



## In defence of story-telling

Adrian Currie<sup>a,\*</sup>, Kim Sterelny<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Centre for the Study of Existential Risk, David Attenborough Building, Pembroke St, Cambridge CB2 3QY, UK

<sup>b</sup> School of Philosophy, RSCS, Coombs Bld, Fellows Rd, Australia National University, Acton, Canberra, ACT, 0200, Australia



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### ABSTRACT

We argue that narratives are central to the success of historical reconstruction. Narrative explanation involves tracing causal trajectories across time. The construction of narrative, then, often involves postulating relatively speculative causal connections between comparatively well-established events. But speculation is not always idle or harmful; it also aids in overcoming local underdetermination by forming scaffolds from which new evidence becomes relevant. Moreover, as our understanding of the past's causal milieu becomes richer, the constraints on narrative plausibility become increasingly strict: a narrative's admissibility does not turn on mere logical consistency with background data. Finally, narrative explanation and explanation generated by simple, formal models complement one another. Where models often achieve isolation and precision at the cost of simplification and abstraction, narratives can track complex changes in a trajectory over time at the cost of simplicity and precision. In combination both allow us to understand and explain highly complex historical sequences.

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### 1. Introduction

In the early 19th Century, a cache of 78 ancient chessmen, mostly carved from walrus ivory, were discovered on the Scottish island of Lewis. They are pictured below (Fig. 1), with a provocative quote.

Who carved them? Where? How did they arrive in the sand-bank—or, as another account says, that underground cist—on the Isle of Lewis in western-most Scotland? No one knows for sure: History, too, has many pieces missing. To play the game, we fill the empty squares with pieces of our own imagination. (Brown, 2015, 1–2).

This quote demands a narrative: an explanation which follows the causal trajectory of the chessmen's origin and subsequent history. Such narratives are common in both historical and scientific reconstruction of the past.<sup>1</sup> Nancy Marie Brown's recent popular history *Ivory Vikings* combines two narratives about the Lewis Chessmen. The first story covers the last few centuries, detailing

debates between art historians, archaeologists and antiquarians about the provenance, manufacture, and purpose of the pieces. The second story is set in the 9th to 13th centuries, and focuses on the social, cultural and economic world of the Lewis Chessmen: the medieval North Atlantic. Brown's emphasis on the role of imagination—story telling—is apt for both narratives. In uncovering history, we draw on material remains, such as the those of the economic and social lives of these communities, and the chessmen themselves, as well as surviving literature like Iceland's rich sagas and hints in the linguistic patterns of contemporary Scandinavian languages—a tapestry of evidence. This evidence is fuel for narrative explanation; stories of how and why the pieces were made, and how they ended up where they did. In developing narratives, imagination plays an important role, as the passage of time erodes elements in the chain of causation; there are 'empty squares' that our imagination must fill.

It is our contention that such story-telling is central to successful historical reconstruction, and moreover that there is no reason for blanket scepticism about such reconstructions. Further, we argue this is just as true for science as it is for history. In this regard, practitioners of human history are methodologically continuous with archaeologists, geologists, cosmologists and palaeontologists. There are differences of course: historical scientists tend to be more concerned with understanding general patterns than historians. They seek to identify general mechanisms that shape causal trajectories through time; for example, the features that determine extinction risk in periods of mass extinction, and those that

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [Adrian.currie@ucalgary.ca](mailto:Adrian.currie@ucalgary.ca) (A. Currie), [Kim.strelny@anu.edu.au](mailto:Kim.strelny@anu.edu.au) (K. Sterelny).

<sup>1</sup> For general discussion of historical science, see Cleland (2002), Currie and Turner (2016).



**Fig. 1.** Some of the British Museum's Lewis Chessmen. Including King and Queen (front centre), knights (back row), bishop (centre), pawns (front ends) and rooks (middle ends). The rook on the right is biting his shield - traditional Berserker behaviour. (source: Wikimedia commons).

determine extinction risk in less dramatic times. But, like historians, they also aim to explain individual historical episodes of particular interest or importance: the formation and breakup of Pangaea; the radiation of flowering plants; the development and spread of agriculture.

Part of the explanatory agenda of historical science involves the identification of similarities between historical trajectories: as noted above, both the general and the particular is of interest to them. The biotic recolonization of Krakatoa after the eruption of 1883 might be similar to the re-establishment of ecosystems on other volcanic islands after eruptions in informative ways (Thornton, 1996). But there are non-trivial differences as well, and ecologists are interested in both the differences and the similarities. In contrast, while the oxidation of iron is a process that takes place in space and time, and at varying rates depending on local conditions, chemists are not typically interested in, say, the specific series of events occurring as an abandoned car shell rusts into the soil. For us, a narrative is a specification of an individual trajectory of this kind.

As we shall understand them, then, a narrative is a candidate explanation of a particular causal trajectory in the past thought to be of interest in its own right. Narratives are not mere chronicles—they do more than provide an ordering of events. They posit links—often causal—between them;<sup>2</sup> earlier events conspire to produce later events. This account of narrative leaves much open. Obviously, narratives can be more or less detailed. Likewise, narratives may present events as being more-or-less contingent.<sup>3</sup> In principle, a narrative explanation of the origins of World War I might be given precisely to underscore its inevitability, charting a perfect storm hitting the European political system early in the twentieth century. We also leave open the possibility that a narrative explanation of a particular historical episode might be intended to illustrate some general mechanism or tendency. A narrative explanation of the origins of World War I might also be

intended to illustrate the threat to peace posed by political systems involving great powers and competing alliances. However, the narrative must intend to capture and explain, at some level of grain, the specific features of that trajectory; the features that make it of genuine interest.<sup>4</sup>

We take it as obvious that historians and historical scientists construct narratives. Our aim is to defend the epistemic viability and productivity of this practice. Building a narrative might seem unproductively speculative, because a narrative typically involves the reconstruction of causal intermediaries that have left no unambiguous trace in the present; positing rather than finding links in a causal chain. Since narrative explanations explain via these causal chains, the explanation as a whole is persuasive only if the identification of each link and its causal connections is persuasive. That is why the charge of “story-telling” is potentially serious; leading to a supposed contrast between the ‘real’ science, the more-or-less firmly established links between material remains and the past, and ‘mere’ storytelling, the construction of imagined links between those pockets of evidential confidence.<sup>5</sup>

Narratives can be problematic in two ways. First, because they are intended to specify what is distinctive about a *specific* trajectory, we cannot take one instance as a model of them all (see Tucker, 1998). Second, the dispersal and erosion of evidence about the sequence—the information-destroying processes of decay—often

<sup>4</sup> Our account of narrative is intended to be more-or-less consistent with others in the literature. One of us Currie (2014) has previously endorsed an extremely thin notion of narrative, identifying it with the explanation of token events; the other Sterelny (2016) has identified narrative with explanations with particular modal properties. Other philosophers (Beatty, 2016; Hull, 1975; Roth, 2008) provide accounts of narrative which do not depart from our account in ways which matter to our argument.

<sup>5</sup> The ‘story-telling isn’t science’ stance is most often expressed in casual conversation, but it is expressed in Aunger’s (1995) discussion of skepticism about ethnographic reports, Herrick’s (2004) position that science is not ‘objective’ but rather provides ‘narrative coherence’, the apparent conflict between ‘narrative’ and ‘evidence-based’ approaches to medicine (Meisel & Karlawish, 2011 discuss, but do not endorse the conflict) and those biological scientists decrying ‘just-so stories’ (starting from Gould & Lewontin, 1979). For a quite different defence of the role of storytelling in science, see Grobstein (2005).

<sup>2</sup> We take narratives to be causal (though not all do), but we will not argue that here. Likewise, we will remain neutral on the nature of cause and causal explanation.

<sup>3</sup> Pace John Beatty’s view (2016).

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