The French Cult of the Modern


"Building projects during the middle of the [19th] century in French cities proceeded with little concern for the historic and familiar." 30

Baudelaire associated the ephemeral, fugitive, and contingent with the concept of modernity and it is these elements that brought about a detachment from the past, and the possibly the redefinition of the past as something stylistic to judge/value rather than as something beyond an object; not a cultural object but something with cultural relevancy.

Part of the goal of the French Revolution was to create a BREAK with the past and create "a radically new type of society with no historical precedent." 31 (emphasis mine)

"The increasing penchant to interpret the world in qualitatively different terms from the past and identify certain attributes, sensibilities, and outlooks as inherently "modern" were products of a culture and cultural vocabulary that prized all that was modern to the exclusion of the ancien and obsolete." 32

Expositions in 19th century represented a flourishing and growing cult of science this would have influence on the development and standardization of archaeological practice; couldn't just be a recreational hobby to be taken seriously!: NEED TO ADDRESS THOUGH WHY it moved to a topic that SHOULD be taken seriously, WHY couldn't it stay in the realm of hobby? was it simply the transformation of hobbies to research in general? or was there a particular REDEFINITION of archaeology in particular?

"Gazing upon a landscape of castles and crumbling monasteries, the conservative royalist Pierre-Simon Ballanche mournfully concluded that "these black towers crowned with crenellated stones must fall, these silent, tapering cloisters must be transformed into prisons or vast workshops for manufacturing. Our castles represent the time of knights and the feudal world. It is necessary that they disappear" (Ballanche 2: 84). Flaubert expressed the same sense of dislocation in his novels, albeit with more panache and artistic flair. In Then Sentimental Education, he chose the image of Jesus Christ riding a steam engine through a virgin forest to symbolize sentiments of rapid change and novelty, conveying the impression of an irrevocable break with standard traditions and perceptions (Flaubert, Sentimental 325)." 37-38 more examples of this "colonial" break with the past and redefinition of it as something not of the pertinent world

How does all this break of the past mesh with different attitudes and perceptions between prehistoric and medieval archaeology? prehistoric focus on tools and the initial steps of modernity the development of the MODERN human whereas the medieval seen as a stagnation in the development of modern culture?

break with the past not inherently equal: different chronological periods valued/devalued based on their perceived modernity and encapsulation of current interests/ideologies

"Reflections on industry and science underscored the idea that the nineteenth century marked a period of unprecedented change and transformation." 38

This cult of the modern was not without detractors or concerned voices about the unstoppable chug of progress and the havoc it would have on the landscape with modern development came modern vices

"As a primarily elite medium, texts reflected intellectual currents, social concerns, and topics of interests pertinent to educated society and readers. It was, therefore, unsurprising that convictions regarding the utility of scientific knowledge, the inexorable march of progress, and the benefits of industry pervaded" 39 reminds to not just assume that these world views were shared commonly through society, must also look at how rural, non-élites, whose land many of these sites were on were not part of this break but how they either internalized or had their own views about archaeological worth

modernization in part about centralization and standardization: shared language, ideas, interests

"Happening upon a throng of Arab tribesmen, Thierry-Mieg could not help but regard them with a sense of historical distance and detachment. "They are still in the Middle Ages," he recorded soberly; "Their degree of civilization has remained the same. . . . Whereas we have progressed the Arabs have remained stationary" (Thierry-Mieg 6, 102, 169)" 40 this is a great quote for illustrating the stagnation view of the medieval (do not
“In a world configured through notions of temporal pluralism and uni-linear evolutionary models, to encounter the primitive was tantamount to coming face to face with one’s distant ancestry and traversing the centuries and millennia bounding a common genealogy (Matsuda 12; Furet 4). It was through this understanding of the primitive that the possibilities of the modern came into sharp relief and assumed form, that men recognized themselves as eminently modern and superior. The modern man may have believed himself to be centuries ahead of the "savage," but these conceptual distinctions belied a troubling interdependence: the modern man need the savage to imagine his own existence and identity.” 41 speaks again to preoccupations of the primitive that played a part in the driving forces for prehistoric study and development (not without it’s own problems); also interesting that medieval viewed as an inbetween point in development, much like modern studies of the early medieval the ability to project forwards and backwards to arrive at an image of the period rather than study the period itself...

interesting the concept of the modern individual restricted largely to cities and towns, there was a very real concept of a backwards and desperately in need of modernization French countryside in this case the chateaus and medeival churches/buildings a visible demonstration of this need rather than an archaeological boon?

certainly the work of French rural no matter how elite would have been viewed as distant and plebian; although those prehistorians studying would have had government offices and would have access to this larger modern elite, many of the local medieval studies remained out of this larger publication network

countryside stranger and more backwards the farther/south more away from Paris one became

colonial practice and the concept of modernity introduced a language of temporality and temporal distance that fundamentally created a break in the past from the modern as opposed to seeing it as a historically connected

“Construing identities and social relations through notions of anthropological time, the new language of elitism transformed outside cultures and societies into little more than artifacts destined to be effaced by the progressive movement of history, a process broadly understood as the colonization of primitive spaces by modernity.” 45 same true for outlook of past cultures too