

# Motion and flow in heritage institutions

## Two cases of challenges from within

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**Abstract:** *Through two case studies, one in Australia and one in Sweden, this paper looks at how seemingly stable heritage institutions such as museums, archives and government repositories can be reformed through engagement with subaltern subjects. Highlighting institutional permeability rather than conservative resistance, we follow the movement of this “motion and flow” and how it in turn affects ideas of what constitutes both “heritage experts” and broader notions of “heritage”. Although these examples vary in scale, they nevertheless share the contemporary myths and misunderstandings around what happens when heritage institutions meet with subaltern peoples and the challenges they offer from within for the inner workings of the institution. In one case a radical inclusion has been achieved while the other has begun what is likely to be a long-term, complex, cultural conversation. Taken together, these institutional achievements may offer an alternative to recent critiques of official heritage institutions as merely inheritors of a nineteenth-century legacy.*

**Keywords:** Heritage, subaltern histories, heritage institutions, Aboriginal Australians, Sweden’s Roma people, ephemeral places, memory, Swedish Roma history, Aboriginal history, National Museum of Australia, Swedish minorities.

Through the lens of two case studies within different national contexts, this paper seeks to understand how purportedly stable and self-contained institutions such as museums, archives and local government repositories are reformed through engagement with subaltern subjects.<sup>1</sup> Although there is much analysis of heritage institutions that follows major ideological shifts of the twentieth century

(Lowenthal 1985, Pettersson 2003), these organisations are still often considered to bear institutional legacies of the nineteenth century (Bennett 1995). Rather than focusing on these characteristics, however, we will instead explore institutional permeability, noticing how meeting the subaltern in particular inspires “motion and flow”, which in turn affects notions of what constitutes “heritage”.

As we unfold each case, we pay attention to the processes through which this permeability stimulates friction. This is most problematic when the commission of the heritage institution and the construction of national identity are entwined, with the (unarticulated) aim of reiterating established discourses of power (Smith 2006). Conversely, we also explore how heritage institutions can function, somewhat counter-intuitively, as sites of remediation. This happens when negative associations of institutional control are flipped, and instead become places for the previously marginalised to find a voice within the authorised national narrative. In our two examples we show how Aboriginal people in Australia and Roma people in Sweden have forced transgressions of professional practice and in doing so have offered a challenge to the idea of what constitutes a heritage expert.

Both cases, of re-ordered management protocols in the National Museum of Australia and the much more recent integration of Roma historical places into Swedish institutional memory, demonstrate the effect of the subaltern subject on heritage institutions. We can see that in one of the cases a radical inclusion has been achieved, while the other has begun what is likely to be a long-term, complex, cultural conversation. While these cases vary in scale – one bears the weight of a colonial history whilst the other does not – they nevertheless share the contemporary myths and misunderstandings around what happens when heritage institutions meet with subaltern peoples and the challenges they offer from within.

#### **CASE ONE: ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA AND THE NATIONAL MUSEUM**

Somewhat surprisingly, it is the colonial history within which major Australian heritage

institutions are contextualised that has recast them as sites of vibrant competition and collaboration. This first case study examines the founding of the National Museum of Australia and the contesting forces that shaped not just the institution itself, but the museological approaches of Australian heritage institutions more generally.

#### *History in the present*

From the late nineteenth century until the 1920s, the British scientist and proto-anthropologist Baldwin Spencer dominated museum practice in Australia. Early in his intellectual life, Spencer became a committed evolutionary biologist, beginning his studies at Oxford in 1881 under Professor H.N. Moseley who was famous for his twin (and conflating) interests in evolutionary biology and ethnology. It was through Moseley's encouragement that Spencer left Britain to pursue opportunities in the colonies (Mulvaney & Calaby 1985). On the fringes of the British Empire, institutions such as museums, libraries and universities were still being founded, and soon after his arrival in Australia, Spencer was nominated as director of the newly inaugurated National Museum of Victoria (Mulvaney 2008). He immediately began travelling to remote regions of Australia to collect objects, take photos and document ethnological details of many Aboriginal cultures, material with which he would found the new museum's ethnographic collection.<sup>2</sup>

For an evolutionary biologist steeped in the taxonomic protocols of British ethnography, the Indigenous people of Australia were a treasure trove. When not in the field or in his teaching role at Melbourne University, Spencer spent evenings and weekends arranging the exhibits which would be viewed by the general public for the next six decades (Mulvaney & Calaby 1985). As an important institution of education,

the museum ensured that Spencer's Oxford-inspired taxonomies were widely disseminated among the general public, while his writing, most notably his meticulously researched *A Guide to the Australian Ethnographical Collection* published in 1901 was broadly circulated within the scientific community (Spencer 1901).

Today, the records and collections amassed by Spencer provide precious links to the past for the Aboriginal people who were the focus of Spencer's efforts. The preservation of this material in the museums and libraries has created a priceless archive that forms the basis for a new generation of engagement.<sup>3</sup> It is important to remember that the taxonomies within which the material is sorted also capture the echo of social evolutionary theory, the spurious science of race which was used to give credence to much damaging social policy throughout the twentieth century.

#### *Shifting the power*

Although many Australian museums were founded in the late nineteenth century, the building of a national capital did not begin until the twentieth, when an architecture competition for the design of Canberra was announced in 1912. While the Victorian museum had given itself the epithet "national", it was always intended that a "real" national museum be located in the new capital. These plans were interrupted by the great depression and two world wars, however, and it was not until the 1970s that preparations for a new national museum began in earnest. Although frustrating to museum advocates, the extended delay allowed for unpredicted opportunities. The political momentum for a new museum coincided with the great social upheavals of the civil and human rights movements, paving the way for not only a revision of the previous century's museological discourses, but a

revolution in the governance structures which underpinned them.

Looking back, it might seem self-evident that Aboriginal people would be included in the planning of a museum in which a gallery of Aboriginal culture and history would be a central feature, but in Australia of the mid 1970s such an approach was far from obvious. Even as the committee tasked with writing the new museum's founding document was meeting for the first time in 1974, the displays which inherited Spencer's legacy were still on exhibition – now almost sixty years old – and if some were slightly reworked, the predominantly evolutionist discourses that framed them were not (Peterson, Allen & Hamby 2008:4f.). So when five Aboriginal people joined the committee of eleven to design an agenda for the new museum, a museological revolution had begun even before they had sat down. The inclusion of Aboriginal people in the founding committee was a conscious political strategy; the new museum would serve as a calculated statement of contemporary national identity and the progressive government of the day was determined that it should reflect Australia's emergent politics. Special Minister of State Lionel Bowen's instructions to the committee signalled the direction they were to take, asking the members to consider the new museum "not as a storehouse of things dead and past", but as a "living, dynamic institution" (Bowen 1974). Aboriginal Australia would take a central role in the story, in a compelling and as yet unexplored museological voice (Hansen 2010).

The primary task of the committee was to offer expert advice to the government on how to frame legislation under which the Aboriginal galleries within the new museum would operate. Their report needed to recommend how best to structure the galleries, not just in terms of content, but crucially, in terms of authority.

From the beginning one thing was clear: The new museum would eschew classical European methods and reach towards a new model suited to its own needs. Most importantly, according to the committee chair John Mulvaney, the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia would seek to “combat the undignified stereotype which most Europeans [held] of Aboriginal society” and to work against the suspicion generated among Aboriginal people by “the taxonomic traditions of [...] existing institutions” (Lee 1983:792f.). To this end, the committee began their written submission by reminding the readers – in this case members of the central government – of the history they were reaching past. In order to demonstrate their task, they evoked the humiliating commentary from Baldwin Spencer’s 1901 *Guide to the Australian Ethnographical Collection*, where he states:

The Australian Aborigine may be regarded as a relic of the early childhood of mankind left stranded in a part of the world where he has, without the impetus derived from competition, remained in a low condition of savagery. The Tasmanians were even lower in the scale of material progress: they were, in fact living representatives of Palaeolithic man, lower in the scale of culture, than any human beings now upon the earth (Pigott 1975:21f.).

In his reflections on the life of Baldwin Spencer, John Mulvaney reminds us to notice Spencer’s humanitarian approaches before citing his outmoded views, and certainly his ethical considerations extended to the reality of Aboriginal people’s lives to an extent unusual for a researcher of his era (Mulvaney 2008:156f.). It is also true that Spencer was an extremely conscientious scientist whose dedication to acquiring ethnographic material built a superb foundation on which many contemporary Indigenous collections are built. Nevertheless,

the committee chose to quote this statement in their report as an exemplar of the humiliation to which Aboriginal people had been subjected by even the most celebrated of museum professionals and to demonstrate just how far their new agenda needed to move.

Over the course of six meetings, the committee set about imagining both the material spaces of the new gallery and its conceptual foundation. It is not clear who made what contribution to the final document but there is a direct and adamant quality to the text that suggests the sentiments are unmediated. That the five Aboriginal committee members<sup>4</sup> were such a powerful cohort, both through their own impressive biographies and their authority as leaders and elders within their communities, goes a long way to explaining how the committee was able to navigate the complexities of writing the foundations for an entirely new museology with such efficiency. They had a culturally calibrated understanding of how far they could reach, how hard to push, and on whose behalf they spoke (and didn’t speak). Most importantly, they could operate within multiple knowledge systems without the need for translation, bringing a cultural dexterity to the meeting room that allowed the committee to approach its task with radical confidence. To found a national museum in the late twentieth century was an absolutely unique opportunity and they were going to make the most of it. If they needed to invoke the past in order to articulate what they were moving away from, they similarly expressed what would drive their new agenda with this counter-statement:

Eurocentric preconceptions [have] concealed the essential spirituality, the network of social bonding and obligations, and the intimate relationships [with country] which typify Aboriginal society. [...] [I]t is the individuality of Aboriginal society,

which tapped alternative imaginative sources to the Western world, that is the theme and justification of the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia (Pigott 1975:21f.).

These ideas would have far reaching consequences for the future museum, but that was still 30 years away. First, the committee warned that unless the racist museum practices of the past were fully addressed, the future cooperation of Aboriginal people could not be guaranteed. Predictably, they expressed their concerns over issues of repatriation of both objects and human remains, as well as the offensive public display of secret sacred material. But they also extended warnings about control that went to the core of the new enterprise. Aboriginal people's fears, they advised, included:

- that the Gallery will be devised by and controlled by Europeans
- that the type of research initiated might benefit white scholars, but [would not be] relevant to Aboriginal needs
- that museums are not interested in the educational requirements or aspirations of Aborigines and that little is done to encourage them as visitors (Pigott 1975:19f.)

To model new governance structures on alternative imaginaries required the new museum to establish radically different institutional protocols – everything from conservation practices, to collections access policy, to public programmes, to what was sold in the shop. Most importantly, the public narratives of Aboriginal Australia would move away from the de-historicising, flattening methods of anthropology (Fabian 2014), including the difficult and persistent notion of “pure traditional” and “impure modern” – and

most especially the myth of the “disappearing native” – to a clearly historicised story where cultural continuation and the politics of survival were emphasised. The gendered and secret elements of Aboriginal sacred life, which had been of such intense fascination to generations of anthropologists, were finally nobody else's business.

Thanks to the liberal agenda of the reigning government, the entirety of the committee's recommendations were enshrined in legislation, and today the National Museum of Australia Act provides the framework within which all large state-funded museums around the nation situate their practice, if not in law then in spirit. Forty years later we can see the results, which are nothing less than the total reinvention of museology in Australia. Reflecting on the emergence of this new paradigm, the moment of transformation is discussed by theorists as both a movement within *new museology* and a product of the social agenda driven by the civil rights movement (Message 2006). But in fact it was neither. Rather, it was one of the moments out of which new museology emerged, predating the conception of new museology as articulated by Peter Vergo in 1989 by almost fifteen years (Vergo 1989). As a deliberate political intervention, it could also be seen as an act of the civil rights movement, rather than a more passive “influence” by civil rights activism. The committee members consciously and intentionally set out to reimagine one of the most resistant institutions, the national museum, fully aware of the historical importance of their task. It was a perfectly executed action of “insider activism”.

#### *New museum for a new world*

One of the hallmarks of this new museology is the shrinking distinction between the institution and the communities they depict. If European

museums holding ethnographic collections are struggling to find meaningful engagements with what they understand as “source communities”, Australian museums are, at least in part, run by them. The latest iteration of this vision is in Baldwin Spencer’s old home, known today as the Melbourne Museum. The newly refurbished Bundjilaka Gallery, the Aboriginal curated space within the museum, sets a new high-bar for museological practice and offers ideas for the use of what would otherwise be redundant ethnographic collections. Overseen by the creator spirits Bundjil the wedge-tailed eagle and Wah the crow, totems for the country on which the city of Melbourne was built, the gallery weaves a complex story of loss and survival, resistance and collaboration. It uses the museum’s historic collections, many of them acquired by Baldwin Spencer, to tell new stories with distinct perspectives. While celebrating this acclaimed new public space, however, it is important to remember that this vibrant and distinctive museological “voice” is the result of forty years of failure, re-invention, resistance and capitulation. And it is representative of the ways in which governance structures have been stretched in new directions.

By the time the National Museum of Australia finally opened in Canberra in 2000, the cultural context had shifted from the heady days of 1970s radicalism. Suddenly and perhaps unexpectedly, the new museum found itself in the middle of a difficult and hotly debated argument about the complexity of the colonial legacy in Australian historiography (Manne 2003, Macintyre & Clark 2004). Despite huge resistance to the new stories on display from conservative elements in the press, the new de-colonial orientation had already been set in legislation. While the form of the galleries suggested in the committee’s report never eventuated, the historiographic transformation had already been achieved.

## CASE TWO: ROMA HISTORICAL PLACES IN SWEDISH NATIONAL MEMORY

The next case examines the un-orchestrated integration of Roma historical places in the national memory. The story of how these sites became a concern for Swedish national heritage institutions seems at first glance to be an innocent research topic. However, on further inspection it can be seen that such research offers unexpected challenges to ideas of Swedish national heritage. It also provides an interesting place from which to view how authorised heritage institutions handle new questions – matters that do not align with the ascribed institutional privileging of a homogeneous culture within the nation state.

Within plain view, Roma historical places seem to remain largely unnoticed, exacerbated by the fact that the distinguishing characteristics of Roma historical places are not easily discussed within popular notions of tangible and intangible heritage. Although Roma places have material histories, the people’s mostly-enforced nomadism leaves their places of occupation vulnerable to acts of collective forgetting. We therefore propose that, rather than intangible, they are better seen as *ephemeral*, and as such, they indicate the ambivalent relation the nation state has to this subaltern group.

Today, most Roma groups in Europe live in precarious conditions, a circumstance that has a long and persistent history. This situation is best understood in the light of the spread of global capitalism, the colonial logics of which are widely acknowledged for having legitimised acts of repression, exploitation and the relocation of people and wealth (Mignolo 2011). Such colonial logics, driven almost entirely by Europeans, are generally considered as going on somewhere outside Europe. The seven hundred years of severe maltreatment

of Roma *within Europe*, understood as *internal* European colonialism as both practice and idea, remains unseen. The case of the Roma clearly exposes ways in which colonial thought and habitus permeated through social relations and structured Europe internally. This means that the “colonial subject” could be found not only somewhere else but also here, on European territory.

Within Europe, the legacy of colonial thought justified particular narratives of belonging and alienation, narratives that furthered and fuelled events such as the holocaust killings in which large populations of European Roma were murdered. In Sweden, a country without a strong colonial history, it is difficult to make a case for society being permeated with colonial thought. Similarly, Sweden famously took a stand against the horrors of both World War I and World War II. However, both thought and habitus contributed to the establishment of a government research institute for eugenics and human genetics, as well as the adoption of programmes for sterilisation and disposal of Roma children (Selling 2013).

Although the severe atrocities suffered by European Roma are well documented, less noticed is their perpetual positioning as outsiders in relation to mainstream society (*Romers rätt* 2010). This is a cultural exclusion which has cast them into a distinct mythical obscurity, “the myth of the placeless Gypsy” (Kabachnik 2010). This persistent mythologising can be seen as one of the core mechanisms that legitimises a recurring repression. From this perspective, the notion of placelessness can be seen as intrinsically connected to the notion of Roma people as “nomadic” which, in turn, hides the social and legal devices that have prevented them from settling. It also works to obscure their continual historical presence – the somewhere, here and there – amongst us. It

needs to be noted that historical documents as well as tradition tell of a Roma history within the European landscape that spans at least seven hundred years (Marsh 2010). In Sweden, the Roma people celebrated their five-hundred-year presence on their National Day, 8 April 2012.

Although this deep historical presence in Europe is commonly known, there is astonishingly little research related to Roma spaces, places and trajectories; they continue to remain outside of “the history of landscape” (Holmberg & Ulvsgård 2014). In the Swedish national context this can be attributed to the historical lack of registered Roma dwellings, connected to a late adoption of Swedish citizenship by Roma (Swedish citizenship was allowed only from 1952); a lack of representation in local community authorities; and a corresponding lack of real estate and property ownership or acknowledged territories. With exceptions for the purposes of surveillance and persecution, no state register – a traditional source for historians – records any demographic information on Roma dwellings, land, taxes, births, deaths, marriages, etc. (Svensson 1993, Reading 2012).

Any Roma historiography must also notice the complex composition of Roma identity. This case study looks at the particularities of Sweden, where ethnic designation within national minority politics accommodates a cluster of subgroups practising a variety of traditions. These extend to lifestyles, religions and language variations. Mostly, these groups sit comfortably within an overarching Roma identity, but in several situations subgroups such as “Travellers” [Resande] appear as a distinct identity. In this context the term “Roma” or “Roma groups” is an umbrella for all groups that identify as Roma, but the term “Travellers” is sometimes interchangeable. It should be noted that there is no national official ethnic register in Sweden; the

only way to address issues related to minority politics is through self-identification.

All of these factors contribute to the subaltern historiographic dilemma: None of the historian's traditional sources exist, which means that the heritagisation of Roma within a national context – which might work to make them visible and to counter ongoing marginalisation – meets severe constraints. It is no surprise that the Roma have long been absent in the context of national history and heritage.

*Heritage institutions and “Roma historical places” – emerging practices*

Since very few European official heritage institutions and agencies have engaged with Roma history, the Swedish examples are notable exceptions. Outside Sweden there are a few European museums mounting permanent exhibitions and several British museums mounting temporary exhibitions. In total our survey found fewer than ten initiatives (with the addition of a few private examples run mostly by Roma or Traveller associations in Britain) (Holmberg & Ulvsgård 2014:17–19ff.).

Sweden, by comparison, has an astonishingly long list of contemporary engagement. During the last decade,<sup>5</sup> Swedish official heritage institutions have undertaken eleven separate projects that focus not only on general Swedish Roma history, but also on historical places. Only two of these projects have led to permanent exhibitions. None of them have led to places being heritage-listed as a means of safeguarding them from exploitation. Most of the projects however, have had extensive public engagements.<sup>6</sup>

The Swedish government's declaration of National Minorities in 1999 designated the Roma as one of five official National Minorities, a status which played an important role in initiating this profusion of projects. Even

though National Minority designation is largely directed towards language policy, language is always part of a larger cultural policy and therefore has indirect implications for Swedish heritage politics and activities on both a regional and a national level.

The research project's focus on knowledge content within these initiatives (and within the heritage sector in general) noticed how Swedish heritage professionals, in spite of the constraints discussed above, identified particular site-based Roma heritage. This opened a window into the collecting of data on over one hundred distinct Roma historical sites, a surprisingly high number. Although the sites are spread across the country, they are most frequent in areas where special initiatives have been launched. The list is not a comprehensive representation of all Swedish sites historically used by Roma people, but shows the intensity and geography of knowledge-led initiatives. This insight raises the question: *How* have heritage professionals come to know about these sites? A breakdown of the data shows that sources included:

- Roma or Traveller informants: 34 sites
- a (non-Roma/Traveller) fellow citizen: 22 sites
- archival material: 20 sites
- photographs: 10 sites
- collective memory: 6 sites
- the heritage officer's personal memory: 4 sites
- landscape inventories: 4 sites

Most of these sites have come to be known through collaboration with Roma or Traveller people or their representatives. We can interpret this as a serious attempt by heritage professionals to get beyond traditional sources to find historical knowledge. However, the list also shows that traditional sources have not been abandoned (e.g. archives, photos).

The most important collaborations with Roma and Travellers have been initiated by the Bohuslän Museum (Resandekartan) and the Gothenburg City Museum (Rom San). Both these projects opened their administrative and governance processes to include Roma and Traveller participation in steering committees, including the right to veto certain material (Holmberg & Jonsson 2014a, 2014b). This was an entirely new process and occasionally an overwhelming experience for the people involved: If Roma history was not known to mainstream society, it was even more lost to the Roma themselves. One Roma man articulated that through the project, the Roma had refound a history. It is interesting to note that the second largest contribution to Roma historical knowledge comes from the oral testimony of non-Roma people, including many of the heritage officers themselves.

Another breakdown of the analysis looks at different types of Roma sites, where a distinction is made between Roma and Travellers, stemming from the source material. Here heritage professionals make use of the names that the groups give to themselves (Roma, Swedish Roma, Travellers), instead of aligning to a national minority politics and the reductionist term “Roma”.

- Roma rural campsite: 38 sites
- Roma urban campsite: 35 sites
- Marketplace used by Roma: 5 sites
- Sheds for the so-called Swedish Roma set up by a municipality: 4 sites
- Graveyard section for Roma people: 3 sites
- Traveller dwelling in rural setting: 19 sites
- Traveller district in urban setting: 3 sites

This list also reveals how heritage institutions have employed a conception of “historic place” that goes beyond the notions of “belonging”,

“owning” and “dwelling”. Instead we see an acknowledgement of camps as well as market-places being Roma and Traveller heritage, although they have never owned the lots they used. Many of the places are of a recent date, a reflection of the alternative historiographies institutions reach for in subaltern history projects where customary archives are lacking.

This analysis shows that the notion of heritage has been reframed in order to include a subaltern group whose heritage does not appear in line with authorised heritage discourse. Swedish official heritage institutions are being pushed in new directions through having to incorporate different histories that demand alternative approaches. Our research clearly shows that Swedish heritage institutions have been working with an agenda to seriously counteract the myth of “the placeless gypsy”. In doing so, the production, formatting and dissemination of new knowledge about “Roma historical places” has challenged any simplistic notion of Swedish national identity and its related performance of Swedishness. While it is still too early to estimate the extent to which this will have a future impact, it nevertheless helps argue against a too-simple notion of power in the context of official heritage institutions.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper we have presented two cases that focus on what is at stake within authorised heritage regimes when they meet the subaltern. As often noted within postcolonial studies, the history and memory of subaltern groups is a tricky field of research; historiographic strands of thought and knowledge are established by socio-cultural majorities in power, and very few contributions stem from the community of concern. Existing representations are therefore

loaded with stereotypes and histories are collapsed into either narratives of atrocities or silences and lacunae.

The history of the radical Australian “insider activists” who forced open the museum door in the 1970s demonstrates the challenge to these notions of “heritage” within an historical frame. This case explored the establishment of an inclusive practice within a new national museum in a former colonial context. In a similar way, the case for inclusion of Roma and Travellers historical sites in Swedish heritage management points towards an aspiration to review the notion of “heritage”. Here we followed the institutional establishment of “historical places of the Roma on Swedish grounds” as an authorised field of research.

While theorists and critics often turn to public galleries in museums to understand the discourses at play within institutions, in these cases we show that it can also be useful to watch the forces at work in governance structures that underpin the institution. The cases presented in this paper highlight a series of achievements that offer an alternative to recent critiques of official heritage institutions. Our examples watch institutional efforts made to find new ways of conceiving of and conceptualising heritage. Today, in Sweden as well as in Australia, there is as urgent a need as ever to continue mapping different paths which reach beyond narrow exclusive, nationalistic and colonial ideologies within authorised heritage discourses (Furumark 2013).

## NOTES

1. This paper is based on presentations given at the ACSIS conference, *In the Flow*, Linköping University, June 2015.
2. In collaboration with Francis J. Gillen, Baldwin Spencer produced many of the founding texts of

Australian anthropology. See for example Spencer & Gillen 1969.

3. Online access to most of these collections has recently been made available at: <http://spencerandgillen.net>.
4. See Pigott 1975:128f. for a list of committee members.
5. The number includes activities to 2014. The list is based on interviews with heritage officials at every national county board and regional museum, as well as other surveys. Some of these projects have been studied in detail, see full presentation in Holmberg 2014; Holmberg & Jonsson 2014a; Holmberg & Jonsson 2014b; Holmberg & Ulvsgård 2014.
6. For further details see the research project *Rörigare kulturarv* at the Department of Conservation, University of Gothenburg, financed by The National Heritage Board, 2012–2014.

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