writer also stated that the issue with England is that the English do not want to be ‘members of a team’, neither at home nor with their EU neighbours. Instead the author of the post believed that the English ‘rule’ over and oppress Celtic nations, whereas Celts are aware of the vital importance of ‘equal partnership’.

One of the counter-images of Celtic union is the ‘wall’, which – according to the Facebook user I quoted above – 17 million people who voted for Brexit may want ‘to build around themselves’. Indeed, the wall, sometimes powerfully symbolised by Hadrian’s Wall, is part of the repertoire leveraged by Leavers. This is shown, for example, by a comment written under a post published on the page *Brexit News* that shared a *Daily Express* news article reporting on an SNP MP who asked if the government had a “deportation process” for EU nationals’ (Heffer 2017). In 2017 the Facebook user who wrote the comment wished for the ‘traitorous SNP’ to be deported beyond Hadrian’s Wall and for Scotland to be ‘filled’ with ‘uncontrolled immigration’ after joining the ‘undemocratic EU’.

In this and other similar texts posted on Brexit-themed Facebook pages, the monument becomes the materialisation of the division between Leavers and Remainers, England and Scotland, England and the EU and indigenous Leavers and immigrants in a series of intertwined identity binaries. The language is that of military action and violence, with terms such as ‘deportation’ and ‘traitorous’ – in part reflecting words chosen by the author of the *Daily Express* article. The resulting image resembles an increasingly isolated England, separated from other UK regions and the ‘EU’: an England that has pushed out Remainers, illegal immigrants or immigrants altogether. This is very different from the situation in Italy, where Celtic identities remain a strong symbol of separatism for part of the base of the League, but are combined with Eurosceptic rather than Europhile sentiment.

Myths of decline and collapse

As in the Italian case, myths of decline and collapse are primarily centred on the idea of the ‘fall’ of the Roman Empire. They are usually mobilised in favour of pro-Leave positions and express the ‘crisis’ narrative woven by politicians and the media ahead of the EU membership referendum

in 2016 (see p. 82). The terminology that is chosen (for example, ‘fall’, ‘collapse’) echoes interpretations of the transition from the Roman to the post-Roman period as break and regression, along the lines of Edward Gibbon’s *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88) and other more recent historiographical works (Ward-Perkins 2005). The ‘fall’ is said to have been caused by an array of different phenomena and factors that will be reviewed against the backdrop of interpretations constructed by heritage experts and the media in Chapter 7. It is important here to reflect on the kinds of contemporary identities and attitudes that surface through the leveraging of the image of the fall of the Roman Empire.

The use of such imagery is underpinned by three core tensions that contribute to define ideas of unwanted others in cultural, religious, moral and economic terms. The first is the opposition that contrasts civilisation and barbarism, in which the latter may be used to refer to cultural inferiority. For instance, a Facebook user wrote in a comment to a post by the page *Pro Great Britain* that the Roman Empire collapsed when ‘hordes of barbarians’ were ‘assimilated’ into Roman ‘culture’ – and, in a similar way, ‘coarse barbarians’ are now entering the UK from the East on a weekly basis. ‘Barbarism’ is characterised particularly as ‘Muslim’ in a post from 2016. The author of this text drew attention to AD 376 when an ‘unmanageable influx of Goths’ caused the worsening of an already difficult situation in the Western part of the Roman Empire. The post ended by comparing that event with the present, and ‘lost civilisations’ with ‘us’ – it stressed how interacting with ‘muslim barbarians’ in a ‘civilised manner’ would lead to ruin.

The third kind of constructed ‘otherness’ was moral, symbolised by an excessive thirst for conquest and expansion attributed to the Roman Empire and identified as a reason for its end. The same ‘downfall’ was predicted for the European Union. This is evidenced by a comment published in 2016. The Facebook user wrote that the ‘Brussels Commission’ is much more powerful than an unelected body should be and argued that the Roman Empire also ‘stretched itself’ too much and consequently ‘tumbled’. The author of the comment then emphasised the importance of looking back at the history of ‘any Empire’, including the British Empire; he or she believed that at some point they all become too large, start being ‘handled’ by dictators and collapse.

The same binary of oppression and freedom underlay the framing of economic and administrative outsider identities. This is revealed in a comment written in 2017 in response to a post that shared an *RT News* article arguing that both Brexit and Trump were about ‘strong vision’,

whereas the EU did not have any. In this Facebook comment we read that the issue with the EU is its bureaucracy and the destructive ‘over-regulation’ that asphyxiates ‘enterprise’. The author of the text highlighted how these characteristics have toppled ‘every political organisation’ from the Roman Empire to the USSR.

Finally, the entanglement of religious and economic reasons appeared in Christian, millennialist narratives centred on an identification of the Roman Empire with the European Union. A number of comments argued that the EU was represented in the Bible ‘in a terrifying prophecy’. For example, in 2016 a user stated that the antichrist was ‘predicated in Revelation 13’, and explained that this chapter of the Bible prophesied an empire rising from the sea to be taken over by ‘the Beast’. According to this Facebook user, such an empire is the ‘Europe Trade Empire’, risen from the Treaty of Rome; Britain should therefore stay out of the EU.

This, and other comments, emphasised the ‘economic’ and ‘trading’ nature of the ‘risen Roman Empire’ – the European Union – and described it as deadly to all true Christians. Such arguments connected Christian, anti-Catholic values with a rejection of neo-liberalism which was associated with the European Union through the image of the Roman Empire. Apocalyptic views of this kind may be found in a particular strand of Protestant Euroscepticism that expresses distrust towards the Catholic continent, referencing the sixteenth-century rejection of the Church of Rome and of the ‘centralised religious and political authority’ it represented (Appelbaum 2013, [Nelsen and Guth 2017](#), 251).

Such end-of-time discourse, more frequently upheld by North American pre-millennialist Protestants, is uncommon in the UK ([Herman 2000](#)). However, survey research tested associations between religious beliefs and voting behaviour in the referendum of 2016 while controlling for other demographic variables – it found that identification with the Church of England was a significant independent predictor for supporting Brexit at the ballot box ([Smith and Woodhead 2018](#)). This, in turn, is linked to what Nelsen and Guth (2017, 258) have described as ‘protestants’ ... sense of national chosen-ness, and distrust of transnational authority’.

Myths of resistance

An identification of the EU with the Roman Empire, characterised as a dominant polity that subtracted freedom from local populations and was sometimes even compared to Nazi Germany, led to responses of resistance. A post discussing the reasons behind Brexit on the page *Pro Great Britain*, for example, argued that exiting the EU was the only way forward after

Britain had been ‘bullied’ to join a “‘roman empire” with no constitution in place yet’. In 2016, another Facebook user exhorted the 27 EU member states to take action soon, unless they wanted to find themselves living under a ‘Dictatorship’ and ruled by a handful of individuals determined to pursue personal power and wealth. The comment continued by drawing a parallel between this contemporary situation, expressed by a ‘Fourth Reich’ EU, and what happened to the Roman Empire.

Julius Caesar and Claudius were evoked by some to convey the militarily active kind of oppression referred to above. This narrative was not only aligned with the rejection of despotism communicated through the song *Rule! Britannia*, but also with Victorian and Edwardian uses of the Roman past (see [Chapter 3](#), pp. 39–40). Whereas Italian supporters of the League evoked Caesar in celebrating Matteo Salvini, Caesar and Claudius in this context are referred to as the leaders of a foreign and domineering polity. In 2016 a Facebook user responded to a post sharing the *Daily Express* article ‘Jean-Claude Juncker warned he could spark European CIVIL WAR with arrogant Brexit stance’ ([Gutteridge 2016](#)). The user expressed his or her hope that if ‘Emperor Caesar Claudius Juncker’ spurred a war, the UK would be sensible enough to stay out of it ‘this time’. A few months later, in 2017, another comment referred to Caesar in a similar anti-heroic way, as a symbol of authoritarianism. The author of the text compared the EU ‘rallying around’ Angela Merkel and the ‘Brussels elite’ to the senators who used to ‘rally around’ Julius Caesar. The authors of both these Facebook comments viewed the Brexit referendum as an opportunity to challenge the EU–Rome by voting Leave.

Two images from the past were leveraged powerfully to evoke this spirit of resistance: Boudica/Boadicea and Hadrian’s Wall. The ‘rebuilding’ of the Wall became a trope of resistance through isolation and exclusion that will be examined in further depth in [Chapter 6](#), comparatively addressing its deployment within the Brexit debate, the Scottish Independence Referendum and discussions regarding the US–Mexican border. Significantly, Boudica/Boadicea was evoked in three distinct comments and was represented as an almost natural counterpart to Caesar. In 2016, in the latest stages of the referendum campaign and in support of the Leave camp, Boudica’s ‘spirit’ was described as emblematic of the British character. This was said to comprise the ‘backbone’ and ‘fearlessness [and] rebelliousness of authority’ that were considered to be distinctive of people who would face anything for the greater good of their country, as opposed to today’s leaders intent on celebrating the ‘mythical benefits’ of the EU.

A post shared by the Facebook page *Brexit News* quoted Martin Schulz, the President of the European Parliament, as saying 'the United Kingdom belongs to the European Union'. A comment on this post accused the EU of not being able to envisage 'a partnership' and stated that this attitude awoke the 'spirit of Boadicea'.

Finally, being 'independent' at all costs was associated with the defiance of expert opinion. In 2016 a Facebook user rhetorically asked what could arouse 'our inner Boadicea' more than the threats issued by the Remain camp and by 'clever experts' warning against a post-Brexit scenario of recession – even, potentially, of a 'Third World War'.

This post is indicative of the dynamics that contributed to the ineffectiveness of the economic argument made by the Remain camp; it shows how such argument sometimes resulted in inspiring Leavers rather than dissuading them from voting for Brexit. Additionally, the post sheds light on the extent to which a perceived authoritarianism on the part of the European Union was tied to those value-driven narratives of conservatism, Protestantism and independence that have been explored elsewhere in this chapter.

The mobilisation of the resistance myth represented by Boudica was consistent with those narratives. Boudica is a long-standing symbol of *libertas* and opposition to Roman imperialism which has been leveraged extensively throughout Britain's history (Gillespie 2018; Hingley and Unwin 2005). Tacitus portrayed her as not only a 'freedom fighter', but also as a moral example. Her exemplary moral standing was again evoked in the sixteenth century, through the work of Polydor Vergil, which referred to her as an important figure in English history (Hingley and Unwin 2005). This rediscovery of Boudica may be better explained in the cultural context of the sixteenth century, when English Protestants distanced themselves from Catholicism and new 'native' populations were encountered in North America. Both phenomena led to a temporary sidelining of the Roman past, perceived as tightly connected to the Church of Rome, and a return to 'indigenous' origin myths.

Boudica continued to be the symbol of resistance to oppressing 'supranational' polities during the sixteenth century. Her image became associated with Elizabeth I and her politics orientated towards protecting the freedom of the English from continental empires (Hingley and Unwin 2005). During the nineteenth century the figure of the Iron Age warrior queen was reinterpreted under the influence of Romanticism (Hingley and Unwin 2005; Steyn 2019). It became one of the symbols of the British Empire, as mother of the nation, as well as of female vote at the beginning of the twentieth century (Macdonald 1987; Hingley and Unwin 2005;

Steyn 2019). Boudica subsequently powered the archetype of the ‘Iron Lady’ attributed to both British female prime ministers: Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s and, more recently, Theresa May (Steyn 2019; Atkins and Gaffney 2020) (Fig. 5.3).

Summary

This chapter has revealed how the past was leveraged by pro-Leave supporters in two main ways. First, the political forces that turned to heritage as a rhetorical arsenal to construct political identities were



Fig. 5.3 Tweet by the *New Statesman* commenting on the comparison made in *The Sun* between Boudica and Theresa May, then British prime minister.

mainly those of the BNP, along with other nationalist parties and Conservative politicians. There are, however, substantial differences in their narrative. The BNP articulated origin myths locating Britain's roots in the pre-Roman or, more frequently, in the post-Roman past; in doing so, they mobilised specific local traditions, especially those referring to England and Wales.

In their Facebook discourse, however, the Roman Empire was not characterised as a force to be opposed, but as a bringer of Christianity, and was not therefore the subject of the condemnation by the BNP. This party attributed the role of invaders to the Normans, accompanied by occasional indirect references to modern France. In contrast, the Conservatives Boris Johnson and David Cameron focused on narratives of civilisation and imperialism whose foundations they perceived as residing in the image of Britannia, the British imperial past and (for Johnson) ideas of Greco-Roman openness and greatness.

The ways in which Facebook users portrayed 'out groups' of others partly resonated with this discourse. There was a tendency to use the dichotomy between civilisation and barbarism to describe foreigners that are 'unwanted' for their (perceived) religious, or more widely cultural, differences. This characterisation was associated with the leveraging of the myth of the fall of Rome. The Roman Empire was not evoked as an origin myth, but was compared negatively to the European Union. Its original power and achievements are acknowledged together with its collapse. The topos of the 'end of the Roman Empire' was referenced to encourage action against a foreseen and imminent destiny of decline. On the pro-Remain side, the myth of mixed origins was mobilised more frequently in order to argue for the continuation of the UK's membership of the European Union. Celtic identities were catalysts for both regionalism and supranationalism. This followed a long trajectory highlighted by Collis (1996), for example; he argues that such identities have been, simultaneously, 'a symbol of European unity' and of 'separateness, of regional identity and of diversity' (Collis 1996, 172; see also Dietler 2006).

The overall narrative of populist nationalism in the UK was opposite to that analysed in Italy, where the Roman Empire was an origin myth for proud populist nationalists. The latter also viewed it as the civilised force whose 'spirit' might help to combat the perceived barbarism of Muslim individuals and EU institutions. In the UK origin myths were centred on the pre- and post-Roman past, while the European Union was characterised as a domineering polity that, similarly to the Roman Empire, should be resisted at all costs.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the figure of Caesar was also evoked in binary and opposite ways. Caesar was portrayed as a heroic figure in Italy and the anti-hero in the UK, where the moral example of freedom fighting was attributed to Boudica. This contributes to the understanding of why Italian Euroscepticism may be less forcefully expressed than similar sentiments in the UK, even in the context of populist nationalism. On the other hand, it has been highlighted how entrenched dualities are active not only at infra-region and in-country levels, but also internationally; the same repertoire of heritage-based myths is often used, though assigned with opposing meanings and values. This suggests that long-standing resistance and compartmentalised ideas of nation both endure today. Generally it could also be hypothesised that, while in the UK populist nationalism emphasises ideas of a free (somehow still imperial) 'us' and an oppressive 'them', its Italian counterpart is more influenced by ideas of cultural superiority.

Notes

- 1 No references to the Iron Age, Roman and early medieval past of Britain and Europe were found in the Facebook discourse of the following politicians and political parties (listed in no particular order): Michael Gove, Will Straw, George Osborne, Nigel Farage, Adam Walker, Eamonn McCann, Jim Allister, Maggie Chapman, Patrick Harvie, Caroline Lucas, Mike Nesbitt, Leanne Wood, Tim Farron, Nicola Sturgeon, Jeremy Corbyn and Theresa May; Traditional Unionist Voice, Alliance Party of Northern Ireland, Green Party of England and Wales, Ulster Unionist Party, Democratic Unionist Party, Scottish National Party (SNP), Conservative Party, Labour Party and Liberal Democrats.
- 2 CC BY 2.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>.
- 3 CC BY 2.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>.
- 4 These are the public Facebook pages that featured the word 'Brexit' in their title or description field and were extracted between March and April 2017 (see [Chapter 2](#), pp. 16–17).

The 'great wall' of Trump

Introduction

Before and soon after his election as President of the United States, Donald J. Trump announced that a wall would be built along the country's southern border. Newspapers, magazines, blogs, advocacy groups and sector organisations began to publish articles and posts about its possible material features and functions. Comparisons were made between Trump's wall and borderlines constructed in other parts of the world, including Hadrian's Wall in Britain. Partly responding to these online publications, people began to engage in political micro-activism on social media ([Marichal 2013](#)), leveraging the image of Hadrian's Wall to explain, support or oppose Trump's choices on matters of immigration and border security. Furthermore, Hadrian's Wall became a means of establishing links between policies that were planned or already implemented by the US government, as well as for Brexit. Beyond the use of this trope, Twitter users did not substantially draw on other aspects of the Iron Age, Roman and early medieval European past to discuss Trump's foreign and home policy in the areas under consideration here.

This chapter begins by introducing the controversy surrounding Trump's wall. The intangible meanings assigned to Hadrian's Wall will then be explored – along with the ways in which these have been mobilised for purposes of inclusion and exclusion, and to mark identity boundaries aimed at creating 'in groups' and 'out groups' of 'us' and 'them'. The analysis concentrates on references to the pre-Roman, Roman and post-Roman lives of Hadrian's Wall in a range of web publications and among Twitter users who reported and commented, in English, on the US–Mexican border or on immigration control and the US travel ban

more generally. See [Chapter 2](#), pp. 17–18 and [Table 6.1](#) for details on the Twitter data analysed for this chapter; see also [Table 6.2](#) for information about the web media outlets investigated.

Table 6.1 Number of tweets per collection or sub-collection used in the analysis as of July 2018¹

Collections used	Number of tweets hydrated in July 2018
US Immigration and Travel Ban	12,303,443
2016 US Presidential Election	
Democratic candidates (Twitter user timeline)	21,997
Democratic Party (Twitter user timeline)	11,760
Democratic Convention (Twitter filter)	5,636,735
Election day (Twitter filter)	2,256,582
Candidates and key election hashtags (Twitter filter)	885,905
First presidential debate (Twitter filter)	2,088,656
Republican candidates (Twitter user timeline)	51,573
Republican Party (Twitter user timeline)	12,285
Republican Convention (Twitter filter)	4,356,122
Second presidential debate (Twitter filter)	2,748,683
Third presidential debate (Twitter filter)	2,004,528
Vice Presidential debate (Twitter filter)	2,108,575
Trump and Hadrian's Wall	4,380

Table 6.2 Online publications that released pieces in English featuring the keywords ‘Hadrian’, ‘wall’ and ‘Trump’ from 2015 to 2018, as returned from a Google search undertaken on 3 August 2020²

Website type	Names
News media (generalist)	CNBC, Huffington Post, The New York Times, Vice, The Sunday Morning Herald, NewsFeed, Wbez, Shortlist, BBC Newsbeat, The New Yorker, The Economic Times, BBC News, Honolulu Civil Beat, The Irish Times, CBS Los Angeles, BBC Culture, The Irish News, Independent.ie , The Conversation, Concord Monitor, Action News Now
News media (thematic)	The Christian Science Monitor, MarketWatch, Gulf News, The New Humanitarian, The Carolinian, Buddhistdoor, Archinect, Satiria News, The Morningside Post, Interesting Engineering, Big think, War on the Rocks, Marketing Derby, Extra Newsfeed, Engineering.com
Magazines	Smithsonian Magazine, National Geographic, Scottish Field
Blogs	Archaeodeath, New Historian, Geography Direction (Royal Geographic Society’s blog), Anthropology in Practice, Society + Space, Union of Concerned Scientists, Ian The Architect, Mises Institute blog, Nicol Valentin
Think Tanks and other organisations	Migration Policy Institute, The Organisation for World Peace, The Institute of Engineering and Technology

The 2016 Election and the ‘performative’ border

In 2015 Trump’s application to register the slogan ‘Make America Great Again’ as a trademark was approved, even though he was not the first to coin this phrase; ‘Let’s Make America Great Again’ had in fact been used by Ronald Reagan during his presidential campaign over 30 years earlier ([Morgan 2019](#)). As a non-ideologist, Trump primarily intended the phrase to be a marketing tool for targeting disillusioned and politically disaffected Americans with populist and belligerent tones via social media ([Morgan 2019](#)). ‘Make America Great Again’ may be perceived as a myth

of regeneration that stresses the radical change that would occur under a Trump administration. Throughout his presidential campaign Trump combined the populism expressed by this phrase and anti-elite slogans, such as ‘drain the swamp’, with nationalist speech-making. The latter, in particular, was powered through the ‘America First’ rhetoric, and by discourse that worked to antagonise and outcast specific groups within society (Wahl-Jorgensen 2018; Ryan 2019; Rivers and Ross 2020). This discourse was characterised by a focus on the ‘ontological security and anti-establishment sentiment of a particular demographic of “heartland” base voters’ (Rivers and Ross 2020, 832).

In order to project the idea of guaranteeing such security, Trump vowed to build a wall between the US and Mexico, stating that it would protect the country from illegal immigration (Oliva and Shanahan 2019). Furthermore, shortly after taking office, the President signed an executive order to halt refugee admissions. He also issued a temporary ban on a number of African and Middle Eastern countries whose population was composed for the most part of Muslims, seeking to prevent them from entering the US (Oliva and Shanahan 2019). Announcing the decision to erect a new border wall, reduce the number of refugees accepted into the US each year to 45,000 (from 100,000 during the Obama administration) and impose the travel ban were, for Trump, tactical steps. They were designed to connect with the cohort of supporters who framed ‘American identity’ as being fundamentally anti-Muslim, white and endangered (Marsden 2019).

The wall, in particular, became a recurrent motif in Trump’s electoral campaign, both during the presidential debates and after he took office (Garcia 2019). Indeed, this was one of the main grounds on which Trump ran for the presidency, shaping the initial months of his first term in office (Rivers and Ross 2020). In the minds of its proponents, the primary function of the borderwork was probably symbolic and performative – as has been demonstrated by a study of how the issue of the US–Mexican border was framed in political discourse during the presidential electoral campaign and its immediate aftermath (Garcia 2019). Trump’s framing of this issue was dichotomous and binary, with repetitive references to his position in favour of ‘building the wall’, contrary to that of his opponents, whom he accused of being unwilling to construct it (Garcia 2019). In contrast, other political stakeholders shifted the framing of the issue from whether or not a wall should be built to how it might be possible to guarantee border security (Garcia 2019).

For Trump, the wall was an effective expression of a racialised borderline, useful to ‘keep out’ illegal immigrants, refugees, terrorists and US DREAMers (Heuman and González 2018). Through televised speeches

and Twitter, Trump crafted an essentialist narrative that, via the symbolism of the wall, worked to preserve White privilege in ways that were not overt, as with older forms of racism, but that had the potential to be even more insidious and effective because they were less apparent (Heuman and González 2018). This was evident when Trump announced his bid for the presidency, on 16 June 2015:

When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. ... they're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems to us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.

His proposed response to the problem was stated as follows:

I would build a great wall, and nobody builds walls better than me, believe me, and I'll build them very inexpensively, I will build a great, great wall on our southern border. And I will have Mexico pay for that wall.

However, the border wall was not only presented as a solution to unlawful immigration from Mexico but also, as anticipated above, to terrorist infiltration, building on rhetoric that had begun after the 9/11 attacks (Verney 2019). The wall featured in Trump's first address to a joint session of Congress on 28 February 2017. In December 2017 his administration issued a National Security Strategy document, which stated:

Terrorists, drug traffickers, and criminal cartels exploit porous borders and threaten the U.S. security and public safety. (Cited in Verney 2019, 150)

This, in turn, connects with Trump's foreign policy direction informed by the 'peace through strength' rhetoric. Again it carries an echo of the words spoken by Ronald Reagan in the very different context of the Cold War (Morgan 2019).

In March 2017 the Department of Homeland Security invited design proposals for Trump's wall, to which reportedly 200 companies responded. Eight designs were selected. The companies that had submitted them were each allocated up to \$450,000 to build a prototype measuring 30 feet (9.144 m) high and 30 feet long (Yang 2017; Verney 2019). After these initial stages Trump tried to seek funding for the wall, including through a US federal government shutdown which lasted for almost a month, from 22

December 2018 to 25 January 2019 (Rivers and Ross 2020). Trump ordered the shutdown after the stalling of a bill that comprised a clause allocating \$5.6 billion of the government budget to the construction of the wall (Gurman and Bravin 2018; Wagner 2019). The cost for such a structure would be prohibitive, given the need to overcome the nearly insurmountable difficulties of building a continuous border line in a complex and harsh environment, while the functional benefits of such a construction would have been very limited (Flores 2017; Verney 2019).

The majority of Mexican immigrants who were residing unlawfully in the US as of 2017 had actually entered legally but then overstayed their visas (Verney 2019). Furthermore, there had been no documented cases of terrorists accessing the country illegally across the southern border (Verney 2019). While not contributing significantly to the fight against either illegal immigration or terrorism, the wall would have impacted negatively on the fluidity of legal border crossings for trade and personal reasons. Even Trump acknowledged this, noting the need to have 'beautiful doors' in the wall (Verney 2019). As of February 2021, the 'great wall' has not been completed, but its powerful symbolism might have cast a long shadow in people's minds by bolstering the 'Wall-DNA' and nativist sentiments that have a long tradition in North American history, as in that of other countries (Yang 2017; Verney 2019). The antagonisation against immigrants, which has recurred periodically since the nineteenth century, was accompanied by the claim that the new arrivals were different from the 'good immigrants' that had come before and were therefore depicted with generally negative connotations (Verney 2019). A similar kind of rhetoric has also been documented for Salvini's Facebook discourse (see Chapter 4, p. 61).

Walls: from Trump to Hadrian

Trump referred to the Great Wall of China at several campaign events to justify and prove the feasibility of his intended wall project (Fig. 6.1). For example, speaking from Hilton Head Island, South Carolina on 30 December 2015, he remarked:

Folks, when I say 'we are going to build the wall', most people say 'you can't build the wall'. We'll build the wall. In China, two thousand years ago, they built the Great Wall of China, which is bigger than any wall we're thinking about, okay? The Great Wall of China goes 18 thousand miles. We have two thousand miles of which we only really

need one thousand miles. We have a thousand miles. So China has 18 thousand – or 13 thousand miles – and we have one thousand miles. We have modern cranes, we have Caterpillar tractors.

Other presidential candidates, political leaders and parties in the US did not leverage this comparison, nor did they evoke aspects of the Iron Age, Roman and early medieval past of Europe on Twitter to any substantial extent during the 2016 US presidential campaign. The only exception was a tweet by Carly Fiorina, then standing as a Republican Party candidate in the presidential race. On 26 February 2015 she tweeted: ‘Yes, @ [BarackObama](#), ISIS wants to drive us back to the Middle Ages, but the rest of us moved on about 800 years ago. #CPAC2015.’

Responses from the Democratic Party focused on the relevance of Fiorina’s degree in Medieval History and commented on the fact that her academic background did not qualify her to address US foreign politics. Similarly, analysis of the official Facebook pages of Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton and the Democratic and Republican Parties did not reveal specific uses of the periods under consideration here. Between 1 January 2015 and the end of 2018, however, a wide array of news media outlets, online magazines, blogs and organisational websites covered the topic of Trump’s border wall through comparisons with other walls in history,



Fig. 6.1 The Great Wall of China at Jinshanling, China. Photo © Severin Stalder, [CC BY-SA 3.0](#).³

including Hadrian's Wall in the UK (see [Table 6.2](#)). These news media sites are analysed on pp. 117–26.

Hadrian's Wall is one of the most iconic and best-known monuments in the UK. It runs for 80 Roman miles (73 modern miles or c.117 km) across northern England, from Wallsend, on the River Tyne in the east, to Bowness-on-Solway in the west ([Breeze and Dobson 2000](#), 1). The monument has been researched extensively within the fields of archaeology, history, classics and other disciplines. As a result of these efforts, which have increased substantially over the past three decades, a wealth of information is available, encompassing both the material features of the Wall and its 'biography' (on Hadrian's Wall's post-Roman 'life': [Hingley 2012](#)). A detailed discussion of this literature is beyond the scope of this book, but a brief introduction is provided here to assist in navigating the findings of the research presented in the following sections.

Hadrian's Wall started to be built in the AD 120s, during the reign of the emperor Hadrian, and remained in use until the beginning of the fifth century, when the Roman military occupation of some of the territories corresponding to present-day Britain was brought to an end. Within this period the Wall fell out of use only once, during the 20 years after the construction of the Antonine Wall in c.AD 140–60 ([Breeze 2019](#), 93–5). The title 'Hadrian's Wall' was given to the monument by archaeologists who studied it in the twentieth century, superseding the medieval name 'Picts' Wall' and the eighteenth-century 'Roman Wall' ([Hingley 2012](#); although ancient forms of the Hadrian's Wall family name were also used in the eighteenth century).

The Wall's design was experimental and construction phases are still the subject of debate ([Symonds 2021](#)). Once complete, its varied 'anatomy' comprised a stone and turf wall, a substantial V-shaped ditch to the north and an earthwork barrier known as the *vallum* to the south ([Hingley 2012](#), 18–19) ([Fig. 6.2](#)). It is probable that the *vallum*, one of the best-preserved features of the Wall complex, did not have a strictly defensive function but was rather intended to define the military zone to the south ([Hingley 2012](#)). Milecastles stood at every mile along the Wall to allow access through it, and two turrets were placed in between each pair of these military posts ([Breeze 2019](#), 62–3). Two other gateways are known at Port Gate and Maiden Way in Northumberland, and forts were located at intervals of between c. 7.3 and 7.6 Roman miles ([Symonds 2021](#), 51). Such forts and the *vallum* were probably added when the construction of the Wall system was already in progress. Research has showed that, even after these had been added, the Wall was rebuilt

several times during the Roman period, including during the reign of the emperor Septimius Severus (Symonds 2021).

Hadrian's Wall marked the northernmost limit of the Roman province of Britannia during the second century AD. Its function has been the subject of long debate, however, particularly the extent to which such an articulated complex was needed to defend the province. From the sixth to the eighteenth centuries, the Wall was believed to have had an exclusively defensive function, but from the nineteenth century onwards this interpretation could no longer be supported on archaeological grounds (Breeze 2019, 64). Other outer regions of the empire that required defence mechanisms were protected by fences or discontinuous walls (Breeze 2019, 66–7). It has been argued that, rather than preventing movement, Hadrian's Wall was used to regulate and control the passage of people and goods by means of the milecastles and gateways along its length. The symbolic function of its construction has also been highlighted by researchers, who have hypothesised that Hadrian wished to establish a landmark to project imperial might and a sense of Roman identity in this peripheral area of the empire (Hingley 2012).

Today, Hadrian's Wall is part of the Frontiers of the Roman Empire World Heritage Site (FREWHIS), together with the Antonine Wall in Scotland and the *Limes* along the Rhine and Danube (Hingley 2018). The FREWHIS, first proposed in 2000, works within a European framework; its long-term ambition is to include all Roman frontiers to highlight their material



Fig. 6.2 Hadrian's Wall, UK. Photo © Elisa Broccoli.

variability and diversity. This project aims to communicate the function of frontier lines and regions as places of encounter and connectivity, in step with emerging research from the burgeoning and rapidly growing area of border studies ([UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2021](#)).

In the last decade, a number of publications have explored the experience of visitors engaging with the landscape along Hadrian's Wall, and on its contemporary perception by both present-day and past communities in the UK (for example, Nesbitt and Tolia-Kelly 2009; [Witcher 2010a](#); [2010b](#); [Hingley 2012](#); [Breeze 2019](#)). These have included reflections on the extent to which the Wall has been racialised and mobilised within processes of antagonistic othering and for the construction of national identities. I will now draw on this literature to discuss the ways in which Hadrian's Wall has been evoked by online publications and Twitter to frame the issue of Trump's wall.

Walls in online news, magazines and blogs

The parallel between Hadrian's Wall and Trump's wall was leveraged by news and other online media outlets based, for the most part, in the United States, UK and the Republic of Ireland (see [Table 6.2](#) and note 2 for a list of the media outlets retrieved and analysed). This was probably the result of the English language bias in the search, the location of the two walls and the popularity and relevance of border debates in these three countries. The ways in which the two walls were discussed reflected the presence of two possible approaches to the theorisation of border walls in international relations as defined by Jessica Becker: realist and social constructivist ([Becker 2018](#)). Realist approaches focus on the desirability of building or reinforcing border constructions in the face of threats. In contrast, the social constructivist view provides an alternative to the dominant paradigm of realism by addressing the ideas and norms that underpin border security and the urge to build or reinforce defensive infrastructures.

Becker (2018) has argued that changing how we conceive of international relations impacts on what is perceived as a threat and, in turn, on the kinds of border policy that are implemented. The parallel between Hadrian's Wall and the 'great wall' of Trump is utilised within the corpus of online publications retrieved to express either realist or social constructivist standpoints on border walls through five core themes: function and effectiveness, 'walls of worry', the ancestry of 'walling up', performativity and sites of encounter.

Function and effectiveness

The majority of the online publications examined complicated the traditional idea that Hadrian's Wall served exclusively and effectively to protect the people inhabiting the territories of Britannia from those who lived to the north. The Wall was mainly conceptualised as a borderline and characterised as either divisive or porous. Its divisiveness was expressed through frames such as 'keeping out', 'guarding' and 'separating'; the 'out groups' it was meant to exclude comprised 'barbarians',⁴ 'marauding Picts and other tribes'⁵ and 'the Scottish'.⁶

In most cases, however, remarks on the divisive nature of Hadrian's Wall were made to advocate against the need to build Trump's wall, based on one or both of two possible arguments. The first underlined the historically documented failures of walls as impenetrable defensive mechanisms, while the second stressed that the 'other' whom Hadrian's Wall was intended to 'keep' out – barbarians – is very different from the 'peaceful migrants looking for a better life for their families' with whom Trump's wall was concerned.⁷ For example, the first argument is evident in a piece published by CNBC in 2015:

Since the ancient Romans erected their empire-defining stone walls, governments have continually built walls to *keep out* invaders, crusaders, foreigners – and to control their own populations. ... Do physical walls work as instruments of border control in the 21st century? Do such physical deterrents offer a humane solution to the global issue of migration? (Chandler 2015)

In other examples, however, the standpoint towards the defensive and divisive function of Hadrian's Wall was either apparently neutral (for example, *The Economic Times*; TNN 2017) or openly in favour (for example, *Fox News*; see pp. 125–6 below). Trump's proposition for building a wall was welcomed in an article written by Kelvin MacKenzie, a journalist for *The Sun*, a British tabloid. MacKenzie drew on it sarcastically to suggest that Hadrian's Wall should be rebuilt to 'keep out' the Scots, who should pay for its construction (MacKenzie 2016). Here the context was a post-Brexit Britain experiencing tensions connected to the desire of some for an independent, pro-EU Scotland.

Other online pieces highlighted the physical anatomy of walls in ways that appear to be non-partisan but that may have resulted in reinforcing the belief that Trump's wall could be effective. For example, on 25 January 2017 *BBC Newsbeat* used infographics to compare Trump's

wall to Hadrian's Wall, the Great Wall of China and the Berlin Wall in terms of height and length. The visuals emphasised that, although Trump's wall would not be the longest ever built – a distinction attributed to the Great Wall of China – it would be the highest. In presenting this simple information, *BBC Newsbeat* also stated that Hadrian's Wall separated England from Scotland, communicating a confused (at best) interpretation of the monument to the young audiences it specifically sought to target:

Hadrian's Wall, which Emperor Hadrian ordered in AD122, was just one double-decker bus in height. It was 117 km long and ran between Wallsend and Bowness, separating England from Scotland. (*BBC Newsbeat* 2017)

Conversely, the porosity of walls was emphasised through frames centred on the idea of population movement and permeability. For example, *The New Yorker* stated that 'the porosity of ... gates prompts the question of what, to the builders of Hadrian's Wall, constituted a border' (de Monchaux 2016). The author of the article remarked on the difference between what had been reported in a Roman account, written around three centuries after Hadrian's reign, and the latest interpretations emerging from scholarly research. The classical account recorded that Hadrian 'went to Britain, where he put many things to rights and was the first to build a wall, eighty miles long, to divide the Romans from the barbarians' (de Monchaux 2016). Recent studies have suggested, however, that the wall 'represented less the end of the world (much less the end of Roman dominion) than a line, within the province of Britannia, between military and civilian jurisdiction' (de Monchaux 2016). The article continued by noting that this distinction was 'possibly far more important than Roman-versus-barbarian, ever since an army led by an ambitious Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon River into the officially demilitarized capital' (de Monchaux 2016).

In a similar vein, Darcy Eveleigh wrote in *The New York Times* that 'invaders were never a real threat' when Hadrian's Wall was built (Eveleigh 2016). In *Gulf News* Adam Smith (2016a) stated that 'we imagine barriers to be impregnable, but they are in fact porous, and can always be circumvented'; it went on to refer to Hadrian's Wall as 'an "entrepôt" for trade and a funnel for population movement'. Exactly the same phrase – 'walls are porous and can be circumvented' – appeared in an article written by the anthropologist Andrew Roddick (2017) for *The Conversation*, where it was attributed to Cornell University archaeologist Adam Smith.

In 'World History Minute', an educational feature that was part of the programming for Chicago's National Public Radio station *WBZ*, historian John Schmidt, who regularly hosts this radio podcast series, stressed that scholars were divided on the reasons why Hadrian had built the wall (Schmidt 2016). He explained that, for some, it was meant to 'keep invaders from Scotland out', whereas 'others say it was built to collect import duties and prevent the smuggling of goods in their colony' (Schmidt 2016). Schmidt (2016) also proposed a further motive: 'Hadrian simply wanted to string a military outpost to keep order'. The uncertainty cast over a single function of the Wall was not resolved in the podcast, which presented multiple possible interpretations.

'Walls of worry'

The emotional dynamics underpinned by walls and their appeal have been addressed in three articles published by *CNBC*, *The Christian Science Monitor* and *The New Humanitarian*. All three stressed how walls are in fact the outcomes of 'worry' by states and governments, or by those who wish to be 'walled in' and exclude others. On 9 October 2015 Sarah Chandler (2015) gave the title 'Walls of worry' to the first section of her *CNBC* piece on 'The world's most controversial border-control projects'. The author mentioned the worries of 'governments' who have 'continually built walls to keep out invaders, crusaders, foreigners – and to control their own populations' (Chandler 2015). This list referred to perceived threats from an outside realm to the detriment of a homogeneous inside space. She also observed that the most iconic images of the Berlin Wall are those of its fall, followed by the questions:

Do physical walls work as instruments of border control in the 21st century?

Do such physical deterrents offer a humane solution to the global issue of migration? (Chandler 2015)

The Christian Science Monitor, a publication owned by the First Church of Christ, Scientist, in Boston, is an independent news organisation with international scope. Its aim is to provide credible and constructive information that counters 'the hopelessness-, anger-, and fear-inducing brand of discourse that is so pervasive in the news' (*The Christian Science Monitor* 2020). True to its stated remit, the publication dedicated an article to Austria's announcement in 2015 that it would build a border fence and,

as drivers behind the desirability of ‘walls’, highlighted the fears generated by globalisation and its perceived impact on people’s ‘ways of life’ (Crowell 2015). These factors were identified as leading to definitions of the self ‘against the other’ (Crowell 2015). While accepting that Hadrian’s Wall was built to ‘separate [the] empire from the “barbarians”’ and that other walls had a similarly divisive function, the article argued that wall projects have increased since 9/11. The author quoted the political geographer David Newman who supported the idea that, although there is some truth in the ‘fear of the outside’, such fear is largely a social construction ‘which enables governments to justify the establishment of new border fences as means of keeping out the “alien” and controlling their own territory’ (Crowell 2015). It was implied that governments use this strategy to stage their ability to provide security and protection.

Partly in line with this position, the Buddhist-themed online platform *Buddhistdoor* described Hadrian’s Wall as a ‘confession of imperial insecurity’ that was the consequence of the unsustainability of overstretched empires (Buddhistdoor 2017). The journalist Paul Currian wrote a piece entitled ‘Who builds the walls?’, published in *The New Humanitarian* in November 2016. A photograph of the iconic sycamore tree that grows next to Hadrian’s Wall opened the article, while its caption referred to the function of walls as ‘icons of certainty’ (Currian 2016).

These three articles expressed views that are in keeping with Bauman’s idea of ‘liquid modernity’ – a state of fluidity and insecurity described as characteristic of current times and connotated by the coalescing of globalisation, neoliberalism and the erasure of physical barriers. As he noted, all of these have worked to erode social security in arguably unprecedented ways (Bauman 2000). For Bauman, people living in what he terms the ‘developed’ parts of the world have responded by finding refuge in a past that they felt they could control, and in the re-affirmation of imagined borders that define the ‘self’ by antagonising multiple ‘others’ (Bauman 2000; 2017).

The ancestry of ‘walling up’

The third theme defined walls as natural and almost distinctive features of complex societies. In some cases, this characterisation is accompanied by the observation that border walls have grown substantially in number during recent years. For example, the *CNBC* article referred to above (pp. 118 and 120) stated that, ‘since the ancient Romans erected their empire-defining stone walls, governments have continually built walls’ (Chandler 2015). At the same time this article claimed that 40 countries

have been building walls following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, then went on to ask why more states are erecting walls today (Chandler 2015). Publications with large readerships, such as the newspapers *The Economic Times* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* and the popular magazine *National Geographic*, have argued that ‘walling up’ has been a frequently recurring practice in history. For example, a piece published in *The Economic Times* in January 2017 reported that ‘most civilizations, from classical antiquity to medieval and modern times, have built some sort of defensive fortification or walls for protection from outsiders’ (TNN 2017). Hadrian’s Wall was referred to immediately after this statement, emphasising how the structure helped to protect Roman Britain from the inhabitants of territories now located in northern England and Scotland (TNN 2017). The article also argued that the destruction of walls was a short-lived phenomenon in the context of globalisation (TNN 2017).

In a similar vein, Cornell University archaeologist Adam Smith wrote in *The Sydney Morning Herald* that ‘over the past millennia, politicians have repeatedly turned to large walls to solve problems’ (Smith 2016b). Starting from this premise, he argued that it is to be hoped that the ‘track record of this ancient technology’ was examined before the decision was taken to invest conspicuous sums of money in Trump’s wall (Smith 2016b). Whether questioning their function and effectiveness or confirming it, all three of these texts worked to normalise the existence of walls.

This is even more pronounced in the *National Geographic* article, written in the form of an interview with the historian David Frye, author of *Walls: A history of civilization in blood and brick* (Frye 2018; Worrall 2018). In answering questions from the interviewer, Frye made a series of claims. These included the notions that building walls is an ancient idea; that ancient and contemporary walls have been constructed to ‘keep outsiders out’ and ‘no invention in human history [has] played a greater role ... in creating and shaping civilization’ because security has facilitated the development of other activities and inventions; and that Rome ‘was very open to immigration’. In this way, Frye contributed to the consolidation of the idea of ‘walling up’ as an almost primary and ancestral need (Worrall 2018).

Performativity

The fourth theme focused on the performative role of border walls and their symbolism. It featured in articles published by high-profile news media agencies and magazines – the *BBC*, *The Huffington Post*, *Gulf News* and *The New Yorker* – as well as in more niche texts released by bloggers, sector organisations or thematic news outlets. *BBC Culture* stressed a

point that has become widely accepted by post-colonial interpretations of Roman frontiers – that ‘barriers of concrete and stone don’t just divide people, they define identities’ (Luckhurst 2017). In this feature, Hadrian’s Wall was presented as a ‘mark of imperial power’ intended to ‘separate the Romans from the Barbarians’ in terms of identity as well as constituting a defensive structure (Luckhurst 2017). Walls were claimed to ‘help a culture to define itself by keeping what it’s not at bay’ (Luckhurst 2017). This text also specifically exposed the performative agency of walls in relation to Trump’s border project, highlighting how the latter had mainly been, up to that point, a projection and a way of expressing ideas of ‘nation and belonging’ (Luckhurst 2017).

Similarly, in his *Gulf News* open editorial, archaeologist Adam Smith (2016a) effectively republished an opinion piece he had written for *The Washington Post* which described both Hadrian’s Wall and Trump’s wall as means of ‘architectural intimidation’ and ‘symbols of a particular kind of hubris’. In line with these framings, *The Smithsonian Magazine* labelled Hadrian’s Wall as a ‘symbol of Roman might’ intended to promote a sense of fear among the people that it was supposedly built to defend (Silver 2017). In more hyperbolic tones, *The Huffington Post* defined Trump’s wall as a phallic symbol of masculine power (Meadors 2016; Smith 2016a).

The New Yorker also drew on a general reference to ‘military historians’ to suggest that Hadrian’s Wall was not especially well designed and conceptualised as a fortification and that ‘display was its purpose as much as any other’, an effect amplified by the light colour of the plaster that some believe covered the surface of the stones (de Monchaux 2016). It is important to mention that borderworks also give rise to local subidentities that are moulded and exist as a result of the very specific environments and social contexts that emerge in border territories – spaces that today include petrol stations or airports (Wille et al. 2016). Simon James and, building upon his work, Richard Hingley and Richard Hartis, have argued that this might have also occurred along the line of Hadrian’s Wall, where a new Roman ‘sub-culture’ or ‘Roman military identity’ came to the fore (James 2001; Hingley and Hartis 2011). However, this kind of local identity-making role for borders and walls was not represented in the online outlets that have been examined.

Sites of encounter

The New York Times, *The Irish Times* and smaller or more local outlets and bloggers, such as *Action News Now*, *Honolulu Civil Beat* and *Extra News Feed*, have framed Hadrian’s Wall as a place of present-day encounter, in stark

contrast to Trump's idea of walls as divisive barriers. The first two publications, both high-profile online newspapers, have expressed the contemporary 'life' of Hadrian's Wall through references to the use of the site by tourists today. Eveleigh wrote in *The New York Times* that 'Today tourists can walk the entire length of it [Hadrian's Wall] coast to coast', while James Harpur stressed in *The Irish Times* that 'the most famous walls in history, built to repulse foreigners or pen citizens in, are now huge visitor attractions' (Eveleigh 2016; Harpur 2017). *Honolulu Civil Beat* leveraged road infrastructure as another frame of connectivity, noting that 'it [Hadrian's Wall] is a tourist attraction with motorways crossing it going to and from Scotland to England' (Craft 2017). In this way this article also directly challenged the very idea that the wall separates the nations of England and Scotland. *Action News Now* similarly argued that 'not all walls have done what they were designed to do, and most, like the Great Wall of China and Berlin Wall, have ended up as tourist attractions' (*Action News Now* 2018). Specifically with regard to Hadrian's Wall, the New York University historian Daniel Jütte was quoted as saying that 'the wall didn't prevent the loss of Britain and it didn't prevent the collapse of the Roman Empire', followed by the juxtaposed statement, 'Today, the Roman Wall is a World Heritage Site' (*Action News Now* 2018).

The materiality of the wall and ideas of ruination and rebuilding are also used to stress the agency of walls as heritage objects that may either connect or divide. Both *The New York Times* and *The Huffington Post* dedicated space to this topic. A *New York Times* article entitled 'What history teaches us about walls' underlined that the same walls built to 'keep people out' were those that 'come tumbling down'; and that, over time, those constructions were rebuilt multiple times (Eveleigh 2016). The *Huffington Post* piece, written by Meadors in 2016, critiqued MacKenzie's article in *The Sun* referred to above. Inspired by Donald Trump's claims and announced interventions on the US–Mexican border, MacKenzie suggested that 'perhaps we might think of rebuilding Hadrian's Wall – and getting the Scots to pay for it' (MacKenzie 2016; Meadors 2016).

Other voices that touched upon the material features and destiny of walls came from thematically-focused outlets. For example, *Engineering.com*, the online publisher of engineering content, highlighted that Hadrian's Wall was primarily built for purposes of 'political showmanship' and that it 'fell into disrepair after Emperor Hadrian's death' (Pollock 2018). *Archinect*, whose aim is to reach and facilitate dialogue between architects and designers internationally, argued that 'border walls do eventually become great ruin-porn tourist attractions' (Ingalls 2017).

Alternative voices

The publications reviewed above have mobilised multiple lives, meanings and functions of Hadrian's Wall to discuss the issue of Trump's proposed 'great wall' in mainly critical terms. The corpus was compiled by interrogating Google with a keyword-based approach, however, and it is likely that the search algorithm returned only part of the existing news media sources drawing on the parallel between Hadrian's Wall and the wall of Trump. The method was a useful means of exploring how the analogy featured across a diverse range of online publications, though it should be integrated with systematic on-platform searches within the most popular US newspapers and channels. These kinds of outlets have a decisive impact on the ways in which individuals experience contemporary issues (Entman 2004). It is therefore critical to understand whether alternative voices, such as those more positive towards Trump's wall, were present and how they framed the past to construct their arguments.

Some of the articles retrieved in this way were the same as those analysed above, but new ones were also identified. Trump's wall and Hadrian's Wall appeared together in pieces published by two of the three main US news channels, and especially in two articles by *CNN* and in five by *Fox News*. The walls did not feature simultaneously in any of the content made available by the website of the political news network *MSNBC*.

Sometimes referred to as 'the big three', *Fox News*, *CNN* and *MSNBC* are the leading cable news networks in the United States, with *Fox News* recording the highest number of primetime viewers (Watson 2020). The first article made available by *Fox News*, entitled 'Throughout history, walls and fences have been built to keep people both out and in', was published on 26 August 2015 during the presidential campaign (Associated Press 2015). It examined 'border barriers', said to be 'an approach that has been taken for centuries with varying degrees of success' (Associated Press 2015).

Several border structures were considered, including Hadrian's Wall and the US–Mexican border. The former, briefly characterised by its material features and chronology, was described as guarding 'Roman conquests in Britain from "barbarians" to the north'; its military effectiveness was presented as the subject of debate by historians, although the wall 'did serve as a symbol of Roman power and a way to control cross-border traffic' (Associated Press 2015). Three further articles were published by *Fox News* in 2019, followed by a fourth in 2020. As such, they are beyond the scope of this present analysis, which ends in 2018. However, it is relevant to note that these articles were supportive of the

construction of Trump's wall on the US–Mexican border and, although presenting border walls as having a 'chequered history of success', they referred to them as legitimate solutions (Carlson 2019; Cohen 2019; Taunton 2019):

Every nation has the right to protect its way of life from those who threaten to destroy it, no matter if that threat takes the form of overt force of arms or that of a human tide whose sheer numbers will overwhelm the existing social, political, and cultural order. (Taunton 2019)

Drawing on the example of Hadrian's Wall, it was ubiquitously stated that walls 'do work', but that they require constant monitoring and must be integrated with other policies:

If the United States does indeed build a wall along its southern border and then monitors it effectively, it may succeed in curbing illegal immigration, but it will not end it. Walls cannot prevent people from overstaying their visas or being smuggled in another way. And if history is any precedent, illegal immigrants may attempt to tunnel under the wall, go over it or breach it some other way. (Cohen 2019)

Trump's wall and Hadrian's Wall were also variously mentioned together in six of the 10 US-based newspapers with the largest circulation (Cision Media Research 2019): in two articles published by *USA Today*, one by *The Wall Street Journal*, two by *The New York Times*, four by *The Los Angeles Times*, seven by *The Washington Post*, one by the *Star Tribune* and one by *The Boston Globe*. These, together with the CNN features, covered ideas and views that were represented by the themes analysed above and were generally critical of Trump's wall.

Reframing walls on Twitter

Having assessed the recurrence of the Trump's wall–Hadrian's Wall parallel as part of the discourse of news media and other online publications, I will now compare how the pair has been leveraged in Twitter debates on immigration and border control. In doing so I use the Twitter collection about 'US immigration and travel ban' (see Table 6.1). Period-specific keywords that featured in this dataset are shown in Fig. 6.3.⁸

Hadrian's Wall was referred to in only three tweets within the collection, all of which were critical of Trump's wall. One tweet rhetorically asked if the wall was a success for Hadrian; it was accompanied by a photo of a section of the stone construction of Hadrian's Wall. In a second case a tweet stating that Septimius Severus, who died in York, would today have been subject to the Muslim ban was 'retweeted with mention'. The added text stressed how this constituted proof that Hadrian's Wall did not work. The third tweet noted that history repeats itself and that Hadrian's Wall was constructed to 'keep intact' the empire, but that walls 'go down' sooner or later. This text was added to the retweet of a tweet from Amnesty International USA, with an image showing the tearing down of the Berlin Wall in 1989 (Fig. 6.4).

The three tweets shared a recognition that a) walls have a chiefly divisive function, b) this function is ultimately ineffective and c) walls are destined to ruination. They showed a more restricted array of meanings attached to historical walls than the media discourse analysed above, although it should be noted that this may result from their limited

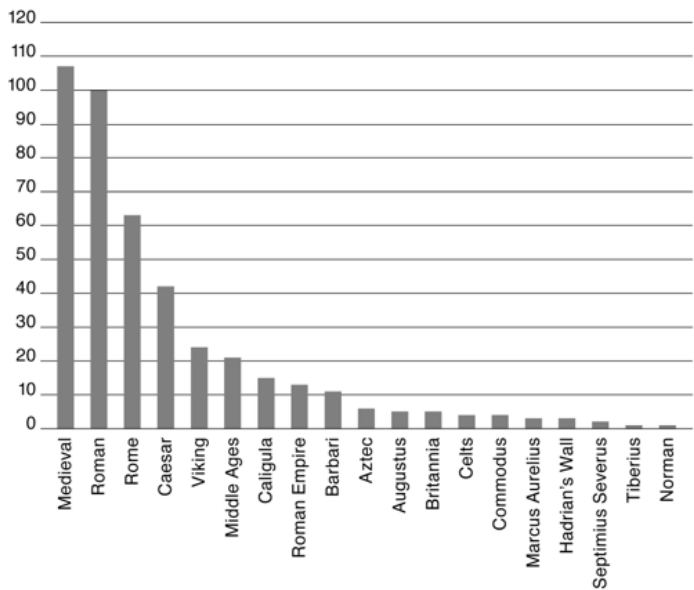


Fig. 6.3 Frequencies of period-specific keywords in unique tweets, retweets with mentions and replies focusing on US immigration and the US travel ban.

number. Information about geolocation and country was not available for any of the tweets, although this does not impact on the core finding. Despite the recurrence of the parallel between Hadrian's Wall and Trump's wall in US news media and popular magazines, Hadrian's Wall was almost absent from Twitter discourse relating to the debate on US immigration. This indicates that there was a gap between the ways in which media discourse positions itself through cultural heritage and historical references and how the public (here clearly in the US) related to contemporary social challenges. It is unsurprising that, in order to connect with an electorate that does not, for the most part, leverage those mentions of the past, US politicians also tended not to mobilise them.

A booster data collection undertaken in the first quarter of 2017 helps to triangulate this result. Over this period a total of 4,380 tweets were gathered through the Twitter stream API that included either the terms 'Hadrian' and 'Trump' or 'Hadrian' and 'USA'. The ways in which the



Fig. 6.4 Tweet by Amnesty International USA sharing a photo of the tearing down of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and describing it as the ultimate outcome of wall building.

tweets were written (for example, the combination of pronouns and nouns used) showed that most of them were published by people living in Britain, with a minority in the US or other parts of the world. Tweets commonly discussed Trump’s wall in relation to home politics, particularly to themes such as Brexit and a second Scottish Independence Referendum. In most cases the authors were critical of Trump; only in a minority of tweets did people declare themselves to be in favour or supportive of the US President and his policies. Conversations often responded to events announced in the media or to statements made by official Twitter accounts, including that of Donald Trump himself.

This contextual information supported the findings mentioned above – namely that the pre-modern past of Europe, including the trope of Rome and the Roman Empire, tended to be leveraged less by the US population than in Italy or the UK. The most frequently recurring words in this corpus were terms related to the decline and fall of the Roman Empire (‘fall’, ‘collapse’, decline’ and ‘empire’), the verbs ‘keeping out’, ‘building’, ‘rebuilding’ and ‘work’, together with nouns such as ‘history’, ‘time’, ‘Scotland’ and ‘Mexico’ (see [Table 6.3](#)). These frequencies suggest a prevalence of frames expressing the supposedly divisive function of the wall and its effectiveness – ‘work’ as opposed to ‘don’t work’ – which were also very prominent across a different range of online publications. In addition, the image of the fall of empires, and of the Roman Empire in particular, may be identified as linked to the need for building or rebuilding walls and the success of these initiatives.

Examining other terms associated with those that recurred most frequently allows their use to be better situated (see [Table 6.4](#)). The theme of the Roman Empire’s decline and fall is clearly connected with the work and interpretation of the eighteenth-century historian Edward Gibbon, who wrote the monumental *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (see [Chapter 7](#), pp. 146–7). The desirability of rebuilding a wall to keep out the Scots is also present, as is the simultaneous use,

Table 6.3 Tokens featuring at least 100 times within the corpus of 4,380 tweets. Tokens most relevant to the aims of the analysis are shown in bold

Tokens featuring at least 100 times
America, build , built, can, china, collaps , day, declin , donald, don’t, emperor , empir , end, fall , fell , get, great, hadrian , histori , holi, just, keep , know, last, like, look, make, mexico , new, now, one, pay , people, read, rebuild , roman , say, scotland , see, think, time, trump, usa, wall, want, way, will, world, year

Table 6.4 Term associations within the corpus of 4,380 tweets. The strength of the correlation is expressed in brackets for each token

Keep (correlations >0.20)
Scot, out, hadrian, progress, mexican
Scot (correlations >0.20)
Keep, buildawal, bay, debi, trump, funct, pay
Rebuild (correlation >0.15)
Scotland, hadrian, pay, trump, scot, wall
Histori (correlation >0.15)
Repeat, learn
Hadrian (correlation >0.15)
Wall, trump, build, rebuild, scotland, wallhadrian, built, pay, mexico, scot, border, keep, berlin, china, mexican
Wall (correlation >0.15)
Hadrian, berlin, china, great, trump, build, built, troy, mexico, border, bank, keep, jericho, pay, rebuild
Fall (correlation >0.12)
Rise, declin, empir, roman, gibbon, read, apart, empire

within the same tweets, of parallels with a number of historical walls – especially Hadrian’s Wall, the Great Wall of China and the Berlin Wall; these also recurred most often in media narratives. The role of history as a source of information from which to learn, as a result of its perceived repetitive and circular nature, featured in the same way across the corpus of online publications. The range of themes covered in those publications was much more varied, however, and is not fully represented in most of the tweets considered here. A qualitative analysis of a random sample of 400 tweets (approximately 10 per cent) has provided further insights.

The first theme that emerged from such qualitative inspection is concerned with the contemporary perception of border walls and frontiers. Trump’s implementation of a ‘peace through strength’ policy and the building of a wall was interpreted as repeating a similar strategy to that of Hadrian in the Roman past – as well as that of Republican President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. Hadrian’s Wall was evoked in ways that primarily highlighted its divisive function (as shown in [Tables 6.3](#) and [6.4](#)) and its potential for marking the break-up of polities, also

using the crystallised opposition between ‘walls’ and ‘bridges’. This is the case for both those comments that oppose such walls and argue against their use and also those, fewer in number, that welcome them. Building walls was characterised as proof of lack of ‘progress’ against an expectation of development with an underlying conception of time as linear and circular. That progress is seen as possible if we learn from the past and change our direction – if we fail to do so, history will repeat itself.

Some of the Twitter users who claimed that Hadrian’s Wall ‘worked’, and that, on this basis, Trump’s wall will work too, stated that they would also welcome a wall between the US and Canada. The two walls of Hadrian and Trump were ultimately indicated as useful to ‘keep out’ various ‘out groups’ of ‘Scottish’, ‘Scots’, ‘Picts’, ‘Celts’, ‘barbarians’ and ‘Druids’. With the exception of the ‘Druids’, these categories very much reflected, in an aggregated and condensed way, the ‘out groups’ featured in the online publications and those that, at different points of its history, the wall has been evoked to exclude.

The idea of Hadrian’s Wall as separating Romans from barbarians has characterised the interpretation of this monument in Roman and early medieval times (Hingley 2020). The *Historia Augusta* (*de vita Hadriani* XI, 2), written in the fourth century AD, reported that Hadrian ‘built a wall for eighty miles, which was to separate the barbarians from the Romans’ (Birley 2005). The same divisive function and ‘in group’/‘out group’ concepts have been identified in the works of Gildas and Bede, who wrote respectively in the sixth and eighth centuries AD. In *The Excidio Britonum* Gildas recounts, possibly from oral history sources, that the Britons asked Rome to assist them in building a wall as a result of attacks from the Scots and the Picts (Hingley 2012). In his *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, completed in AD 731, Bede drew on Gildas, among other sources, to ascribe the building of structures along the line of Hadrian’s Wall to the end of the period of Roman occupation and to the need to defend those territories from the Irish and the Picts. Hadrian’s Wall was known as ‘Picts’ Wall’ until the mid-eighteenth century, when its construction was attributed to an earlier period and it became known as the ‘Roman Wall’ (Hingley 2012).

The notion of Hadrian’s Wall as ‘the English Wall’ is also deeply rooted in history, and particularly in the period before the Acts of Union between England and Scotland in 1706–7. From the tenth to the twelfth centuries the area crossed by the Wall was known as ‘the debatable lands’, a heavily contested Anglo-Scottish border zone (Hingley 2012). In this context the remains of Hadrian’s Wall must have had an impact on the

minds of at least part of the population. They were interpreted as an almost natural border line until the 1707 Act of Union.

The 'out groups' noted above have endured and collectively accumulated over centuries; through Twitter, they have become an agglomeration forming part of the contemporary, intangible heritage of the border. The framing of Hadrian's Wall in the virtual space of Twitter has reflected an important aspect of the embodied experience of visitors offline. Just like the visitors in an interesting study undertaken by Robert Witcher (2010a), Twitter users in my research tended to embrace the perspective of the Romans and, in the post-Roman period, that of the English. The groups of 'others' that the monument was said to be 'keeping out' in the tweets were those who lived, whether in reality or in people's imagination, to the north of the frontier line.

The dominant perspective of Romanisation, which has informed the ways in which the Roman past has influenced local identities and ideas of nation in the British Isles, has returned on Twitter to become more contemporary than ever. However, in some of the micro-blogs scant traces existed of characterisations of Hadrian's Wall that were not racialised but that acknowledged, for example, the contribution of Septimius Severus to the repairing and rebuilding of the Wall. This occurrence, and particularly the emperor's African origin, was raised to denounce the paradoxical nature of the decision made by Trump to issue an immigration ban. This will be discussed in further depth later in this section. The political micro-activism activated on Twitter drew on this theme to argue in support of those affected by the ban and against the philosophy of physical and symbolic wall building – thus re-balancing the core 'whiteness' of 'official' portrayals and interpretations of Hadrian's Wall offline (Tolia-Kelly 2011).

It is in light of their supposedly shared divisive function, simplified to the extreme, that very different walls have been juxtaposed in many of the tweets. For example, Hadrian's Wall and Trump's wall have been placed next to the Chinese Wall, the Berlin Wall, the Maginot Line, the Soviet Wall, the walls of Troy, the Ranikot Wall, the West Bank Wall and the Kumbhalgarh Wall. Here the arguments seemingly reflected some of those made in online publications, but in a less complex and less articulated manner. A minority of Twitter users evoked the porous nature of walls in general, and of Hadrian's Wall in particular, together with the latter's debated function. Some of these users pointed out that the Wall should not be used to call for a separation between Scotland and England because it lies wholly within England. Others underlined the performative role of the monument since the time of its construction or its function for

collecting custom duties or undertaking surveillance, rather than as a means of dividing Roman Britons from ‘others’.

Additional symbolic and commemorative functions of the Wall were either mentioned or emerged indirectly. Both Hadrian’s Wall and Trump’s wall were leveraged as symbols of ‘strength’ or, conversely, of ‘self-focus’, ‘oppression’ and ‘xenophobia’. Trump’s wall, for example, was either said to ‘immortalise’ the power of Donald Trump or considered as an expression of contemptible ‘narcissism’. Partly connected to the commemorative function of the wall is the heritagisation of Trump’s wall. One tweet mentioned, whether seriously or humorously, that there was an expectation that Trump’s wall might become a World Heritage Site and a place where ‘selfies’ would be taken. In contrast to this view, for those for whom the eventual designation of World Heritage Site would have marked the end of any divisive functions of such walls, Trump could visit Hadrian’s Wall and realise ‘what happens to walls in the end’.

Whether or not this was intended to be a sarcastic comment, this way of drawing on the international significance of Hadrian’s Wall as a property within the Frontiers of the Roman Empire World Heritage Site (FREWS) was very different from the prevalent framing given by news media outlets. The latter leveraged the World Heritage status, and the image of international flows of tourists travelling to visit Hadrian’s Wall, in order to emphasise the connecting nature of borders. In turn, this framing was in line with the FREWS’s intent to present the frontiers of the Roman Empire as a transnational monument and a place of encounter. Heritage initiatives and permanent museum displays offline have aimed to communicate this idea – for example through the *Connecting Light* installation along Hadrian’s Wall in 2012 and the permanent display on the experiences of contemporary frontiers at Tullie House Museum in Carlisle, at the western ‘end’ of Hadrian’s Wall (Hingley 2018) (Fig. 6.5).

In summary, news media and popular magazines have played a key role in shaping people’s experiences of topics such as the US–Mexican border debate and public uses of the pre-modern past in this context. Individuals on Twitter have re-hashed and expressed some of the frames deployed by online media outlets, but have resisted others and proposed their own, in line with the findings of recent research on the framing of social conflicts in news coverage compared to Twitter (Ahmed, Cho and Jaidka 2019). Whether rejected or embraced, a general view of borders as divisive and resilient structures with long-term agency has emerged, despite the more nuanced and varied interpretations offered by news and magazine articles online as well as heritage curation projects offline.



Fig. 6.5 *Living Frontiers* display. Tullie House Museum, UK. Photo © Chiara Bonacchi.

This divisiveness has operated on categories of discrete ‘peoples’ that directly or indirectly leveraged insistent dualities between civilised societies and barbarians, Romans (or English) and Picts (or Scots), revealing a cumulation of antagonistic identities forged over centuries of ‘othering’. These images, dualities and narratives have remained the go-to repertoires associated with walls both in the past and in the present for individuals active on Twitter and probably based largely in the UK. However, it is important at the same time to note that Hadrian’s Wall was deracialised by some Twitter users, possibly also as a result of work on decolonisation conducted recently on the Wall and within heritage more broadly, in step with the directions taken in other sectors and parts of society. An emphasis was placed on the individual remains of walls, satirically referred to as monuments of the self, places for Trump’s memorialisation and locations where selfies would be taken.

Myth-making in Twitter debates on US immigration

In addition to Hadrian’s Wall, other aspects of the Roman period, and to some extent of the post-Roman past, were mobilised in the collection focusing on Twitter debates about US immigration and the US travel ban (see [Table 6.1](#)). Examining these uses is important to situate the

leveraging of historical borderworks within the political discussions under consideration here, as well as to draw comparisons with the kinds of myth-making found central to populist nationalist discourse in the case studies of Italian populism and Brexit (see [Chapters 4 and 5](#)).

References to the pre-modern past of Europe are shown in [Fig. 6.3](#). They are fewer in number overall than those appearing in posts, comments and replies posted on Brexit-themed Facebook pages, or on the Facebook pages of populist parties and their leaders in Italy. Assuming that the three case studies were dominated by tweets and posts from social media users living in the US, UK and Italy, is it possible to infer that the voicing of concerns and beliefs relating to contemporary social issues on social media is more of a European phenomenon than a North American one? If so, this would be despite the latter's long-standing tradition of embedding the classical world in the construction and deconstruction of ideas of nation (see [Chapter 3](#)). I return to this discussion in [Chapter 7](#) where I explore the social fabrics of myth-making.

In all three case studies, however, terms pertaining to the Roman past were prevalent throughout. In the US case, the Roman Empire featured in 13 tweets, seven of which focused on the 'fall' of the empire, identifying this as a result of immigration and using it to justify the need for border-control policies. The word 'barbarian' was also used as an image to signify regression, together with the adjective 'medieval' and, in one case, with the phrase 'third world' (for example, 'third-world, medieval barbarism'). 'Muslims' or 'the influx of Islam' were aligned with barbarians while 'liberals' were associated with the Romans, who 'opened the gates' and allowed the collapse of their empire. Julius Caesar was generally evoked as a symbol of both greatness and anti-democratic despotism, in much the same way as he featured in Brexit-supportive Facebook posts, comments or replies probably published by UK-based users.

We may hypothesise that, whereas the decline and collapse of the Roman Empire and Caesar were more socially rooted images within a US context, this is less the case for Hadrian's Wall, which has a narrower circulation among different social groups. Future, longer-term longitudinal studies may be able to prove or disprove this hypothesis. If confirmed, this would provide the foundation to understand better the different extent to which some myths have become part of the unconscious heritage transmitted within a given society, referred to by Bourdieu as 'habitus' ([Bourdieu 2010](#)). A reference to 'Vikings' appeared in relation to the Swedish response to the #MuslimBan. They were called upon as the myth of origin for present-day US people who have changed from 'Vikings to victims'; references were also made to an episode involving the alleged rape of a Swedish woman by a

Somali immigrant. In another tweet, this time satirical, Trump wears a horned helmet – often linked to the Vikings in popular culture – on which the slogan ‘make America great again’ is engraved. There is also an ironic perspective to this tweet, suggesting that the Vikings should be banned as they were the ‘original immigrants’ to the US.

Summary

The performative role of Trump’s wall is widely accepted in political science research; so is the fundamentally racialised nature of this borderwork that was intended to protect white privilege by supposedly ‘keeping out’ illegal Mexican migrants and terrorists. In making his binary argument to build – as opposed to ‘not build’ – a wall on the US–Mexican border, Trump drew on the Great Wall of China as an example of the successful construction of a very long border wall with a defensive function. However, his discourse, along with that of other presidential candidates and of the two main US parties on both Facebook and Twitter, was devoid of references to the Roman, pre- and post-Roman past in arguing the issue of wall-building and border control. By contrast, news media, magazines and blogs made a number of comparisons between Trump’s wall and historical walls, mobilising especially the material anatomy, function, destiny and contemporary meanings of Hadrian’s Wall. In doing so, most of them communicated a more complex image of the Wall, and of historical walls more generally – they did not portray them simplistically as being necessarily successful in defending the territories of an empire or a country from attacks by external forces.

A notable exception was *Fox News*, which embraced both divisiveness and defence as undebatable functions of Hadrian’s Wall and other walls. The channel went on to argue that walls could succeed and were justifiable constructions, despite their ‘chequered’ history. Drawing on a number of expert sources from the disciplines of archaeology, anthropology and international relations, the majority of the media outlets examined were shaped by and communicated recent interpretations of Hadrian’s Wall as porous, a place of encounter and connectivity – not least as a result of the World Heritage Site status granted to this property, which is part of the Frontiers of the Roman Empire World Heritage Site.

These subtler and more debated readings of the Wall, however, do not feature as much in Twitter coverage of the border debate that included references to Trump’s wall and Hadrian’s Wall. Here the dominant narrative was characterised by divisiveness and adopted by both the supporters and

the opponents of Trump's wall. The divisive role of walls was part of the habitus of the Twitter users who participated in the debate and, according to their framing of the tweets, were largely based in the UK (Bourdieu 2010). Although this might not seem surprising, given that Hadrian's Wall is located in northern England, it is significant as the monument was featured in association with Trump's wall in prominent US newspapers and magazines that had both wide offline circulation and online readership. Furthermore, Twitter discourse in the main reiterated the colonial and white gaze on Hadrian's Wall: the perspective of an insider whose 'outside' (whether antagonised or not) comprised groups such as barbarians, Scots and Picts. It was the gaze of someone who identified with Roman possession and domination. Evidence of post-colonial approaches to the Wall were also present, however. These were articulated through the identity of Septimius Severus and the recognition of his rebuilding of the Wall, in order partly to deracialise the monument (Tolia-Kelly 2011).

In the Facebook and Twitter discourses on the topic of immigration posted by the US presidential candidates and parties during the run-up to the 2016 election, and thereafter, references to the Roman, pre-Roman and post-Roman past were virtually absent. References to those periods by other Facebook and Twitter users were also extremely limited, compared to those in the UK and Italian case studies. The aspects of Europe's pre-modern past that were evoked focused most commonly on the Roman Empire, its flourishing and its decline and fall. The image of the Roman Empire (and of the Roman Republic) has been central to the making of nationhood in the United States. Beyond this trope, however, the Iron Age, Roman and early medieval periods were almost entirely ignored. They were not part of the repertoire through which the US public engaged with contemporary issues of immigration and border control. Nor did they play a crucial role in the discourse that aimed to exclude 'out groups' as part of populist nationalist agendas.

Notes

- 1 Please note that, as of July 2018, it was only possible to hydrate part of the tweet IDs listed in the collections.
- 2 On 3 August 2020 I performed a Google search for web items including the keywords 'Hadrian', 'wall' and 'Trump' and published in English between 1 January 2015 and 1 August 2020. The search returned 157 results. Of these, 51 were published between 2015 and the end of 2018 and are relevant to this chapter (see Table 6.2).
- 3 CC BY-SA 3.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>.

- 4 For example, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Huffington Post*.
- 5 *Market Watch*.
- 6 For example, *Vice* (satirically mentioned), *BBC Newsbeat*.
- 7 *Huffington Post*.
- 8 It should be noted that a similar analysis to the one undertaken on Brexit-themed Facebook pages, presented in [Chapter 5](#), could not be undertaken here. Facebook users created a very small number of public Facebook pages focusing on the US–Mexican border issue compared to that of Brexit. Furthermore, changes in the Facebook API prevented the extraction of comments and replies on these pages and on those of US politicians, political parties and campaigns.

Experts, authority and social fabrics

Introduction

This chapter investigates the leveraging of expert authority and the influence of expert interpretations within contemporary populist nationalist discourse. It draws specifically on the opinions expressed by sympathisers of the League and Five Star Movement (5SM) on Facebook, and by individuals who discussed Brexit on the same platform. I will begin by examining Facebook users' historical sense-generation in relation to the 'end' of the Roman Empire, and the ways in which historiographical debates focused on this topic are reflected in people's historical consciousness. This chapter continues with an exploration of language legitimisation, identifying and analysing the kinds of expertise evoked in order to support and validate specific antagonistic forms of othering.

I will then discuss the relationships between the findings and structures of power and authority that play a critical role in shaping public engagement with an 'official' past in Italy, compared to the UK and other anglophone countries. In this regard it is important to note that the Italian case study comprises comments written in Italian on the Facebook pages of Italian parties and their leaders (the League and Matteo Salvini, 5SM and Beppe Grillo). As such, it has national scope and relevance, providing the opportunity to situate the impact of expertise on Facebook discourse in the context of the social fabric of Italy. For the most part, Facebook contributors to such pages either live in Italy or were born there and still maintain an interest in the political events of this country.

Brexit, by contrast, is a political event with international significance. Public Facebook pages concerned with this topic comprise a majority of social media texts in English, and the data collection filtered only these

texts. Although it is safe to assume that most of the posts, comments and replies published on Brexit-themed Facebook pages were authored by people residing in or having strong ties with the UK, they cannot be straightforwardly considered ‘the product’ of British social structures and dynamics. These considerations are accommodated by focusing initially on the Italian case, then treating the Brexit example as an international comparison. Finally, this chapter reflects on the extent to which ‘post-truth’ regimes of knowing are affirming, and to which claims regarding a supposed ‘demise of expertise’ apply to scholars researching the human past and its present-day relevance.

Historical consciousness

The philosopher Jörn Rüsen has defined historical consciousness as the ‘mental procedure by which the past is interpreted for the sake of understanding the present and anticipating the future’ (Rüsen 2012, 45). Historical consciousness intervenes in the ‘mediation between values and action-oriented actuality’ and has the practical function to ‘bestow upon actuality a temporal direction, an orientation that can guide action intentionally by the agency of historical memory’ (Rüsen 2014: 66–7). Such a function may occur in ‘external practical life’ or in the ‘temporal dimension of human subjectivity’ (Rüsen 2014, 68).

According to Rüsen, historical consciousness may take the form of four possible and potentially overlapping modes: traditional (uses of the past by means of identification), exemplary (uses of the past by means of generalisation), critical (uses of the past to frame the present by means of negation) and genetic (interpretation of the past as historicised and not present-centred) (Table 7.1).

Based on Rüsen’s work, a growing number of research projects, primarily within history didactics, have endeavoured to design, test and evaluate pedagogical tools aimed at nurturing historical consciousness. These efforts, focused on studying the use of narratives of the past in future-orientated decision-making processes, are prevalent in continental Europe (Seixas 2017, 61). British and American theorisations of history education, on the other hand, have privileged historical thinking. They have been described as centred on ‘second-order concepts’, on the ‘way we go about doing history’ rather than ‘what history is about’ (Seixas 2017, 61). Of course, the two pathways are not mutually exclusive; countries such as Canada have indeed cultivated both. Working with either or both of these two approaches, also depending on the different

Table 7.1 Rösen's four categories of historical consciousness, defining identities over time (Source: [Rösen 2014](#), 72)

	Traditional	Exemplary	Critical	Genetic
Experience of time	Repetition of an obligatory form of life	Representing general rules of conduct or value systems	Problematising actual forms of life and value systems	Change of alien forms of life into proper ones
Patterns of historical significance	Permanence of an obligatory life form in temporal change	Timeless rules of social life, timeless validity of values	Break of patterns of historical significance by denying their validity	Developments in which forms of life change in order to maintain their permanence
Orientation of external life	Affirmation of pre-given orders by consent about a valid common life	Relating peculiar situations to regularities of what had happened and should happen	Delimitation of one's own standpoint against pre-given obligations	Acceptance of different standpoints within a comprising perspective of common development
Orientation of internal life	Internalisation of pre-given life forms by limitation – role taking	Relating self-concepts to general rules and principles – role legitimisation by generalisation	Self-reliance by refutation of obligations from outside – role making	Change and transformation of self-concepts as necessary conditions of permanence and self-reliance – balance of roles
Relation to moral values	Morality is dictated by obligatory orders; moral validity as unquestionable stability by tradition	Morality is the generality of obligation in values and value systems	Breaking the moral power of values by denying their validity	Temporalisation of morality; chances of further development become a condition of morality
Relation to moral reasoning	The reasons of values is their effective pre-giveness, enabling consent in moral questions	Arguing by generalisation, referring to regularities and principles	Establishing value criticism as important strategies of moral discourse	Temporal change becomes a decisive argument for the validity of moral values

structures of national curricula, education researchers have exposed a number of recurring trends regarding the nexus between past, present and future. For example, studies undertaken in the US, Canada and Australia have highlighted communities' difficulties of engaging with history education and official national narratives, in contrast with strong and diverse popular kinds of historical sense-making (Clark and Peck 2020). Similarly, survey-based research conducted in Europe has revealed that students have less interest in official history learned in the classroom than in personal or family history. Furthermore, results have shown that students' simple narratives of history incorporate the notion of imagined community (Angvik and von Borries 1997; Sandahl 2015).

Historical consciousness may be seen as a fundamentally Western concept which rests on ways of knowing that are rooted in European-centred Enlightenment philosophy (Seixas 2017; Clark and Peck 2020; Nordgren 2019). However, Rüsen has characterised it as an anthropological universal, encompassing 'tradition', and this allows it to be understood as a 'trans-historical and trans-cultural' 'interpretive process' (cit. Nordgren 2019, 794; Ruin 2019). It seems therefore appropriate to leverage the idea of historical consciousness to understand how Twitter or Facebook users have mobilised narratives about the end of the Roman Empire in order to mark antagonistic divisions between themselves and others in the present and to create new and different futures. It is also important to note that affect, linked to cognition, plays a powerful role in the mobilisation of the past as part of historical sense generation (see, for example, Crouch 2015; Smith, Wetherell and Campbell 2018).

Like memory, historical consciousness may be individual or collective. It develops over time through an array of encounters with the past that include school education, visits to heritage sites or watching television programmes and films (Clark 2014, 89; Clark and Peck 2020). Indeed, there is a dialectic relation between memory – a 'society's retention and loss of information about its past in the familiar terms of individual remembering and forgetting' (Schwartz 1991, 302) – and the mental procedure of dealing with the past to make sense of the present and anticipate what is to come. In her publication on journalists' use of collective memory, Jill Edy (1999) has argued that the impact of formal education and direct expert communications on the configuration of public memory is limited. By contrast, she has claimed that the most widespread images and understandings of the past are crafted by mass media through an arsenal of commemorations, historical analogies and the historical contexts provided for contemporary events.

Commemorations fit the model of ‘tradition’ proposed by Rüsen and historical analogies may align with exemplary modes of historical consciousness, since they consist of comparisons between present and past situations deemed similar (Edy 1999). Such analogies can be ‘powerful symbolic resources that are pressed into service by various political actors’ (Edy 1999, 78). Historical analogies have also been researched within the political sciences, where scholars have stressed their frequent use as methods of persuasion, rather than of making sense of the present through analysis; for this reason, Leira has suggested treating them as myths (Mumford 2015; Leira 2017). Fictional narratives, especially televised ones, have been attributed an even higher transformative power than factual ones (Birkner and Donk 2020), but have been shown to focus frequently on elitist representations of societies and on ‘events’ resulting from the individual actions of ‘great men’ (Cohn 1976; Nimmo and Combs 1983). Finally, social media may become a place for argumentative exchange that also works to influence collective memory and historical consciousness (Birkner and Donk 2020).

Experts and trust

What is the role of ‘experts’ within processes of historical sense generation? Important debates surrounding the public profile and social roles of archaeology, history and heritage professionals have recently filled the pages of several high-profile scientific journals. Some of these discussions, touched upon in the introduction to this book, have examined expert attitudes and behaviours towards exclusionary narratives that leverage the human past and circulate in the public sphere (Richardson and Booth 2017; Bonacchi 2018; Brophy 2018; Gardner 2018; González-Ruibal, González and Criado-Boado 2018; Harrison 2018; Smith and Campbell 2018; Popa 2019; Barclay and Brophy 2020).

Building on these reflections, I argue that two guiding principles may help to comprehend how experts influence individual and collective historical consciousness today. The first principle is probably rather uncontroversial and agreed upon: that scholars and practitioners in history, archaeology and heritage are political when framing the scope of their work and when communicating it to ‘public’ audiences. Researchers choose to focus on those specific aspects of the past that they feel are most relevant and interesting based on their personal sensibilities as well as wider socio-cultural concerns. Equally key is how academic knowledge is exchanged with diverse groups within the population and the motivations

that inform these dissemination efforts. Gardner or Popa, for example, have chosen to disclose their personal views concerning the European Union as a political project and regarding populist nationalist sentiments; they have embraced and commended a militant role for public intellectuals to counteract divisive uses of the past (Gardner 2017; González-Ruibal, González and Criado-Boado 2018; Popa 2019).

Although this position is legitimate, it assumes that experts are able to speak 'purely' and perhaps does not fully consider the complex communication dynamics in which they are immersed. Such dynamics are conditioned by structural factors such as the neoliberal interests of a large part of media industries, and the hyper-connectivity of web infrastructures and globalisation, to name just a few of the most incisive (see discussion in Bonacchi and Krzyzanska 2021). To what extent may 'experts' communicate 'accurately' in a media context that is pre-cooked, filtered, vetted and manipulated possibly even more – or more covertly – than the one which pre-dated the 1990s and was dominated by broadcasting and the press? While the influence of these mass media continues, social media platforms have been deliberately fostering the emergence of echo chambers of like-minded people. Can expert voices be influential in these circumstances? How can this be achieved and under what terms?

There have been several documented cases of research being presented to the public in scientifically questionable but media-sexy ways to appease the press and secure media coverage (Bonacchi 2018; Brophy 2018). Scientific commentators have also noted that neoliberal academics encourage these dissemination practices and push scholars to stress the world-leading nature and social impact of as many of their scientific outputs as possible (Brophy 2018; Barclay and Brophy 2020; Bonacchi and Krzyzanska 2021). Furthermore, expert voices may be implicated, although unwittingly, in forms of heritage-based neo-tribalism, as shown by the results of a study on the deployment of ancient DNA research on human origins within Twitter (Bonacchi and Krzyzanska 2021). This project has evidenced that, despite being motivated by the progressive desire to present race as a modern, socially constructed concept, expert interventions have resulted in enticing antagonistic othering more than soothing it (Bonacchi and Krzyzanska 2021). The research has also indicated that 'trust in experts' was the identity marker that co-occurred with all other markers to outcast specific groups in society. Scepticism and rejection are directed at experts especially when the public feels that the experts' narratives have been politicised as a result of openly pursued activist agendas (Bonacchi and Krzyzanska 2021). However, if a 'gap'

does exist between experts and the public it is not irreparable nor universal, as subsequent sections of this chapter will show.

After the vote in favour of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States, the term ‘post-truth’ was chosen by Oxford Dictionaries as 2016 Word of the Year. In doing so the Dictionaries recognised its ‘significant spike in use in 2016’, often in combination with the noun ‘politics’ (Oxford Languages 2020). They stated that the adjective ‘post-truth’ ‘relat[es] to or denot[es] circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’ (Oxford Languages 2020).

The pivot of this definition is a somehow Cartesian opposition between cognition and emotion which has been disproved by a conspicuous body of interdisciplinary literature, as noted in the previous section. Such opposition has frequently been discussed by scholars, opinion influencers and the public in connection with the idea of a surging mistrust in experts. However, social science investigations have reached different and sometimes diverging conclusions about the status of expert authorities in contemporary Western societies.

During the last few years an increasing number of publications have speculatively critiqued – or empirically rebutted – the claim of a generalised public mistrust in experts. For example, after reviewing survey data of public attitudes towards experts in the UK and the EU, Dommert and Pearce have concluded that there is insufficient evidence to make any firm claims to support this lack of trust (Dommert and Pearce 2019). Furthermore, the evidence that does exist suggests that these attitudes tend to be positive rather than negative (Dommert and Pearce 2019). It is critical at this point to ask exactly who ‘experts’ are and where may such expertise be found? To answer this question, I will now discuss the second guiding principle to the analysis of the role of experts in historical consciousness.

Heritage studies have typically defined interpretations of the past that have been sanctioned by experts as Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD). The latter has been described as manifesting itself in the ‘officialdom’ of heritage places in the care of government agencies, in national museums or school curricula, to name just a few examples (Waterton and Smith 2009; Smith 2010). As a concept, AHD has had a transformative impact on heritage research and practice, equipping professionals with tools to counteract interpretations of the past that are dismissive of the variability of social values. Framing AHD has helped us to recognise that objects, places, practices, people and ideas from the past may have meanings other than those officially recognised, which typically privilege the

aesthetic properties of tangible resources. Together with these significant merits, however, the notion of AHD has a limitation: it conveys an idea of ‘officialdom’ and of ‘officially framed expertise’ as monolithic.

By contrast, expertise is constructed through a number of interactions between people, places and objects and – importantly – through individuals contributing their own personal idiosyncrasies, even when these individuals work with history, archaeology or heritage based at ‘sanctioned’ organisations (Carr 2010; Collins 2018). If we think of expert interpretations of the past as ‘History’, we must acknowledge that these live multiple lives and filter into a varied array of domains within which people’s historical sense-generation arises. By means of example, it will be sufficient to refer to the impact of academic framings of Romanisation in the English school curriculum today (Hingley, Bonacchi and Sharpe 2018; Sharpe 2019); or to the ways in which views of the Romans as a civilising force, working to achieve a destiny of empire for the benefit of their subjects, have percolated for decades into television programmes shown in both the UK and Italy. It is this kind of expertise – present within different pockets of society and constructed, distributed and utilised through socialisation – that will now be identified in the Facebook posts, comments and replies that mobilised the end of the Roman Empire for pro- or anti-populist nationalist purposes.

The end of the Roman Empire in historiography

The end of the Western Roman Empire has long been a trope within popular culture and a topic addressed by Western thought and historiography. The notion of a ‘decline and collapse’ of Rome has been closely associated with the idea of a subdivision of time into the three phases of classical antiquity, barbarism and decadence, followed by an era of rebirth inspired by the legacy of the classical world. This tripartition, which emerged from humanism, has resiliently endured to permeate the habitus of Western populations for generations (Wickham 2009).

The perception of a *media aetas* has been varied within humanistic culture. It was certainly less positively constructed by Italian humanists than by those of Germany or France, who regarded it as a period that generated some of their political institutions (Vitolo 2000). Since the eighteenth century, this *aetas* has been the subject of renewed and intensified attention. Enlightenment thinkers critiqued specific aspects of their contemporaneous political and social structures that they considered

to have been derived from medieval regression and superstition (Womersley 1988; Gillett 2017). From that point onwards the ‘end’ of the Roman Empire began to be revisited and examined in greater depth. Over time scholars have proposed a number of interpretations of this phenomenon. They have viewed it alternatively or simultaneously as a break or transformation of the Roman world, and have provided several different reasons for this based on written or material evidence.

The first thesis to be developed – arguably the one still most widespread within popular culture – was advanced by Edward Gibbon, author of *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which was published in London between 1776 and 1788 (Gibbon 1999). In the crucial timespan between the American Declaration of Independence, on 4 July 1776, and the years immediately preceding the French Revolution in 1789, the Roman and British Empires were strongly connected in the minds of political and intellectual elites living in the territories of contemporary Britain and North America. The English identified their nascent empire with that of the Romans; they believed themselves to be the Romans’ legitimate heirs and were committed to spreading ‘civilisation’ via colonisation. At the same time the American Revolution had led Americans to distance themselves from the images of the past embraced by the English; the ‘example’ of the Roman Empire was consequently rejected as despotic. However, the model of the Roman Republic, displaying *mores* and virtues which the Americans saw as a moral antithesis to the excesses and corruptions of the empire, were embraced and praised (see Chapter 3).

This was a time when young gentlemen, mostly from European countries, undertook so-called ‘grand tours’, travelling to Italy to visit cities such as Florence, Venice and Rome to experience classical antiquity for themselves. Among them were Goethe, who recounted his experience in *Italian Journey*, the artist Thomas Cole, whose *Course of Empires* was very much inspired by his time in Rome, and Edward Gibbon himself, who reportedly decided to write his monumental *History* while sitting ‘amidst the ruins of the Capitol’ on 15 October 1764 (Gibbon 2006; Goethe 1970; Barringer 2018). Gibbon’s work began with the reign of the emperor Hadrian during the second century AD, a time then deemed to be the cultural peak of the ancient world, and ended in 1453, the year of the ‘fall’ of Constantinople and its conquest by the Ottomans under Sultan Mehmed II. The *History* covered over 1,000 years, a period it described as a continued decline of the Roman Empire caused by three main phenomena: the fading of civic virtue and valour; the diffusion of Christianity, critiqued by Enlightenment philosophy; and the suffering due to invasions by Germanic peoples (Fig. 7.1).



Fig. 7.1 *Sack of Rome AD 455* by Karl Bryullov, between 1833 and 1836, contemporaneous of Thomas Cole. Held at Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia. © Public domain. The notion of the impact of barbaric invasions remained in nineteenth-century historiography and became part of the repertoire of Romantic art.

This conception of the ‘fall’ of the Roman Empire was supported by scholars until the twentieth century, when the Belgian historian Henri Pirenne proposed his famous thesis centred in medieval economic history. In *Mahomet et Charlemagne* (1935) Pirenne linked the Carolingian ‘rebirth’ to the Arab conquest, arguing that ‘without Mohammed, Charlemagne would indeed have been unconceivable’ (Pirenne 2012, 234). He moved away from the dichotomy between Romans and barbarians, and stressed how Germanic peoples entered the frontier areas of the empire without fundamentally changing its urban organisation; cities continued to serve as commercial, political and administrative hubs. In contrast to Gibbon, Pirenne supported the idea of a break of the Mediterranean *koinè*, which he considered to be one of the key markers of Imperial Rome. He attributed such a break specifically to the attacks perpetrated by the Arabs between the seventh and ninth centuries (Pirenne 2012). It is at this point, according to Pirenne, that the commercial exchanges on which the unity of the Mediterranean region had previously relied entered a state of crisis. The historian also suggested that, during the same period, the urban fabric of the territories once part of the

empire radically changed, either through shrinkage or transformation, and their economy became more prominently agricultural.

Pirenne's interpretation has had a mixed reception, although it continues to be debated and to provide a framework within or against which some historians and archaeologists continue to base their research (Effros 2017). The opponents of this thesis have objected to it on two main grounds. On the one hand, they have emphasised that both towns and the economy had dramatically metamorphosed and contracted long before the seventh century. On the other, they have argued that archaeological research undertaken during the last 30 to 40 years has proved that commerce had never ceased altogether, with luxury goods in particular continuing to circulate.

In different ways, the theses of both Gibbon and Pirenne have underpinned a view of decline only challenged substantially for the first time in the 1970s by North American historiography. In 1971 Peter Brown published *The World of Late Antiquity*. He chronologically located this period between the second and the eighth centuries and characterised it as a time of profound change and cultural transformation, rather than one of crisis (Brown 1971). Brown's work helped to reflect on the features that were distinctive of late antiquity without setting the latter in opposition to the preceding centuries. His interpretations emerged during the years immediately following the cultural, political and societal protests of the 1960s; it is in this 'environment' that the cultural and religious 'revolution' of late antiquity was theorised, replacing the paradigm of decline dominant until that point.

In the 1980s Walter Goffart took the argument further, proposing that Germanic peoples had been progressively and peacefully 'accommodated' within the frontiers of the Roman Empire (Goffart 1980). Goffart resisted the notion of barbaric invasions core to early modern historiography and questioned the violent nature of population movement during the fourth and fifth centuries. He deemed the crisis experienced by the Roman Empire in those years as a consequence of changes that the empire had brought upon itself rather than of the hostile attacks of incomers (Goffart 1980; 2006).

This current of international historiography, which has privileged ideas of multiculturalism, peaceful interaction and transformation, has been recently disrupted by the thesis proposed by the historian Bryan Ward-Perkins. In *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* he has returned to the argument that a socio-cultural fissure did occur, justifying the terms 'fall', 'break' and 'end of civilisation' in the light of a new wealth of data available also thanks to archaeological research (Ward-Perkins 2005). In his hotly

debated book, Ward-Perkins has stressed the violent character of conflict as well as a decrease in comfortable living as markers of pronounced change. He has challenged the views of both Brown and Goffart, stating that ‘the coming of the Germanic peoples was very unpleasant for the Roman population, and that the long-term effects of the dissolution of the empire were dramatic’ (Ward-Perkins 2005, 10). His analysis has focused on economic history and on an assessment of the material world in which people were immersed. However, Ward-Perkins has been careful to assess previous positions by recognising their merits and not to discard them completely. Today the debate remains open. A number of scholars support theses comparable to those backed by Ward-Perkins (for example, Heather 2010), while others continue to prefer interpretations of transformation (Pohl et al. 2018).

Public interpretations

The end of the Roman Empire was referred to in 134 comments published from 2010 to 2018 on the public Facebook pages of: the techno-populist 5SM party and its leader, Beppe Grillo; the populist nationalist League party and its leader, Matteo Salvini; and the nationalist and more electorally marginal CasaPound Italia and its leader, Simone Di Stefano (Tables 7.2 and 7.3).¹ The length of the comments evoking this historical

Table 7.2 Frequency of references to the end of the Roman Empire per year, across the Facebook pages of 5SM, the League and CasaPound Italia, and of the leaders of these parties

Frequency of references per year								
2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
2	5	2	9	10	21	29	29	27

Table 7.3 Frequency of references to the end of the Roman Empire from 2010 to 2018 within the Facebook pages of 5SM and Beppe Grillo, the League and Matteo Salvini, CasaPound Italia and Simone Di Stefano

Frequency of references from 2010 to 2018		
5SM and Grillo	League and Salvini	CasaPound and Di Stefano
33	90	11

phenomenon varied greatly from less than 10 words to well over 100, across all Facebook pages (Table 7.4). Around three-quarters of the texts are more than 10 to 13 words long, with more numerous but shorter comments published on the Facebook pages of the League and Matteo Salvini than on 5SM and Beppe Grillo (Table 7.4). The same applied to the extracts that refer specifically to the periods of the past explored here.

All of the modes of historical consciousness theorised by Rüsen (2014) appear in the corpus. However, the great majority of uses of the past align with an exemplary kind of consciousness (Table 7.5), where the idea of the end of the Roman Empire has been leveraged through analogies between the past and the present. In these cases, time was experienced through general rules considered to be applicable to different chronological contexts and to allow predicting what will happen based on comparisons and generalisations (Rüsen 2014). Traditional forms of consciousness were

Table 7.4 Descriptive summary statistics of the length (in words) of Facebook posts and comments in which the end of the Roman Empire was mentioned and of the specific extracts where the historical phenomenon was referenced

Length of Facebook posts and comments expressed in number of words					
5SM and Grillo		League and Salvini		CasaPound and Di Stefano	
Min.	7	Min.	6	Min.	5
1st Qu.	16	1st Qu.	21	1st Qu.	14.5
Median	65	Median	44	Median	24
Mean	143	Mean	64	Mean	42
3rd Qu.	169	3rd Qu.	84	3rd Qu.	46.5
Max.	655	Max.	313	Max.	182
Length of extracts referring to the end of the Roman Empire					
5SM and Grillo		League and Salvini		CasaPound and Di Stefano	
Min.	2	Min.	4	Min.	5
1st Qu.	10	1st Qu.	13	1st Qu.	12
Median	25	Median	24	Median	19
Mean	68	Mean	41	Mean	27
3rd Qu.	60	3rd Qu.	50	3rd Qu.	27.5
Max.	655	Max.	273	Max.	78

Table 7.5 Frequency of the modes of historical consciousness evidenced in the corpus

	Tradition	Exemplary	Critical	Genetic	NA
SSM and Grillo	0	21	0	9	2
League and Salvini	2	79	3	9	1
CasaPound and Di Stefano	0	7	0	3	1

very rare, as the ‘fall’ of Rome did not constitute a chronological timespan or theme that represented a myth of origin for Italians.

The end of the Roman Empire was, in fact, depicted largely in terms of an unwelcome phase that disrupted a previous state (or myth) of a now lost ‘golden age’. Equally, the critical kind of consciousness, where the present is defined in relation to the past in terms of opposition and a ‘break’, featured in only a very few comments. The notion of a ‘fall’ of Rome was not rejected or critiqued to express values of continuity and integration, but was fully embraced. Finally, genetic consciousness was evidenced across the Facebook pages, even though in a smaller number of cases than the exemplary type. Genetic consciousness does not treat the end of the Roman Empire in an episodal way; it rather approaches this phenomenon with a broader conception of time as entailing change aimed at retaining presence.

Mentions of the end of the Roman Empire tended to be isolated and, for the most part, they did not elicit responses; they were affirmed without argument (see [Table 7.6](#)). Facebook users mainly mobilised this historical phenomenon by addressing the causes that they believed had led to it, rather than by simply and briefly referring to the trope ([Table 7.6](#)).

Table 7.6 Frequency of Facebook posts and comments containing references to the end of the Roman Empire in which causation is expressed

Frequency of posts and comments featuring causation (total)		
SSM and Grillo	League and Salvini	CasaPound and Di Stefano
16 (of 33)	67 (of 90)	6 (of 11)
Frequency of posts and comments where others’ positions are acknowledged (total)		
SSM and Grillo	League and Salvini	CasaPound and Di Stefano
4 (of 33)	14 (of 90)	2 (of 11)

In all but one of the posts and comments evoking the end of the Roman Empire the latter was described as *'finito'* (finished), *'caduto'* (fallen), *'collassato'* (collapsed) or *'distrutto'* (destroyed); fewer posts referred to a state of 'crisis', 'decadence' or 'decline'. The fall of Rome was characterised in two main ways. In longer texts it was attributed to immigration and to reasons such as an increase in corruption and bribery, as well as other economic and demographic trends. More specifically, migratory movements were qualified as being 'beyond control' and 'savage', though also as a 'humanitarian emergency'. For these Facebook users, the Roman response had consisted of 'opening the frontiers', 'excessive permissiveness', allowing 'ethnic substitution' and granting citizenship to barbarian peoples 'coming from beyond the *Limes*'.² In some comments, granting citizenship was presented as a means of compensating for fewer births among the existing citizens of the empire, and to address a desperate demand for labour, tax revenues and the defence of the frontier. For example, in 2015, a Facebook user wrote on the page of Matteo Salvini that the Western Roman Empire had fallen because the Romans were not having 'a lot of children' any more and there were not enough people to work as farmers or to 'enlist'. Hence, the author of the comment continued, the Romans decided to draw upon the Visigoths – but these 'new arrivals' soon rebelled against their generals and masters and 'took Rome for themselves'.

Significantly, posts and comments published on the pages of 5SM and Beppe Grillo stressed 'corruption' as the chief cause of the end of the Roman Empire more than any other reason. In a comment published in 2012 on the Facebook page of Beppe Grillo, for instance, we read that the Romans were 'all corrupted'; they did not even realise that the barbarians had arrived because they were too focused on 'celebrating'.

On the whole, this first group of texts presents the 'end' of the empire as resulting from an internal crisis accentuated by migratory movements that were 'badly managed' by the Romans. In the words of a Facebook user, 'they gave border control to the barbarians'. The idea of a crisis from within is also attributed to the desire of 'getting rid of tyrants', in a sentence that echoes how the fall of Rome trope was used in the Brexit debate (see [Chapter 5](#), pp. 100–2).

In contrast, a second group of posts and comments does not refer to population movement in terms of migrations but of 'invasions' – 'barbaric' invasions or 'invasions of northern people'. For example, in 2018, the author of a comment written on the Facebook page of Matteo Salvini warned that, if no action were taken, Italy would 'vanish' and become the victim of 'hordes of Barbarians' as had happened to the Roman Empire.

However, there are also examples where the ‘migration’ and ‘invasion’ models are combined. This is the case in a comment published in September 2015 by a Facebook user who emphasised that barbarians had been ‘welcomed for years’ within the frontiers of the Roman Empire before they felt strong enough to ‘conquer’ large parts of this empire. Furthermore, in two comments the movements of barbarians said to have ‘fractured the Roman Empire’ are praised as having provided ‘a great service to humanity’ by ‘injecting new life in Europe’. This reference may be reminiscent of some of the continental, particularly German, uses of the concept of *Völkerwanderung* (the migration period).

In summary, in our dataset, the end of Imperial Rome was perceived as a nefarious event that ruined a great polity and, under new but comparable circumstances, was again threatening Italy and Europe. The framing of this phenomenon as one of ‘decline and fall’ constitutes a faint echo of Gibbon’s famous thesis. Its power rests in the use of language when referring to the collapse of the empire, whether described as a longer-term process through long explanations or briefly evoked in a rapturous manner. Although the title of Gibbon’s work has been variously present in individuals’ minds over the past decade, the words have been mainly leveraged as empty shells, filled with both contemporary motivations and more recent expert interpretations. The motif of barbaric invasions has been debated since the eighteenth century, but the reference to the ‘handling’ of incomers is one built on the positions taken in the wake of the Second World War – a time when, in a newly pacified Europe, scholars were inclined to explore theses of accommodation of Germanic peoples as alternatives to invasions (Goffart 1980).

Contrary to what has been argued by supporters of the accommodation theory, however, these ‘immigration flows’ are presented in Facebook comments as creating substantial damage to previous ways of life and potentially leading to a ‘take over’, if not an ethnic ‘substitution’. The longer texts that discussed the economic, demographic and ‘moral’ reasons for the crisis that weakened the empire and paved the way for population movements contributing to its fall reflected twentieth- and twenty-first-century historiography. To nuance this picture further, it is important to consider the specific sources cited for purposes of legitimisation of authority or rehashed in comments mentioning the end of the Roman Empire.

Authority and legitimation

The linguist Theo van Leeuwen (2007, 91) has developed a framework to analyse what he has referred to as the ‘language of legitimation’. This framework is used – quoting the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas – to ‘demarcate types of legitimate authority ... according to the forms and content of legitimation’ (Habermas 1988, 97). Authorisation is one of four categories of language legitimation identified by van Leeuwen, further broken down into tradition, conformity, personal, impersonal, expert and role model authority (van Leeuwen 2007, 92; Fig. 7.2). Our attention will focus particularly on the ways in which expert authority – legitimacy provided by ‘expertise rather than status’ – has been built into the comments that contained references to the end of the Roman Empire (van Leeuwen 2007, 95).

In the Facebook comments that leveraged the end of the Roman Empire, expert authority is called upon by citing the names of experts or by referring to general categories of institutions and organisations and of forms of mediation in which experts were featured. The latter comprise education resources, newspaper articles, books and television programmes, sometimes available on YouTube, as well as the well-established Italian *Encyclopaedia Treccani* (Table 7.7).

Alessandro Barbero is one of two historians who were directly cited as experts and whose ideas have influenced the public use of frames such as ‘humanitarian emergency’ and ‘immigration’ in relation to the end of the Roman Empire. Barbero, Professor of Medieval History at the University of Eastern Piedmont in Italy, is a prominent public intellectual and communicator. The author of numerous books, including *Barbari*:

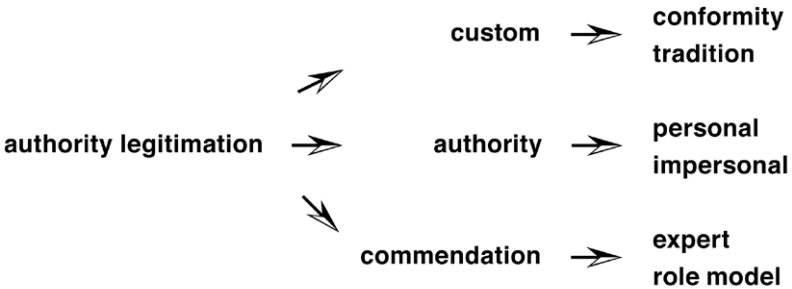


Fig. 7.2 Categories of authority legitimation. Source: redrawn from van Leeuwen 2007, 97. © Christina Unwin.

Table 7.7 References to expert authority in posts and comments that evoke the end of the Roman Empire. These were published on the Facebook pages of 5SM, Grillo, the League, Salvini, CasaPound Italia and Di Stefano. When a reference occurs more than once in the dataset, the number of occurrences is indicated in brackets

Public Facebook pages	References to expert authority
5SM and Grillo	'Learning materials'; Dimitris Kazakis ³ (2); Salviano; Cicerone
League and Salvini	<i>Gli ultimi giorni dell'Impero romano</i> (book; 2); 'I read of barbarians and similar things' (reading); web link to a newspaper article published in <i>Il Giornale</i> ; ⁴ YouTube video of Rai3 TV episode featuring Alessandro Barbero; episode of television series <i>Ulisse</i> featuring a historian (2); book on the end of the Roman Empire just published in France; history learned in school; <i>Encyclopaedia Treccani</i> ; Ammiano Marcellino; 'many historians'; 'historian barbero'; 'good history book'
CasaPound and Di Stefano	'Study of history'; 'reading of history'

*immigrati, profughi, deportati nell'impero romano*⁵ (Barbero 2015), he has appeared in and hosted programmes on Italian national television. Indeed, many of his lectures and television discussions on the relations between the Roman Empire and 'barbarians' are accessible via Barbero's personal YouTube channel, as well as from other accounts on the same social media platform. Facebook users referred to two specific television programmes in which the historian offered his expert input.

The first reference to Barbero was made in September 2015. It implied that a user who wrote on the Facebook page of Matteo Salvini had engaged with various communications by the historian and that these had informed their thinking on immigration. The Facebook user stressed that even Barbero, whom he described as 'very capable', had argued that the Roman Empire fell because of the 'same exact factors we experience today' and foolishly ignore. The comment went on to highlight a supposed similarity between how 'barbarians' were 'exploited' by the Romans in ancient times and how they are handled today by the EU and Italian 'governments'.

In this text, the user was directly referring to the television episode 'Roma e i Barbari, un'altra storia delle invasioni',⁶ broadcast by Rai Storia as part of the *a.C.d.C.* series authored by Davide Savelli and Alessandro Barbero. The latter opened the programme by underlining that 'barbaric invasions have also occurred in continuity with and not only as a break from Roman civilisation' and that 'before being invaders, the barbarians had been, for a long time, immigrants, well-integrated in the empire' (Barbero and Savelli 2015). The television episode was edited so that images of present-day migrants and of diverse groups of individuals in contemporary cities, such as London, followed segments showing the movement of barbaric people. The intent was to establish a clear parallel between multi-ethnicity in metropolitan contexts nowadays and Rome in the fourth century AD, which Barbero calls 'a melting pot'. The historian stressed how integration by means of granting citizenship rights had always been a strength of imperial policy and that, in AD 212, the emperor Caracalla made the decision to extend this right to all those living in the territories of the Roman Empire. This was a choice that led, according to Barbero, to an increase in immigration and to the 'barbarisation of the army'. The breaking point of this situation was then identified in the events that preceded the battle of Hadrianopolis in AD 378:

The trigger really was a humanitarian emergency. We are talking about the entrance, within the Roman Empire, of an entire people of refugees, the Goths, and of the disastrous management of this humanitarian operation by the Romans. (Alessandro Barbero in Barbero and Savelli 2015)

Such 'mismanagement' was presented as the Romans taking advantage of the situation in several ways, including through bribery, sexual exploitation of women and by failing to guarantee sufficient food and provisions. This contributed to a state of affairs said to have resulted in open and violent conflict. The same frames of 'humanitarian emergency' and the same connections between the granting of citizen rights and greater migrant inflows were cited repeatedly, particularly by Facebook users posting on the populist nationalist Facebook page of the League.

This proposed narrative was presented again in the episode 'La fine dell'Impero romano',⁷ which formed part of the 2017/18 season of *Passato e Presente*⁸ broadcast by Rai Tre and presented by the journalist Paolo Mieli (Pierelli 2017). Alessandro Barbero participated in the television episode as a guest expert, together with more junior historians. His contribution was specifically referenced by a Facebook user who posted a

comment on Matteo Salvini's Facebook page in 2017. This user exhorted others to watch 'La fine dell'Impero romano' and 'learn a bit of history'. He or she then highlighted how Barbero showed that 'what is happening now with migrants' also happened in AD 500 when the Roman Empire ended. Analysing the content of the television episode can help us better to understand the context for this Facebook comment.

The journalist Mieli, who introduced the 40-minute-long episode, stated that it would address the 'fall of the Roman Empire'; he then asked Barbero if he would name three main causes for this fall among the many in circulation. After jokingly clarifying that the journalist must have been referring to the Western Roman Empire, since the Roman Empire ended in 1453, the historian answered as follows:

They arrived in high numbers, lots of aggressive peoples and well-armed, and the Roman Empire, who had always gone to disturb others in their own countries for centuries, discovered that they were not able to keep them out anymore. (Alessandro Barbero in [Pierelli 2017](#))

Barbero explained that the fall began in the fourth century AD, when 'the mechanism for absorbing immigrants, practised successfully by Rome for centuries, failed to function well and ... groups began to flow into the empire who did not want to integrate and with whom it was impossible to coexist peacefully'. The exchange between the historian and the presenter continued through a critical review of Barbero's words:

Mieli: 'Please consider, Professor, that you are saying things that someone could read ... as ...'

Barbero: 'I know, that can be instrumentally used by the right and the left.'

Mieli: 'So, welcoming immigrants who do not want to integrate endangers a community?'

Barbero: 'I think it is fair to say this, yes.'

Barbero's position in the debate concerning the end of the Roman Empire probably leaned towards favouring the idea of a transformation of the Roman world over that of a violent and profound break. Such a view was also communicated to the public through the case of the Ostrogoths' interaction with the Roman population, and the cultural legacy adopted by the former and inspired by the latter. However, Facebook users tended to legitimate their fear of migrants and their desire not to welcome them in Italy by absorbing and repropounding the very 'contemporary' language

– verbal and visual – that featured in the two television programmes discussed above. This language, utilised to suggest historical analogies, fed exemplary consciousness, thus demonstrating the profound impact of current historical expertise, mediated through Italian national television (Rai), the equivalent of the BBC in the UK. Far from being dismissed, expert authority, identified in Barbero, was leveraged to support discourses of exclusion – not only through more superficial references, but also via the detailed reporting of arguments and terminology used by the historian.

The impact of cultural and educational television programmes in Italy – and specifically of Barbero’s framing of the fall of the Roman Empire within populist nationalist speech on Facebook – was further indicated by a reference to the established series *Ulisse: il piacere della scoperta*.⁹ *Ulisse* has been broadcast since the year 2000 – initially on Rai 3 and, since 2018, on Rai 1 – through a cultural magazine format; episodes, over two hours in length, focus on a variety of themes ranging from history and archaeology to science. The series was authored by Piero Angela and his son Alberto, who has also been presenting it from the start. The Angelas have been a well-known and trusted ‘brand’ of scientific communication on Italian television since the 1970s; Piero Angela, in particular, has been among the authors and presenters who contributed to a more widespread diffusion of the Italian language (Bettetini, Braga and Fumagalli 2004, 203; Borrelli and Gavrila 2013, 118). In our corpus there are two references to *Ulisse*, both pointing to the episode aired on 8 October 2016, ‘Viaggio ai confini di Roma’ (‘Journey at the borders of Rome’), which covered the history and defence of the territories located at the *Limes* of the Roman Empire (Angela 2016). Both mentions were published by users on the Facebook page of Matteo Salvini.

In 2016 a Facebook user wrote that in the episode of *Ulisse* mentioned above ‘the historian’ explained that the Western Roman Empire fell because of ‘excessive immigration’ and the ‘chaos’ that followed. Then the author of the comment went on to note how ‘history repeats itself’. In a similar vein, another Facebook user mentioned that, after hearing ‘the historian’ explain the causes for the ‘fall of the Roman Empire’, he or she ‘got worried’ because it seemed ‘like he was talking about contemporary things’. Interestingly, this individual also emphasised how he ‘saw’ the historian’s ‘smiling gaze’ become ‘rigid’ as he was discussing those events.

The historian mentioned in the two extracts is, once again, Alessandro Barbero. He appears in the episode claiming that the Western Roman Empire fell because of its inability to ‘handle immigration’:

At a certain point the immigrants flowing become too many, the bureaucracy that needs to manage it becomes too corrupted and the politicians who need to grant permission start not to have clear ideas anymore. It ends up that humanitarian emergencies of refugees, illegal exploitation of immigrants create an explosive situation, which then translates in wars, revolts, devastations and in what we call 'barbaric invasions' and the fall of the empire. (Alessandro Barbero in [Angela 2016](#))

Books, and reading more generally, were also referred to, together with television, as forms of expert authority that provide legitimation for anti-immigration stances. For example, on the Facebook page of Matteo Salvini, a user quoted a newspaper article published in *Il Giornale*, a national outlet with a centre-right political orientation. The article reviewed Michel de Jaeghere's monograph, *Les derniers jours: la fin de d'Empire romain d'Occident*,¹⁰ on the occasion of its translation into Italian ([Camilleri 2016](#); [de Jaeghere 2016](#)). Two more users posting on the same Facebook page invited others to read *Les derniers jours*; one of them probably became aware of the book after reading the newspaper article, since the beginning of the Facebook post is very similar to that of the piece in *Il Giornale*:

It is already out of stock and being reprinted: the book by historian Michel De Jaeghere *The Last Days: The End of the Western Roman Empire* which arrives now in Italy ... was first published in France, where it raised a ruckus. ([Camilleri 2016](#))

In the newspaper article, the journalist summarised the sequence of reasons and poor responses that led to the end of the Roman Empire according to de Jaeghere: a fall in the birth-rate, the decision to increase taxation, which went on to destroy the economy, and the empire's attempt to solve its economic frailties through policies that invited heavy immigration ([Camilleri 2016](#)). After attributing to the sociologist Massimo Introvigne the claim that barbarians were aware of the superiority of Roman culture, the piece ended by stating incisively that the same cannot be said for contemporary 'Islamic immigrants' ([Camilleri 2016](#)).

The supremacy of the Roman world over that of 'barbarians' is an established idea in Italian popular culture – one that has featured prominently, for example, in school curricula ([Terrenato 2001](#)). In contrast, television discourse has been slightly more varied in this respect, especially in recent years. The episode of *Ulisse* focusing on 'The end of the Roman Empire' and broadcast in 2003, for example, described barbarian people as 'primitive populations' ([Angela 2003](#)). Over 10 years later, however, in the

episode of *Past and Present* mentioned above, the presenter, Paolo Mieli, asked the historian Alessandro Barbero whether it would be more appropriate to refer to the Visigoths, Vandals and so on by these specific names, rather than the general category of ‘barbarians’; Mieli argued that the latter only reflects the perspective of the Romans. Consequently signs are emerging of a different sensibility within scientific communications aimed at a general public audience in Italy (Pierelli 2017).

An international comparison

It is possible, although not straightforward, to compare the ways in which the end of the Roman Empire has been leveraged as part of populist nationalist discourse on the Facebook pages of Italian parties and their leaders with the discussions about Brexit on Facebook pages touching upon this issue. As anticipated in the introduction, the Italian case study is one where it is safe to assume that the great majority of, if not all, Facebook users felt connected to Italy and its culture. They followed Italian politics and mobilised the end of the Roman Empire by utilising Italian terms and idiomatic expressions. The Brexit example is different, as it pertains to the sphere of international relations and has been at the centre of public attention in Europe, the US and beyond. Nevertheless, as a whole, it provides a useful ‘international’ comparison to that of Italian populist nationalism, if approached and treated with care. On the basis of this comparison we may only suggest, rather than demonstrate, the existence of similarities or differences.

References to the end of the Roman Empire in the Brexit case study were less than half of those in the Italian example (61 and 134 respectively). They were made in 2016 (50 references) and at the beginning of 2017 (11 references).¹¹ Most of the Facebook posts, comments and replies featuring the end of the Roman Empire were published in June 2016, the month in which the Brexit referendum was held (see Fig. 7.3). As in the Italian corpus, exemplary and genetic modes of historical sense generation were prevalent, but genetic consciousness recurred more frequently. There were, in other words, more instances where the end of Imperial Rome was leveraged as a reference point briefly to explain the development of situations that had occurred over centuries in the past. In these examples users described general processes that had been unfolding since the ‘fall’ of the Roman Empire, rather than dealing with the specifics of this phenomenon. The posts, comments and replies referring to the trope that we are examining here were longer. However, the extracts in which this

past was evoked have a comparable number of words to the Italian case (Table 7.8). In both case studies causation featured in over half of the texts.

In the Brexit corpus a ‘thinner’ engagement with the last days of Rome was expressed through a wider variety of themes than in the Italian case. These included the Romans’ departure from Britain in AD 410, the lavish costumes and corruption of the later imperial era, invasions by

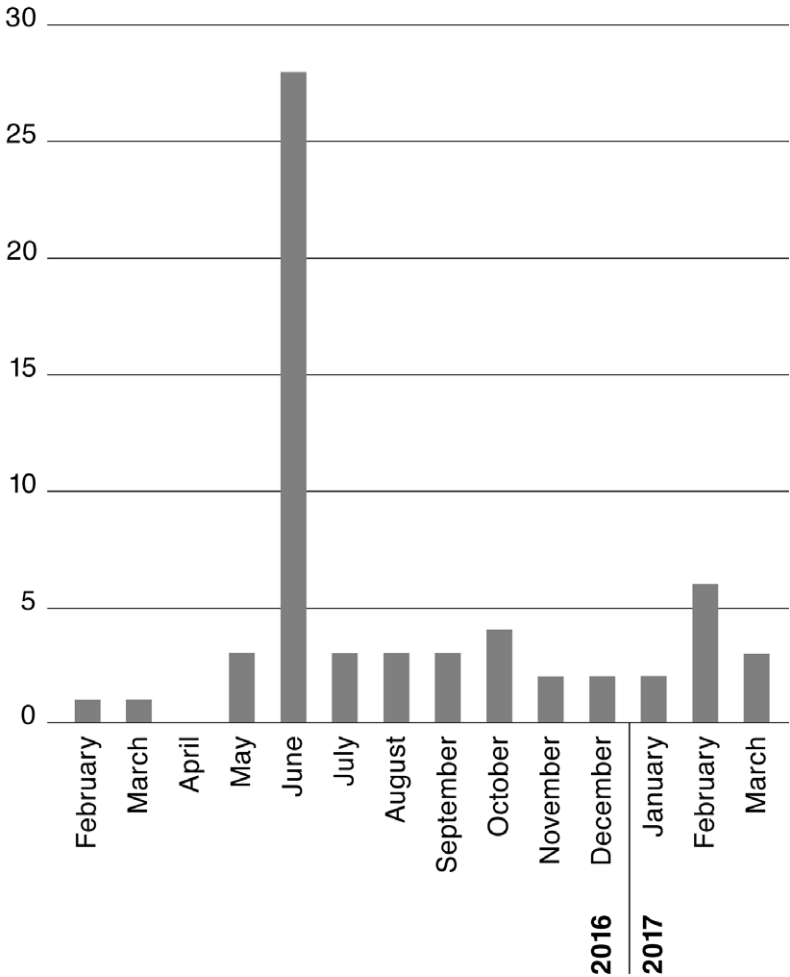


Fig. 7.3 References to the end of the Roman Empire that featured each month in the corpus of posts, comments and replies published between May 2010 and April 2017 on Brexit-themed public Facebook pages. Only the period for which references were identified is shown.

‘Islam’ and barbarians, excessive bureaucracy, the over-stretching of the empire (described as having become too large to be controlled), an erosion from within as a result of the unsettling presence of immigrants and the ‘natural’ life cycle of empires that emerge, flourish and fall. Although a number of these themes also featured in the Italian case, in the Brexit example greater prominence was given to aspects that related directly to the UK as a country and, even more so, to the European Union as a supranational polity (see [Chapter 5](#), pp. 100–2 for further discussion). The idea of a break with civilisation was evident, but expert authority was not invoked – nor was it possible to recognise the influence of specific kinds of mediations such as those of television broadcasting, popular books and newspapers. The only exception was a comment published in March 2016; this included the link to a Wikipedia page on the ‘Decline of the Roman Empire’ and a generic reference to the expert authority of historians – who were said to consider AD 376 as a crucial year leading to the end of the Roman Empire.

There was greater evidence of language legitimisation based on expert authority and of the transformative impact of television in the Italian case study than in the Brexit one. The latter, as noted above, was mostly reflective of UK and anglophone culture (see also [Bonacchi, Altaweel and Krzyzanska 2018](#)). Additional research is required to test this hypothesis and to explore it in depth.

Table 7.8 Descriptive summary statistics of the length (in words) of Facebook posts, comments and replies mentioning the end of the Roman Empire and of the specific extracts dealing with the historical phenomenon

Length of Facebook post or comment expressed in number of words		Length of extract referring to the end of the Roman Empire	
Min.	6	Min.	4
1st Qu.	45	1st Qu.	19
Median	137	Median	39
Mean	154	Mean	69
3rd Qu.	179	3rd Qu.	163
Max.	947	Max.	218

Mediations and social fabrics

This chapter has confirmed the mythical nature of the ‘fall’ of Rome in structuralist terms, as a simple, recurring trope that features in populist nationalist discourse related to Italian politics and to the Brexit debate. The trope was leveraged in prevalently exemplary ways. It was affirmed rather than questioned or argued over with others, and it was evoked as a historical analogy bearing specific interpretations of the social fabrics within which Facebook users were living. However, we have also exposed the variability of the framing of this myth and the influence of expert authority, mediated and distributed through a range of communication practices, in shaping the internal articulation of the myth itself. Although the general notion of an end of the Roman Empire has permeated European societies, and Italian and British ones in particular, its narration – especially as regards causation – is subject to change. As in the case of any myth, it was chosen as a means through which to discuss the present and the future.

The ways in which people engaged with the details of different expert interpretations shows the agency of expert knowledge in cultivating certain versions of the myth – and consequently its contribution towards influencing specific views of society and the world. The idea of the ‘fall’ of Rome is part of the habitus of both Italy and Europe; it represents ‘tradition’ in Rösen’s terms (Bourdieu 2010; Rösen 2014). The concept is nurtured and preserved by power structures that have worked for centuries to project an image of the supposed superiority of the Western world – and, more recently, of the European Union as an ideal political construction. Nevertheless, the evidence provided on the public reception of select and more recent explanations for the end of the Roman Empire points to the possibility of ultimately changing the viability and applicability of this myth. It is therefore important to examine several elements: the long-term trajectory of the tradition-led and shell-like layer of myths; the situations in which this layer may be ‘turned on and off’; and the shorter-term meanings and interpretations that fill the myth’s shell. It is critical to understand how the kinds of interpretations offered by experts and their mediation through multiple forms of public engagement with the ‘official’ past serve to influence historical consciousness.

Unfortunately, very few quantitative studies have explored preferred or more frequent ways of experiencing the ‘official’ past in relation to people’s socio-demographic background, understandings of such past and values attributed to it. There is also a substantial fragmentation in the

literature that does exist in terms of disciplinary and methodological framing – including, importantly, how to conceptualise and define ‘the past’ and ‘public experiences’ of it. Consequently we do not have a wide picture of the social organisation of interactions with the past, in contrast to the more extensive research undertaken on engagement with fields such as the arts, sports or music (for example, [Bennett et al. 2009](#)).

However, there are a few publications that we may draw upon and discuss in connection with the findings of previous sections of this chapter. A recently completed European-funded project has carried out survey-based research to examine public understanding, attitudes towards and practices of engaging with contemporary archaeology in Europe ([NEARCH 2014](#)). It reported that television was used by the majority of respondents for accessing archaeological information, with Italy having the highest number who claimed to have watched at least one documentary about archaeology (91 per cent of respondents compared to 78 per cent in the UK; [NEARCH 2018](#), 55). Furthermore, television constitutes the most ‘democratic’ form of archaeological communication, popular among people with lower as well as higher levels of formal education in both the UK and Italy ([Bonacchi 2014](#), 393). Compared to television, visiting museums and heritage sites, the press and social media are less frequently used as sources of information about archaeology in Europe ([NEARCH 2014](#), 25). These sources are also more popular among better-off individuals with higher levels of formal education ([Merriman 1999](#); [Swain 2007](#); [La Regina 2009](#); [Bonacchi 2014](#)).

Furthermore, as discussed above, research on historical consciousness has shown how the population of anglophone countries is experiencing a disconnection with history education; parental education and family background are now far more influential in determining the ways in which people engage with the past ([Clark and Peck 2020](#)). Nevertheless, on the one hand it may be that a disconnection with formal history education is not so significant in Italy, for example; here the case study has shown that school education is referred to as an expert authority category for legitimisation purposes. On the other hand, the population’s sense of the past can be strongly influenced by school education indirectly.

Television is a rather conservative industry, mostly driven by viewing figures in connection with the specific audience targets imposed by advertising. In 2009, when discussing the reasons behind the choice of heritage sites to be covered by an archaeologically-themed television series aired in the UK, I gathered from one of the producers that the rationale was informed by prior experience of the periods, localities and themes that would be popular with the public. This popularity seemed to

be mainly explained in terms of what audiences were familiar with as a result of what they had learned in school. It is therefore not surprising that, within each series of *Time Team* for example, Roman sites, and especially villas, featured frequently and were among those scheduled to be aired at the specific points when audience fatigue could be predicted.

The expertise that informs history education in the classroom is likely to influence factual television communications about a country's 'official past'. Prehistory, ancient and medieval history feature strongly in Italian school curricula, where the whole of Italian and, to some extent, European and world history has been taught in three distinct cycles for decades: at primary school, in junior high and in high school. The situation in the UK is very different and more fragmented. Prior to 1989, the year in which curricula became more regulated, teachers were allowed to cover what they wished, while bearing in mind the requirements of formal examinations. Furthermore, the UK now has bespoke school curricula for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; only the English curriculum includes examples of the periods and topics that should be taught, which currently include prehistory. This has not always been the case, however; from 1989 to 2013 history taught in English primary schools began with the Roman occupation of Britain. The organisation of school curricula in this way may help to explain why survey respondents across Europe have indicated 'antiquity' as the period they were most likely to want to engage with, for example by visiting an exhibition or a site, with prehistory and medieval times being less popular (NEARCH 2014, 57).

Another important kind of expert authority features and is valued in television programmes exploring facets of the human past. A study I conducted between 2010 and 2011 examined the archaeological television series and one-off programmes perceived by the Italian and UK public to be the most satisfying (Bonacchi 2012). Results showed that *Superquark* and *Ulysse*, two series authored and presented by Piero and Alberto Angela (p. 159), were referred to the most by respondents living in Italy, whereas the most popular series for UK residents was *Time Team* (Bonacchi 2012). *Superquark* and *Ulysse* have the format of a television cultural magazine that comprises archaeological themes and topics relating to fields such as heritage. Respondents to my surveys indicated that a critical reason for their appreciation of these series was the expertise and authority of the presenters, and their ability to explain things 'clearly' and in a 'serious' and 'scientific' manner (Bonacchi 2012). Expert authority was also one of the main reasons why UK respondents favoured *Time Team*, alongside the camaraderie between

the archaeologists, the realistic portrayal of the archaeological research process and the fact that the layman's point of view was represented (Bonacchi 2013).

Generally, for heritage television, formats where expert authority is presented as prominent can be more successful in terms of viewer satisfaction and series longevity than more entertainment-based shows (Bonacchi 2012; 2013). In the case of *Ulisse* and *Superquark* the authors and presenters are well-educated journalists, but in others, such as the *a.C.d.C.*, they are academics. One of these is Alessandro Barbero (p. 157). He has also gained a high profile through social media and the establishment of his own YouTube channel, progressively moving from collaborations with existing television series to hosting new ones of his own. Furthermore, as television is a more 'democratic' way of participating than making visits to museums or sites and reading newspapers, magazines or books, the extent to which expert authority may shape the public's historical sense-generation through education and television is perhaps the most impactful, certainly in terms of numbers of individuals reached and their socio-demographic make-up.

As we have seen, it is this kind of communication and the expert authority that features in it that have been used to frame populist nationalist uses of the past and to be leveraged as a means of legitimisation. These overall results suggest that the 'demise' of expertise is far from being a universal reality – and perhaps especially so in Italy, for example, compared to other countries such as the UK. Trust in experts is alive, directly mobilised and indirectly influential.

Summary

This chapter has introduced Rüsen's and van Leeuwen's frameworks for analysing, respectively, historical consciousness and language legitimisation. These classifications were applied to the examples of Facebook posts, comments and replies referring to the end of the Roman Empire in relation to Italian populist nationalist discourse and Brexit. Both case studies have evidenced a prevalence of exemplary kinds of historical consciousness and of uses of the past that work to affirm the 'fall' of Rome rather than to discuss it.

The leveraging of the end of the Roman Empire can be deconstructed as having a tradition-led and shell-like layer with a long-term trajectory in the habitus of both Italian and UK societies, and which echoes the words of the title of Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Within such a shell, however, more recent expert interpretations are

powerfully shaping the ways in which this historical phenomenon is framed and mobilised to make sense of the present and to predict the future. In the Italian example, expert interpretations inspired by the transformation model and reflecting on the agency of migration and its management by the Romans are the most influential. Populist nationalist positions working to exclude ‘out groups’ of immigrants are legitimated based on expert authority that is directly invoked as well as indirectly rehashed. Expert positions distributed through school education and television are shown to make probably the most impact on public engagement with the ‘official’ past.

Notes

- 1 These references were identified by qualitatively analysing all the posts and comments that contained keywords relating to the Roman Empire, ancient Romans and Rome among those listed in Chapter 2, note 4 (p. 129).
- 2 ‘*Limes*’ here refers to the ‘Roman *Limes*’, the border line of the Roman Empire.
- 3 In the context of the financial crisis experienced by Greece, users who posted on the Facebook pages of Beppe Grillo recycled parts of a blog post presenting the views of the economist Dimitris Kazakis on the role played by debt in determining the end of the Roman Empire. As this expert was not specifically mentioned to legitimate populist nationalist positions, I will not discuss how his authority was mobilised, although the ways in which information about his position was accessed and shared – via the input of a blogger – should be noted.
- 4 Camilleri 2016.
- 5 English translation: ‘Barbarians: immigrants, refugees, deportees in the Roman Empire’.
- 6 English translation: ‘Rome and the Barbarians, a different story of the invasions’.
- 7 English translation: ‘The end of the Roman Empire’.
- 8 English translation: ‘Past and present’.
- 9 English translation: ‘Ulysses: the pleasure of discovery’.
- 10 In the corpus the title of this book is featured in Italian, as *Gli ultimi giorni dell’Impero romano*.
- 11 Note that data collection was undertaken between March and April 2017 (see Chapter 2, pp. 16–17).

Conclusion: a new perspective

Deconstructing populist nationalism through heritage

The study presented in this book has enabled the deconstruction of contemporary populist nationalism by examining the ways in which the deep past has been mobilised within it. It has shed new light on the anatomy of myths inspired by the Iron Age, Roman and early medieval past of Europe. It has also exposed the circulation of these myths during the last decade, in association with exclusionary social media discourse linked to the Italian political debate, Brexit and US border policies. The research has provided the first assessment, undertaken comparatively and through a large body of evidence, of how the pre-modern world has been leveraged, on Facebook and Twitter, by political parties, leading politicians, the public and the media, and of the relationships that exist between such uses. Furthermore, it has investigated historical sense generation and has characterised the influence of expertise, expert authority and mediation practices in shaping how myths are transmitted, articulated and legitimised. These outcomes were achieved through the development, iterative testing and application of an approach firmly grounded in extensive qualitative-quantitative analysis of relevant 'found' data identified by navigating social media big data.

In this concluding chapter, I will discuss the significance of both the findings and the methodology. In doing so I seek to understand the constitutional contribution of heritage to the crafting and operationalisation of populist nationalism, comprehend the weight of experts and expertise in the formation of historical consciousness and political identities and imagine the future of social heritage research.

The 'narrative turn' in studies of populist nationalism has helped to identify sets of linguistic structures and frames employed with the purpose of marking social divisions and outcasting projected groups of 'others'. From published literature we are also well aware of the emotional architecture of populist nationalist discourse – and that, whenever such discourse incorporates mentions of the past, it can be more 'emotive' and polarised than when it does not (Morden 2016). Previous to this study, however, there had been no systematic analysis of the international currency of the repertoire of objects, places, people and practices within populist nationalist speech that relate to the Iron Age, Roman and post-Roman heritage of contemporary Europe.

Through the research conducted for this book, it was possible to establish that this specific heritage has been heavily mobilised by populist nationalist parties which are more electorally marginal – in some cases more extremist or with a longer tradition. Examples are CasaPound Italia in Italy and the BNP, UKIP (up to 2017) and Plaid Cymru in the UK. For these parties, inspired by twentieth-century nationalism, recalling the past, especially through foundational myths, has been vital. In this way, they have justified their struggle to reinstate 'the nation' that they present as having once existed, free and unbound, in a 'golden age' now lost and followed by a period of oppression.

In stark contrast, the deep past has been removed from the 'official' discourse of newer populist parties, whether these are unprecedented techno-populist groups, such as the Five Star Movement (5SM), or known quantities on the political scene which have however been dramatically transformed (for example, the League). Narratives arguing for the need to defend Christian civilisation from Islamic invasions feature on the Facebook pages of the League and Matteo Salvini, although they are devoid of any references to the past.

Up until 2013 the strategy of the League had been to transform its foundational myths whenever there had been a crucial change in its make-up or direction. When the Northern League entered the political scene as a movement, it selected a well-known figure, Alberto da Giussano, to symbolise its fight for independence. Subsequently, when the movement became an electorally viable party, this heritage was integrated with the Celtic sun and a new mythical repertoire of greatness and resistance. The latter was centred on the opposition between the Celts of northern Italy – 'hard and pure barbarians', as they sometimes called themselves – and corrupted, economically exploitative and domineering Rome. The new populist nationalist chapter of the League is very different, however; it is ahistorical, in the broader sense of the term, which includes myth-making.

Andrew Gardner's comment, on the pages of *Antiquity*, that there is a 'seemingly inevitable entwining of contemporary politics with justifications rooted in the past' does not fully apply in these contexts (Gardner 2018, 1662). The pre-modern 'official' heritage of European territories, with its local and national idiosyncrasies, has been eradicated from the rhetorical arsenal to facilitate populist nationalist or technopopulist narratives connecting with comparable ones worldwide. Such heritage cannot be compared with those frames which are known to be internationally relatable as tools of exclusion, and which condemn anything considered to have derived from globalisation, such as immigration, multiculturalism and supranational institutions (see, for example, Miller-Idriss 2019). Furthermore, this *tabula rasa* also serves the function of distancing the emerging or refashioned populist parties from older ones.

In the case of the League, for example, celebrating the Roman and more generally classical foundations of Italy would be almost paradoxical for a party that has fiercely combatted this very image and identity. Second, referring to Rome may be perceived as too explicit a citation of the Fascist Ventennio, the period of Italian history that cultivated the myth of Roman origins *par excellence*. The third reason for rejecting the deep past is that the newest populist parties aim to present themselves to 'the people' as their defendants against the 'establishment', which they describe as consisting of the political class in power and mainstream media. From this arises the need to appear and 'sound' very different from this so-called 'elite'. In Italy, political figures such as Matteo Renzi, leader of the major and centre-left Democratic Party in 2018, do mobilise a series of thought-through citations of classical antiquity. For instance, on the occasion of his meeting with the CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, Renzi presented him with a copy of Cicero's treatise *De Amicitia*; the gift was a reference to the 'befriending' function of Facebook.

Further examples may be drawn from other parts of the political spectrum. As highlighted in Chapter 4 (pp. 59–64), in support of anti-immigration claims, the centre-right and right-wing parties Forza Italia and Fratelli d'Italia have promoted the 'Roman-Judaic' tradition as one that has informed Italian history and culture and that should be protected. Both parties have been part of coalition governments in the past and, for this reason, have been portrayed by the 're-born' League and the emerging 5SM as 'the old caste', whose language and narratives can no longer be adopted.

The incorporation of historical analogies or images may also be perceived as a 'learned' practice and something that 'the people' may readily rebuff. This is perhaps even more evident in the Brexit case study,

in which the two politicians who leveraged Iron Age, Roman and post-Roman heritage more heavily on Facebook were David Cameron and Boris Johnson. Both Cameron and Johnson were senior members of the Conservative Party, educated at Eton and Oxford. During the timespan considered by the research, Johnson voiced his opinions as that of a journalist writing for *The Telegraph* and subsequently (until 2016) as the Mayor of London. His ‘uses of the past’ on Facebook were mostly a rehashing of the journalistic pieces he had authored.

The press – especially centre or centre-left outlets – substantially drew on examples from pre-modern times. Across the three case studies, online newspapers and magazines pointed to the past, whether through references to Hadrian’s Wall or to the end of the Roman Empire; journalists incorporated quotes from experts whose opinions either aligned with their views or could be showcased as such. This contributes to the consolidation of the idea that ‘mainstream media’ constitute part and parcel of a supposedly elitist, not easily interpretable ‘establishment’ among those who favour more populist positions.

This book has also evidenced that, contrary to populist parties and their leaders, the ‘base’ of the 5SM, the League and pro-Brexit micro-activists contributing to political debates on Facebook leveraged Roman heritage – especially the Roman Empire – and, in a more limited way, the Iron Age and post-Roman past. These pasts were evoked primarily through oppositions that coincide with exclusionary identity markers. The dualities through which the Roman past is often contrasted to pre- and post-Roman times were perfectly suited to communicate negatively connoted ideas of the ‘other’. In particular, Facebook users with close connections to Italy expressed populist nationalist sentiment through the dichotomous pairings of civilisation and barbarism, militarised ‘tough’ Romans and weak contemporaries, greatness and decadence, multicultural and culturally homogeneous societies.

All of these dualities featured in the discourse of pro-Brexit Facebook users, with the exception of myths of Roman origin referenced by Remainers, even though some may not have lived in or had a strong connection with the UK. Within the Remain camp, myths of Celtic *koinè* were also mobilised to rebut English identity and the decision to exit the European Union, to which ‘Celtic’ nations were perceived as belonging. Italian populist nationalism was strongly centred on the identification of Italian roots in the Roman Empire and on the civilisation–barbarism dichotomy. The latter was used to reject so-called ‘barbarian’ immigrants and to rebel against ‘barbarian’ states playing a core political role within European institutions, such as France and Germany.

In both the case studies of Italian politics and the Brexit referendum, the fall of Rome proved a striking image. It was evoked to call for stricter border controls and tougher immigration policies, for the end of excessive bureaucracy and expansionistic ambitions, and for the extinction of careless political classes, seen as indulging themselves in privilege without engaging with issues facing the rest of the population. Facebook users who supported Remain positions in relation to Brexit and those who opposed populist nationalist views within Italian political debates drew prevalently on myths of mixed origins, especially on the notion that we are all the product of multiple migrations and encounters. More generally, the fact that these two groups mobilised similar myths in comparable ways indicates that they recognised a shared European heritage. For them this consisted of the tangible and intangible legacies of Imperial Rome on the one hand, and of population movement across millennia on the other.

In contrast, populist nationalist sentiments were fuelled by origin myths that were played out in opposite ways (see also [Kristiansen 1996](#)), and through myths of collapse and resistance. Unlike the official discourse of the newest populist parties, people turned to ‘national’ symbols of pride and descent to use them with an anti-globalist perspective; however, these symbols are cross-nationally dissonant. Had they been analysed in depth as a way of comprehending value-based reasons for political decision-making, they could have enabled politicians and strategists better to anticipate or understand the outcome of referenda and elections, including Brexit.

This kind of study is vitally important for the planning of political futures. Some myths have penetrated deeply into the habitus of societies, to the extent that they have become almost immutable. Such myths may be activated and de-activated, however, and may slightly morph in ways that become significant to determine political change. Such transformations serve partly to reflect key socio-cultural shifts and partly to illustrate bespoke political strategies or the agency of distributed expertise.

The influence of experts and expert authority

This book has demonstrated how expertise constructed through social practices influences people’s use of the deep past to frame socially exclusive narratives. In order to understand this impact more fully, it is important to consider the mediations through which experts’ interpretations are passed on, and the interconnections that exist between such mediations. Through the study presented in [Chapter 7](#), and drawing on the results

of previous chapters, it is possible to propose a middle-range theory on the relationships between formal education, informal learning at heritage places, television communication and historical consciousness working to frame and express antagonistic ‘othering’ in contemporary Italian and anglophone (primarily UK) society. Although comprehensive research on the presentation of Iron Age, Roman and early medieval sites in Italy is lacking, the analysis undertaken for the *Ancient Identities in Modern Britain* project has shown that the dualities leveraged in support of or against populist nationalist views are often reproduced – and can therefore be reinforced – at heritage venues focusing on these periods in the UK.

Kate Sharpe has conducted ethnography at a range of heritage sites across Britain; in the process she has interviewed 84 members of staff including managers, curators, education officers, volunteers and guides. She discovered that many outdoor venues stage the Iron Age and Roman periods either as polar opposites (particularly in England) or via exaggerated single portrayals of one or the other period (particularly in Scotland and Wales); these approaches are also reflected in hands-on experiences that reinforce stereotypes relating to ancient identities. For example, Roman sites usually invite children to take part in military drills while Iron Age places generally offer activities such as building wattle and daub walls or baking bread (Sharpe 2019). Multi-period museums are uniquely placed to counter these artificial boundaries, but often have a legacy of gallery spaces that accentuates both stark differences between periods and homogeneity within them; aspects of continuity and variation are thus frequently omitted (Sharpe 2019). In Scotland and northern Wales an absence of civil sites (Roman towns and villas) has resulted in an emphasis on Iron Age egalitarianism and Roman military domination rather than on the Roman ‘civilising’ effect documented for England.

Dualities that set civilisation and barbarism in opposition and celebrate the heroism and might of the Roman Empire have also been present in Italian school curricula for a long time. The 1923 educational reform of Giovanni Gentile, Minister of Public Education in Mussolini’s first government, introduced teaching of the Greek and Roman world into primary schools; this was delivered through storytelling of heroes and mythologies (Caroli 2015) (Figs 8.1 and 8.2). Anecdotal testimonies have suggested that this way of learning about ancient history was still common in the 1960s and may have contributed to how Italians 60 years of age and more understand antiquity. Despite several changes since the 1920s, history teaching in Italy has preserved a chronological presentation of the past at all levels of school education.

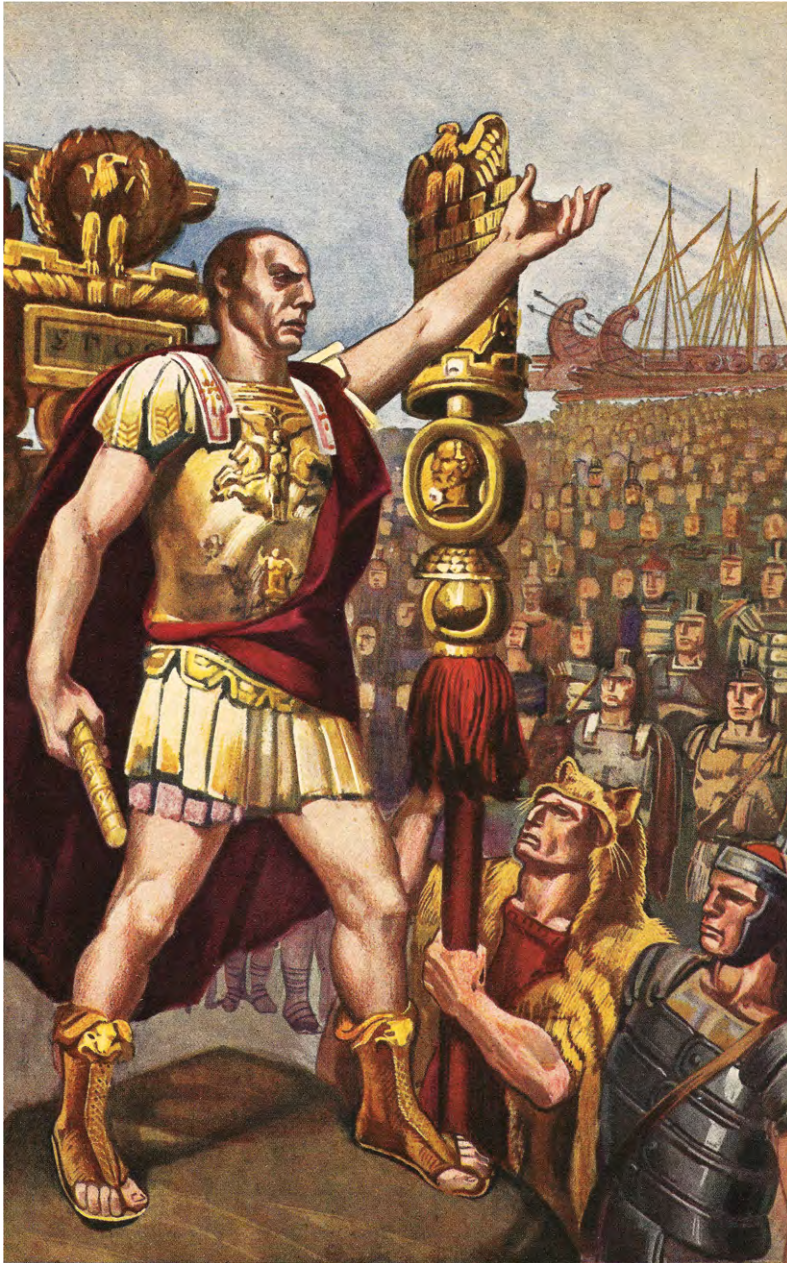


Fig. 8.1 ‘Caesar haranguing legionaries in Rimini’, Italy. From the book *I Grandi Capitani Italiani*¹ by Francesco Grazioli, Rome, XIV year of the fascist era (that is, between 28 October 1935 and 27 October 1936). Edizioni Scuole Italiane All’Estero.² Illustrations by Angelo della Torre.

In contrast, it is very difficult to determine the exact kind of knowledge of prehistory or history developed by primary and secondary schoolchildren during most of the twentieth century, as the first 'centralised' curriculum was only approved in 1989. How school encounters with the Iron Age, Roman and early medieval periods have



Fig. 8.2 'Germanicus's victory over Germanic peoples'. From the book *I Grandi Capitani Italiani* by Francesco Grazioli, Rome, XIV year of the fascist era (that is, between 28 October 1935 and 27 October 1936). Edizioni Scuole Italiane All'Estero. Illustrations by Angelo della Torre.

informed the historical consciousness of British people now aged over 40 years cannot therefore be easily determined. It has been argued, however, that the teaching of history in England and, to a certain degree, in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland has been informed by a 'great tradition' that had crystallised by 1900, then remained relatively fixed and dominant for at least 70 years (Sylvester 1994). Teaching concentrated mainly on British political history, from Caesar to the First World War, and deployed an eminently didactic methodology that privileged the role of the teacher in providing information to pupils (Sylvester 1994). This kind of pedagogy and organisation was rather similar – with the exception of the geographical focus – to that of Italian schools during the same period.

Differences emerged more markedly from the 1970s, when a more learner-focused approach, structured around a less knowledge-centred model, was developed in Britain, along with the decision to teach history as distinct and disconnected 'topics'. As evidenced by Sharpe's research with schoolteachers between 2016 and 2019, this topic-based approach has fostered the creation of artificial boundaries between periods, encouraging teachers and pupils to regard the latter as compartmentalised and objective temporal units (Sharpe 2019). In turn, this compartmentalisation facilitates dualistic interpretations of the ancient past that emerge as a result of opposing one 'age' to another.

Additionally, by 1974 history had lost ground in primary school teaching. Politicians increased pressure to move to a more state-controlled and unified education policy, which finally made its appearance in 1989 (Sylvester 1994). From the 1990s to 2013 pupils in English primary schools were taught (or should have been) 'the Romans, Anglo-Saxons and Vikings; Britain and the wider world in Tudor times; and either Victorian Britain or Britain since 1930' (Department for Education and Employment 1999, 106). Examples suggested for topics to teach about 'the Romans' were: 'the Roman Conquest and occupation of Britain; Boudicca, Caratacus and resistance to Roman rule; the building of Hadrian's Wall, roads, villas and towns; [and] Roman settlement in the local area' (Department for Education and Employment 1999, 107). This thematic selection privileged narratives of occupation and resistance, of technological advancement and perceived improvements in wellbeing.

The reform promoted by Michael Gove in 2014 emphasised the importance of 'knowledge' in the English curriculum for history, and of chronologically ordered accounts of the history of Britain in a world context (James 2018). The aspects of 'Roman Britain' that were signposted to teachers of Key Stage 2 (KS2) pupils aged 7 to 11, however, have included

Caesar's 'attempted' and 'successful' invasions, the Roman Empire and the 'power' of the Roman army, Hadrian's Wall, 'British resistance' with reference to Boudica, the 'romanisation' of Britain and 'Roman withdrawal ... and the fall of the Western Roman Empire' ([Department for Education 2013](#)). The chosen language more or less implicitly contains some of the dualities discussed above. Sharpe has found that such binaries featured prominently in KS2 teaching of the Iron Age and Roman periods in England ([Hingley, Bonacchi and Sharpe 2018](#); [Sharpe 2019](#)).

Furthermore, Gove's reform of the National Curriculum for History introducing Prehistory at KS2 had a significant impact on the learning provisions offered for school visits, as well as on outreach programmes at heritage places ([Sharpe 2019](#)). Teachers with limited resources, suddenly faced with delivering prehistory for the first time, turned to local museums, outdoor heritage sites and independent heritage educators for support ([Sharpe 2019](#)). In recent years these venues have therefore become even more significant for children's learning about (and through) history and heritage ([Sharpe 2019](#)). The dichotomous presentations that we have evidenced as being prevalent at heritage venues – with important exceptions³ – are therefore informing school teaching today at a perhaps increased level. Consequently, the need for more nuanced and critical teaching of the Iron Age, Roman and early medieval past of Britain within a world context is of central importance. This may be embedded in formal and informal learning to support the development of tolerance, understood as a three-dimensional concept entailing 'acceptance of, respect for and appreciation of difference' ([Hjerm et al. 2019](#)).

For much of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the Roman and post-Roman past – and, intermittently, prehistory – were present in formal education in Britain, albeit in varying degrees. They featured to a greater extent in Italy, where the history of the country in a wider international perspective was taught from prehistory to the twentieth century, in step with the educational practices of most European countries. It could be hypothesised that such school education may have contributed to create the conditions for the unique appeal of the Roman past, followed by prehistory and the medieval period in the minds of contemporary European citizens. Furthermore, it has provided information on how numerous and diverse groups of the UK and Italian population continue to experience the Iron Age to early medieval past.

Televised narratives of Roman, pre- and post-Roman military and social history have been customarily planned and delivered according to the positioning of the past through school education. Expert interpretations of history have filtered into school curricula, albeit often

without substantial updating from a view of Romanisation that has been critiqued during the 1980s and 1990s through scholarship inspired by post-colonial theory. These same core perspectives carry on being dominant in recent television programming, although elements of change may be detected. For example, as explored in [Chapter 7](#), this ‘spirit of change’ prompted the journalist Paolo Mieli, presenter of the television series *Passato e Presente*, to ask the historian Alessandro Barbero whether it was not time to cease referring to Germanic peoples as ‘barbarians’, and instead to use specific names, such as Visigoths or Vandals, rather than continuing to empathise or identify with the Romans.

Similar cases of slowly shifting interpretations of heritage objects, places, ideas and practices may also be found in relation to Hadrian’s Wall and the deracialisation of this border construction (see [Chapter 6](#)). Cultural and social transformations are affecting and modifying the expert narratives that filter through mass media. This is key, especially in the case of television – the most widespread source of information on the ‘official past’ in Italy, the UK and other European countries. Importantly, television also constitutes the most ‘democratic’ means of broadcasting the past, since it transverses different socio-demographics. By contrast, museum or site visiting remains mostly the remit of people with greater income and higher levels of formal education.

In addition to the impact of expert interpretations documented in this book, evidence emerges of the appreciation of the expert authority of historians, archaeologists and journalists long at the forefront of cultural communications. These include Piero and Alberto Angela, in Italy, and the presenter and researchers featuring in *Time Team* in the UK until 2013, when the programme was dropped. The television series that are enjoyed the most are considered to be successful by their viewers precisely because of the expert knowledge and authority of the presenters. Furthermore, in the Italian case study, these experts are referred to as trusted sources in upholding specific views of the past, as in the case of school education (see [Chapter 7](#)). Expert authority is cited and is by no means universally at peril, even though it is sometimes used to support populist nationalist views. However, communicating through historical analogies that describe the past with frames borrowed from the present – as in the example of the fall of the Roman Empire being attributed to causes such as a ‘humanitarian emergency’ badly managed by the Romans – may fuel intolerance and neo-tribalism (see [Bonacchi and Krzyzanska 2021](#)).

Although terms that resonate with present-day reality experienced by television audiences may help to make connections with the public, the differences between the past and the present should also be discussed in

order to facilitate more critical approaches to heritage. For instance, migrants requesting entry into European territories cannot be considered to be exactly comparable to an invasion of armed Goths. A more careful handling of metaphors and similitudes in this regard may curtail the rise of viewers' concern, and of aggressive-defensive responses such as those suggested by populist nationalism. References to expert authority were documented for the Italian case studies, although this was less the case for Brexit-themed discussions on Facebook. Uses of the past in the latter context also tended to be thinner and less argumentative than in the Italian one.

These differences may be interpreted as suggesting either a greater disconnection between ordinary people and history teaching in anglophone countries, chiefly the UK, or a more limited trust in experts from all fields. Such a disconnection has previously been highlighted for the US and Britain by educationalists as well as historians (Clark and Peck 2020). In 2010 the historian Niall Ferguson wrote in the *Financial Times* that history had never been 'less popular in British schools' (Ferguson 2010). He went on to blame both the absence of compulsory teaching of the subject at secondary school level and also the prevailing topics-based pedagogy:

History is not a compulsory part of the British secondary school curriculum after the age of 14, in marked contrast to nearly all other European countries. The most recent statistics for England and Wales indicate the scale of the problem. In 2009 a total of 219,809 candidates sat the GCSE in history – just 4 per cent of all GCSEs taken. More students sat the design and technology GCSE (305,809). At A-level the story is worse. There were 49,071 A-level history candidates in 2009, 5.8 per cent of all A-levels taken (down from 6.4 per cent in 1992). (Ferguson 2010)

The future

Navigating big data through data-intensive ethnographies has illuminated those rare instances when people have expressed – unsolicited, and outside of the classroom or any other pre-set learning environment – their ways of drawing upon the past in order to relate to present-day issues, and to translate their values into action-orientated narratives that may guide decision-making about today and tomorrow. The chosen methodology has been extremely useful for identifying the presence or absence of myths and dualities constructed from the pre-modern past of Europe and

their transmission through medialisations of different kinds. Examining how people mobilise the past to express populist nationalist views would have not been as effective through a different approach, such as focusing on specific segments of populations such as the members of political parties or far-right movements. This would have only enabled us to capture the opinions and behaviours of a narrow and pre-determined part of society highly dedicated to political activism offline; those who are more casually political would have been excluded from the study.

The focus on social media has also been key as we begin to assess the movement of information, its rehashing and use across media sources and platforms; working with reported answers from a social survey would have yielded very different results. These unique characteristics of the study design are crucial for justifying its application, despite some of the limitations. The latter include the impossibility of presenting individual Facebook posts, comments, replies or tweets when published by private citizens, whose anonymity should be protected. A further challenge was the need to adapt research *in itinere* to respond to the specific ways in which different social media platforms were utilised by politicians in a given country, as well as by the majority of the people who connected with the political issues under discussion. Variations were also evidenced in the extent to which – and ways in which – the past was mobilised.

Finally, the number of Facebook and Twitter texts that featured people, places, objects or practices from the Iron Age, Roman and early medieval periods constituted a minuscule proportion of all the posts and tweets shared on these platforms for each case study. Of course, this should not be read as a sign of the irrelevance of historical sense-generation to the interpretation of the present and anticipation of the future. Rather it is the outcome of the rarity of instances when historical consciousness is spontaneously and verbally articulated. However, such rarity does pose problems for quantification that are less relevant when considering the whole of the corpus of posts, comments, replies and tweets. Nevertheless, term frequencies, associations and clustering were also performed on these period-specific references for two reasons.

First, they helped to contextualise and orientate more qualitative kinds of analysis. Second, these references to the past are *all* the ones that could be retrieved from millions of social media documents. Given the nature of the data that was used, and in the light of some of the considerations already introduced in [Chapter 2](#), these descriptive statistics and quantitative analyses were interpreted with a view of suggesting new possibilities. New sets of hypotheses were inductively elaborated; these may be tested in subsequent studies that will leverage

different methodologies. None of these hypotheses could have been generated without the approach that has been adopted for this book.

Research informed by big data thus constitutes a valid way of interrogating society about its use of the past in a present- and future-orientated perspective. It is a rich and promising methodology for the future of exploring social heritage. As explained in [Chapter 1](#), the term ‘social heritage’ refers to the study of mobilisations of the past by individuals and groups who cognitively and emotionally respond to social issues to which they are exposed in their everyday lives. Although this specific definition aligns with research in the realm of public history, historic consciousness and memory studies, it does not coincide exactly with any of these fields. Social heritage retains a focus on examining the multiple and variable interactions with the past that may unfold more or less fluidly both online and offline and in a range of contexts; these include formal and informal education as well as more incidental and serendipitous encounters. From a social heritage perspective, expertise is regarded as being distributed and carefully assessed – rather than dismissed as ‘officialdom’. This enables us to understand how it influences narratives of the past through communications that rely on older and newer media in the profoundly networked environment that we now inhabit.

Notes

- 1 English translation: *Great Italian Captains*.
- 2 English translation: Italian Schools Abroad Edition.
- 3 A detailed account of the presentation of Iron Age, Roman and – to a more limited extent – post-Roman heritage in Britain, led by Kate Sharpe and Richard Hingley, will be provided in a separate and multi-authored monograph. This publication is also an outcome of the *Ancient Identities in Modern Britain* project.

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'This book represents an extraordinary contribution to the study of the complex interplays between heritage and nationalism. It proposes a novel approach based on the study of big data from social media, using a range of case studies that encompass from the Italian elections to Brexit Britain and Trump's border policies. A must-read for anyone interested in the uses of the past for present political discourses.'

Manuel Fernández-Götz, University of Edinburgh


'Bonacchi's ground-breaking study provides important new approaches to understanding the politics of the past in the present through an exploration of populist nationalism in social media. In doing so, it not only makes a sustained argument regarding the value of social media big data for heritage research, but also shows how social media is transforming heritage and its futures.'

Rodney Harrison, UCL

How was the Roman Empire invoked in Brexit Britain and in Donald Trump's United States of America, and to what purpose? And why is it critical to answer these kinds of questions? *Heritage and Nationalism* explores how people's perceptions and experiences of the ancient past shape political identities in the digital age. It particularly examines the multiple ways in which politicians, parties and private citizens mobilise aspects of the Iron Age, Roman and Medieval past of Britain and Europe to include or exclude 'others' based on culture, religion, class, race, ethnicity, etc.

Chiara Bonacchi draws on the results of an extensive programme of research involving both data-intensive and qualitative methods to investigate how pre-modern periods are leveraged to support or oppose populist nationalist arguments as part of social media discussions concerning Brexit, the Italian Election of 2018 and the US-Mexican border debate in the US. Analysing millions of tweets and Facebook posts, comments and replies, this book is the first to use big data to answer questions about public engagement with the past and identity politics. The findings and conclusions revise and reframe the meaning of populist nationalism today and help to build a shared basis for the democratic engagement of citizens in public life in the future. The book offers a fascinating and unmissable read for anyone interested in how the past and its contemporary legacy, or 'heritage', influence our 'political' thinking and feeling in a time of hyper-interconnectivity.

Chiara Bonacchi is Chancellor's Fellow in Heritage, Text and Data Mining and Senior Lecturer in Heritage at the University of Edinburgh (from March 2022).

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