

History is Curious¹

I am not a historian. As a retired Classical archaeologist, however, I have spent most of my life digging through history, and I have thought a lot about generations of human beings passing through time. And through a series of unforeseen teaching assignments I did end up writing a pedagogical US history textbook for the “Great Books” private Key School high school in Annapolis, Maryland, a decade ago.

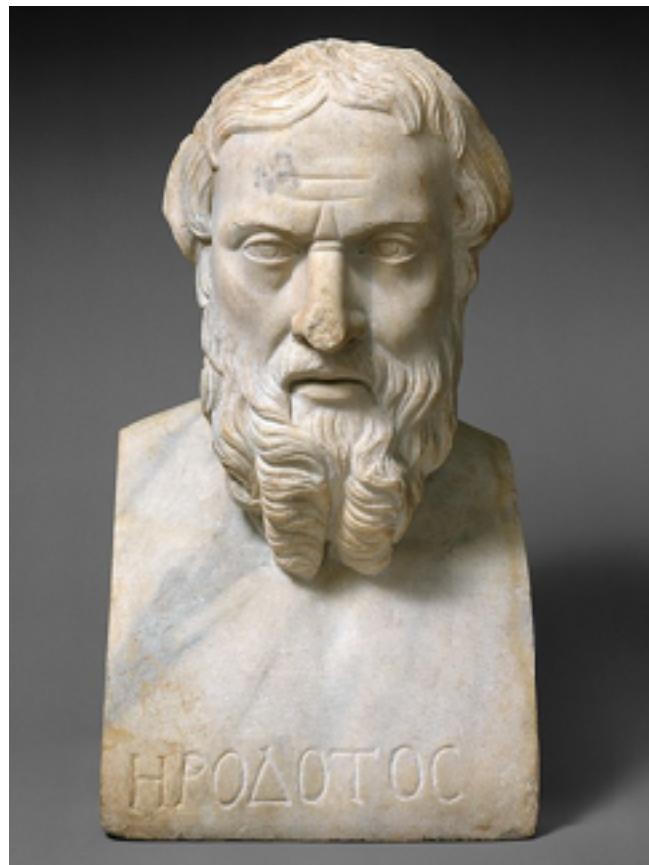
And now, in my retirement in Oviedo, Spain, I am surrounded by history in ways that I wasn't when I lived back in New England. (Yes, there are a few traces of aboriginal peoples in New Hampshire, some of which I helped to excavate, that date back five or six thousand years. But when we moved into my wife's grandmother's house in Keene, NH, which had been built in 1848, I used to think that I was living in a very old building.) Now we live in an apartment in a manor house built in 1776 and every day I walk past the millennium-old Medieval walls of Oviedo, glancing at the remains of a monastery first founded in the year 761 AD, and I have visited most of the Paleolithic caves in our region to see painted artwork that is more than 20,000 years old.

The following, admittedly idiosyncratic, notes are not meant to be a historiography of history and to real historians I am sure that they will come off as jejune. But, as with so many of my other essays, I felt compelled to put them down on paper.



So let's start at the beginning: Herodotus, the Father of History.

¹ Of course I have used Google searches in writing this essay. I was astounded to receive a warning to many of my searches that the AI Overview Google provided may contain erroneous “hallucinations”!



A Roman copy (2nd century CE) of a Greek bust of Herodotus from the first half of the 4th century BCE. H. 47cm.
Metropolitan Museum of Art, no. 91.8.

Herodotus (c. 484 BCE—c. 425 BCE) was not the first person, or even the first ancient Greek, to write about the past. But he was the first to use the word “history” in the sense we use it today, employing a word (*ἱστορίαι*) that can be taken to mean “research” or “inquiry” or “investigation”. Herodotus begins his *Histories*:

This is the display of the inquiry of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, so that things done by man not be forgotten in time, and that great and marvelous deeds, some displayed by the Hellenes, some by the barbarians, not lose their glory, including among others what was the cause of their waging war on each other. (Translation by A. D. Godley, 1920.)

In his account, Herodotus does provide what he considers to be causal links of the events that led up to the war between the Persian Empire and the Greek city-states at the beginning of the 5th century BCE. In doing so, Herodotus set a standard for what history should be that would last for millennia: not simply that “A did B” but “A did B because C”. And, by focusing on the deeds and wars of great men, Herodotus also set a pattern for historical research that would last into the 20th century.

In his wide-ranging account Herodotus provides numerous digressions to cover what we would call a geography and ethnography of the known world, or at least the world known to him. The *Histories* reveal that Herodotus based his work on a number of different sources, from traditional myths such as those recorded in Homer, to his predecessor Hecataeus of Miletus' Περιόδος γῆς ("Journey round the Earth"), to his own travels. And the *Histories* are replete with passages that reveal what are to us astonishing examples of Herodotus' credulity, such as the passage in Book IV where Herodotus says that in eastern Libya there is a race of "headless men that have their eyes in their chests", information that he takes to be true because he heard it from Libyans himself. Clearly, Herodotus was more interested in telling a good story than providing a fact-checked history.

Viewing the *Histories* as a collection of stories brings up the issue of how Herodotus “published” his work. Rather than instinctively imposing our modern view of how historians publish their works—writing a manuscript that is then submitted to a publisher who produces bound books to be distributed to libraries and bookstores—we should note that Herodotus and other writers of his age “published” their works orally, by reciting them at public events. It is reputed that Herodotus once read his entire *Histories* in one sitting to an audience gathered at the Olympic Games. (Another story has it that Herodotus waited to start reading his work at Olympia until clouds came to offer him some shade, by which time the assembled crowd had dispersed, leading to the ancient Greek proverbial expression 'Herodotus and his shade' to describe someone who missed an opportunity through delay.)



History and Prehistory

Now an aside.

In archaeology, there is a fundamental distinction between “prehistoric” and “historical” archaeology, with the former describing the excavations of past cultures for which there is no written record and the latter excavations of cultures for which we do have a written record.

To a large degree this prehistoric/historic distinction is a false one.

The invention of writing occurred at different times and places across the globe, from the Sumerian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphics of the late 4th millennium BCE, to the

early Semitic alphabets of the early 2nd millennium BCE, to the earliest Chinese characters on oracle bones of the Shang Dynasty (c. 1200 – c. 1050 BCE), to the development of the Mayan script in the early 3rd century BCE. But even after the invention of writing, most people who lived in these “historical” cultures were illiterate and obtained their knowledge of their past and their traditions orally, such as we saw with Herodotus. Even most people who followed the monotheistic “Religions of the Book”—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—learned the tenets of their faith orally, through listening to readings of the sacred text delivered from the pulpit and, for Christians at least, seeing Biblical stories on carved altarpieces or in stained glass windows. Most people who lived in early “historic” cultures, then, lived their lives much as people in “prehistoric” cultures had done.

And we should resist imposing on the past our modern notion of the “historical record”, with well stocked libraries and voluminous archives full of material into which historians can delve. Yes, the famous Hellenistic Library of Alexandria might have been an exception, but, in the West at least, our modern “historical record” did not really begin until the creation of universities, from the Al-Azhar madras in Cairo founded in 970, to the University of Bologna founded in 1088, to the University of Salamanca founded in 1134, to the 12th century University of Oxford, and to the University of Paris founded around 1200.

The preference for face-to-face oral communication over written texts was expressed by Plato. In his dialogue *Phaedrus*, composed around 370 BCE, Plato has Socrates tell his disciple that writing is detrimental to memory and hence to true understanding. In their wide-ranging discussion of the art of rhetoric, Socrates relates a tale of the invention of writing by the old Egyptian god Theuth who brought his invention to the king of Egypt, the god Thamus. Thamus chides Theuth over the utility of his invention:

... for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality. (275:a-b translation
Benjamin Jowett)

Socrates goes on to tell Phaedrus:

I cannot help feeling, Phaedrus, that writing is unfortunately like painting; for the creations of the painter have the attitude of life, and yet if you ask

them a question they preserve a solemn silence. And the same may be said of speeches. You would imagine that they had intelligence, but if you want to know anything and put a question to one of them, the speaker always gives one unvarying answer. And when they have been once written down they are tumbled about anywhere among those who may or may not understand them, and know not to whom they should reply, to whom not: and, if they are maltreated or abused, they have no parent to protect them; and they cannot protect or defend themselves. (275:d-e translation
Benjamin Jowett)

[The irony of Plato, a prolific philosophical writer, trying to make an argument against the utility of writing has, of course, not gone unnoticed.]

Fast forward two millennia, and today we are witnessing a return to oral communication over the transmission of information via written texts. Many people continue to read books, of course, but increasingly many “read” them through listening to them on audiobooks. And one of the most popular modern forms of the transmission of information is the podcast, although with podcasts one can write to the podcaster and have one’s question or comment addressed in a subsequent AMA episode.

We might conclude this rather rambling aside by mentioning Friedrich Nietzsche's 1874 essay "Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben" ("On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life"). Originally planned as part of a series of thirteen essays on Imperial Germany, Nietzsche's "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History" warns against the "oversaturation of an age with history" in a society with a "weakened personality", where history only provides "instruction without invigoration". "We need history, certainly," Nietzsche maintains, "but...for the sake of life and action.... We want to serve history only to the extent that history serves life." Nietzsche's warning seems particularly relevant a century and a half later, in our current age of information overload!



Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

For those of my parent's generation, who lived through the Great Depression and World War II, their reaction to the Spanish-born American philosopher George Santayana's maxim, which he published in his 1905 *The Life of Reason*, was "Duh, of course!" Those who witnessed the horrors of Hitler's Holocaust vowed "Never again".

Now, however, with the rise of fascism and authoritarianism across the world, we seem to be caught in the grip of an unexplainable global amnesia, where Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, Stalin, and Mao are only names once glanced at in history books and now forgotten.²



René Magritte, *Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it*, ca. 1962, gouache and pencil on paper mounted on paperboard, sheet: (34.0 x 24.2 cm), Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Container Corporation of America, 1984.124.194.

The surrealist René Magritte's 1962 painting, commissioned by the Container Corporation of America as part of its Great Ideas of Western Man series, seems to presciently predict our current global amnesia. The past is represented as a megalithic chair, fit for a

² I should just note here the so-called “Mandela Effect”—the term coined by the paranormal researcher Fiona Broome, who reported having vivid memories news reports about the South African leader having died in jail in the 1980’s, a false memory that Broome claimed hundred of other people shared. (Other examples of the “Mandela Effect” include the children’s book *Berstain Bears* being spelled *Bernstein*, the Fruit of the Loom logo having a cornucopia, Snow White saying “Magic mirror on the wall” instead of “Mirror mirror . . .” And the list goes on.) A popular, and obviously absurd, explanation of such group false memories is that we have shifted into a parallel multiverse world where only some people remember the previous universe’s past.

giant to sit upon, but which now is replaced by a tiny red wooden chair that could only support our current puny behinds.



The past is never dead. It's not even past.

So said Gavin Stevens to Temple Drake in William Faulkner's 1951 novel *Requiem for a Nun*.

In Faulkner's rather lurid novel, the sequel to his 1931 work *Sanctuary*, the character Gavin Stevens is telling Temple that she must take responsibility for her own history and own up to the consequences of her earlier actions. And for the most part the idea that "the past is never dead" is similarly taken today as implying that we individuals go through our lives carrying the baggage of our personal histories, from our upbringings to our adolescences and into our adulthoods. F. Scott Fitzgerald expresses this same idea in the concluding words to his 1925 *The Great Gatsby* novel, where the narrator Nick Carraway reflects on the tragic story of Gatsby and Daisy: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

In his speech “A More Perfect Union” that he delivered on 18 March, 2008, in Philadelphia, PA, the then presidential candidate Barak Obama widened the “past isn’t dead” idea from the personal to the societal. In this speech, one of most perceptive commentaries on the role of race in American society and one of the most beautifully written works in the corpus of US political rhetoric, Obama says:

As William Faulkner once wrote, "The past isn't dead and buried. In fact, it isn't even past." We do not need to recite here the history of racial injustice in this country. But we do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist between the African-American community and the larger American community today can be traced directly to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow.



History is written by the victors.

While Winston Churchill did not invent that phrase, he did seem to have ascribed to the idea, as did Hermann Göring. The notion that the winning side in a conflict has control of the narrative began in 19th-century French and Italian accounts of how the Jacobin revolutionary Robespierre was viewed after his execution.

The idea that taking control of the historical narrative could be used for nefarious ends is one of the theme of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, published in 1949. In the novel, Winston Smith, who worked at the Ministry of Truth rewriting historical documents and newspapers to conform to the changing political fashions of Big Brother, is caught as a thought criminal and tortured by O'Brien of the Thought Police:

'There is a Party slogan dealing with the control of the past,' he said. 'Repeat it, if you please.'

"Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past," repeated Winston obediently.

"Who controls the present controls the past," said O'Brien, nodding his head with slow approval. 'Is it your opinion, Winston, that the past has real existence?'

Again the feeling of helplessness descended upon Winston. His eyes flitted towards the dial. He not only did not know whether 'yes' or 'no' was the answer that would save him from pain; he did not even know which answer he believed to be the true one.

O'Brien smiled faintly. 'You are no metaphysician, Winston,' he said. 'Until this moment you had never considered what is meant by existence. I will put it more precisely. Does the past exist concretely, in space? Is there somewhere or other a place, a world of solid objects, where the past is still happening?'

'No.'

"Then where does the past exist, if at all?"

'Then where does the past exist?
'In records. It is written down.'

'In records. And- ?'

'In the mind. In human memories

'In memory. Very well, then. We, the Party, control all records, and we control all memories. Then we control the past, do we not?'

Taking control of the historical narrative seems to be alive and well in 21st-century America led by the pathological narcissist Donald Trump. Rather than acknowledging his privileged background and expressing sympathy or empathy for the exploitation of Native Americans, African Americans, women, and others that, in large part, created the conditions of his privilege, Trump, and other similarly minded misogynist, racist Americans, would prefer to erase the historical record of that exploitation by removing any reference to it from our history books and historical museums. “We shouldn’t have to feel guilty for the bad

things our ancestors did,” the white MAGA crowd chants. Bullshit!, of course you should if you personally have benefitted from their actions, however much you abhor what they did. “Slavery wasn’t so bad, and many slaves were treated well.” Again, bullshit!!!! Statues of Confederate heroes, erected in the south during the Jim Crow era and removed a decade ago amid public outcry, are now being re-erected. And echoes of the old “Manifest Destiny” can be heard in the mouths of white Christian nationalists when confronted with the facts of the genocide of Native Americans.

[Given that we are living in a disturbing ‘alternate facts’ world, I imagine that a Venn diagram of holocaust deniers and flat earthers would show a significant overlap.]



Whose history is it, anyway?

The idea that history should be more than a mere recitation of the deeds of great men and of the wars that they started began in the late 1920’s with the advent of the French Annales school, led by the historians Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre, and, later, by Fernand Braudel. A key concept of the Annales school is that historical forces can be viewed as acting at different time scales, from the short term events traditionally covered by historians to the *longue durée*, the long-term time scale when changes in geography, material culture, and what later Annalistes called *mentalités*, or the psychology of the epoch, were at play. The Annales school took a modernist scientific approach, incorporating economics, sociology, and anthropology to provide a total history that encompassed the lives of ordinary people.

[We might parenthetically add that a parallel revolution occurred in the discipline of archaeology in the 1960s. The “New Archaeology” or processual archaeology held that the goal of archaeology was not the uncovering of monumental architecture or the digging up of marble statues, but rather the idea that, as a branch of anthropology, archaeology should focus on how artifacts can shed light on how past societies functioned and adapted to their environments. on how the lives of ordinary people of the past can be revealed by digging through their garbage dumps.]

With the rise of feminism and the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, historians increasingly sought to give voice to marginalized groups that theretofore had been neglected in history books and in museum displays.

Ironically, progressive historians and museum curators have tended, like the book banners, to falsify the historical record by emphasizing the achievements of the marginalized. “You think that African Americans/women/etc. never made any contributions to the arts, science, literature? Well, here are some notable examples of the contributions they made . . .” However well intentioned, highlighting the contributions of some illustrious members of these marginalized groups tends to downplay the sufferings most members of those groups endured or the lengths that the illustrious had to go to overcome their marginalization.



The End of History and the Last Man.

In his 1992 book of this title, with its old-fashioned genderized “Man”, Francis Fukuyama is really only talking about political philosophy:

not just ... the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: That is, the end-point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.

There has been much criticism of the neoconservative RAND fellow Fukuyama's position, mostly on his treatment of Islam and the lack of emphasis he gives to cultural factors. In the year following the publication of *The End of History*, Jacques Derrida wrote in his *Specters of Marx* book:

... never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity. Instead of singing the advent of the ideal of liberal democracy and of the capitalist market in the euphoria of the end of history, instead of celebrating the 'end of ideologies' and the end of the great emancipatory discourses, let us never neglect this obvious, macroscopic fact, made up of innumerable, singular sites of suffering: no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, have so many men, women and children been subjugated, starved or exterminated on the earth.

Recently, Fukuyama has modified the theory he developed "during the heady days of 1989" following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Fukuyama now warns of the dangers of political decay such as witnessed by the corruption and crony capitalism in the current Trump Administration. In his 2002 book, *Our Posthuman Future*, Fukuyama stated "there can be no end of history without an end of modern natural science and technology".

Given that the situation in the world has deteriorated significantly in the three decades since Derrida made his admonition in 1993, given our inability to stop runaway climate change, and given the dangers of the rise of an apocalyptic artificial general intelligence (AGI), we do seem poised on the brink of the end of human history, as least as we have known it for millennia.



humorous inverse ucronía

And on that happy note, I conclude with some cartoons.³

In 1857, the French philosopher Charles Renouvier published his *Uchronie: L'utopie dans l'Histoire*, riffing on the title of Sir Thomas More's 1516 work *Utopia* ("No Place"), in which More describes an ideal society on an imaginary island. Renouvier used his invented term *uchronía* ("no time") to describe what is now called "alternate histories", imaginative speculations about how history might have unfolded if certain key events had transpired in a different way.

In humor theory (and, yes, there is such a thing!), one of the main forms of humor is incongruity humor, where two or more incompatible elements are assembled contrary to expectations, leading to a cognitive dissonance that has a humorous effect, what Schopenhauer called the ludicrous (think a chicken at a seminar on how to cross a road). In comic studies (and, yes again, there is such a thing!), it has been noted that a common technique cartoonists and comic strip artists use to satirize our contemporary world is to intentionally re-contextualize a work of art, an artist, or an ancient culture within a modern setting. In their 2014 *La Pintura en el Cómico*, Luis Gasca and Asier Mensuro write: “En ocasiones, y en especial en adaptaciones caricaturescas, nos encontramos con una ucronía distinta. Los autores descontextualizan conscientemente el pasado introduciendo elementos contemporáneos para reflexionar o ironizar sobre nuestro presente sociopolítico y cultural” (“Sometimes, especially in cartoon adaptations, we find a distinct ucronía. The authors consciously decontextualize the past by introducing contemporary elements to reflect on or to parody our contemporary sociopolitical and cultural world”).

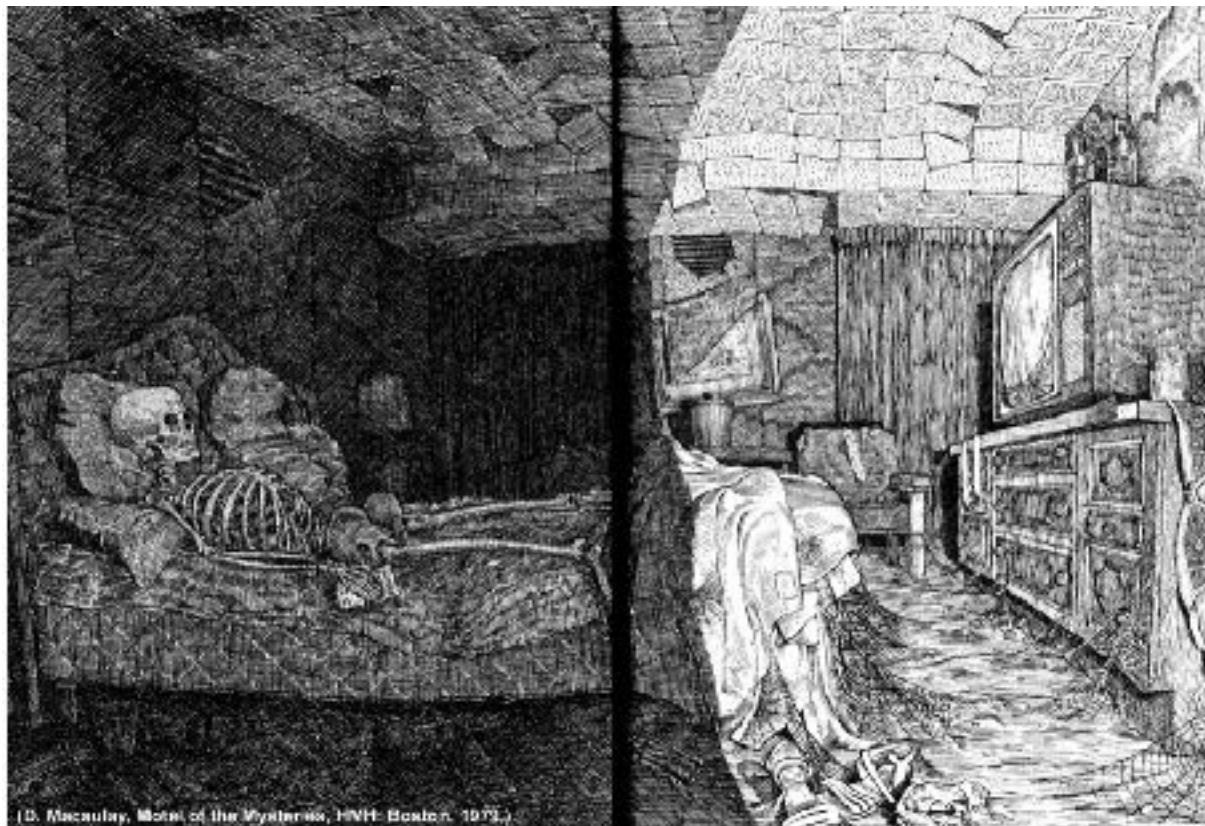
³ This discussion of humorous inverse ucronía and the following cartoons come from my *Art and Archaeology in the American Funny Pages*, which I uploaded to my website in 2020.

To avoid confusion of the use of the term ucronía to describe alternative histories, I prefer to use the term “humorous ucronía” to describe the sort of comic temporal re-contextualizing Gasca and Mensuro are describing.

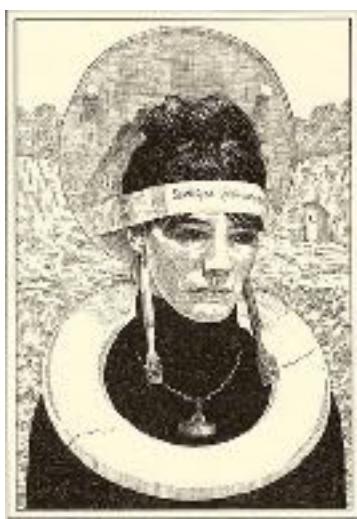
And then there is a reverse type of humorous ucronía, where a future perspective is incongruously imposed on the present. A common form of such humorous inverse ucronía take is to have an archaeologist—often an alien one—from the future humorously misinterpret our contemporary world.

(And, given the pessimistic view of the impending end of human history we predicted above, this seems an appropriate topic with which to conclude this essay.)

The archaeological humorous inverse ucronía began with David Macaulay’s *Motel of the Mysteries*, published in 1979. In Macaulay’s satire, a group of future archaeologists in 4022 was excavating the ancient “Usa”, which had collapsed in 1985, buried under the detritus of junk mail that descended on the country after a reduction in postal rates. The fictional future archaeologist leading the group was Howard Carlson—a not so subtle reference to the Egyptologist Howard Carter, the discover of the tomb of Tutankhamun, a blockbuster show on which was being shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art as Macaulay was publishing his book. Carlson misinterprets the 20th-century motel they encountered as a sacred site. A skeleton in bed, remote control still in its hand, is interpreted by Carson as “facing an altar [i.e. a TV] that appeared to be a means of communicating with the Gods”. Howard and his assistant Harriet Burton find another body in “a porcelain sarcophagus” [i.e. a bathtub] in the “Inner Chamber” [i.e. the bathroom]. In a parody of Henrich Schliemann’s famous 1874 photograph of his wife wearing part of “Priam’s Treasure” [gold ornaments that actually date to the Early Bronze Age, a thousand years before the time of the Trojan War], Harriet put on the “Sacred Collar” [i.e. the toilet seat], “matching Headband” [i.e. the “sanitized for your comfort” paper strip one finds on motel toilets] and “the magnificent plastics ear ornaments and the exquisite chain and pendant” [i.e. toothbrushes and bathtub plug]. Howard Carson also puts on the “Sacred Collar” and “matching Headband” and worships at the “porcelain altar”.



(D. Macaulay, *Motel of the Mysteries*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1979.)



David Macaulay, *Motel of the Mysteries*, 1979; lower center, Sophia Schleimann wearing the “Jewels of Helen,” 1874.

Following Macaulay, a host of cartoonists and comic strip artists have created their own humorous inverse ucrónia gags.

FUTURE ARCHAEOLOGY



Wiley Miller, Non Sequitur, 7 Oct., 1992.

FUTURE ARCHAEOLOGY

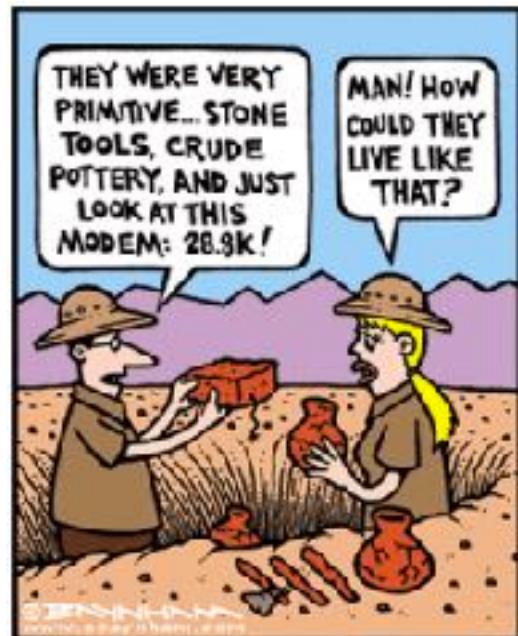


Wiley Miller, Non Sequitur, 7 July., 1998.



How future archaeologists will assess our culture.

Gary Wise and Lance Aldrich, *Real Life Adventures*. 29 Dec., 1999.



John Baynham 2006.

**TOM THE DANCING BUG
PRESENTS:**

BY
RUBEN
BOLLING



ARCHAEOLOGISTS HAVE UNCOVERED AN ANCIENT AMERICAN SHRINE TO "S.U.V.s", AMERICANS' BELOVED RELIGIOUS TOTEM-VEHICLES, NEAR WHAT WAS ONCE CALLED "DENVER."



**S.U.V.
Shrine
Excavated**

THIS IS A RICH DISCOVERY OF WHAT AMERICANS CALLED A "CAR LOT" THAT COULD BE A KEY TO UNRAVELING THE MYSTERY OF THIS ILL-FATED PEOPLE.



LOOK, THIS BEHEMOTH ONLY SEATS FOUR!

S.U.V.s WERE SACRED OBJECTS THAT, MUCH LIKE COWS IN INDIA, CLOGGED AND BEFOULED STREETS, BUT COULD NOT BE THREATENED DUE TO THEIR RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE.



ARTIST'S REHENTION

IT IS BELIEVED THAT IT WAS ANCIENT AMERICANS UNHOLYING WORSHIP OF THESE TOTEMIC VEHICLES THAT LED TO THE OIL WARS OF THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY.

AMERICANS WERE ACTUALLY CONVINCED BY THEIR POLITICAL HIGH PRIESTS THAT THEY SHOULD SACRIFICE THEIR CHILDREN AND THE ENVIRONMENT TO APPEASE THE S.U.V.s' INSATIABLE APPETITE FOR "GASOLINE".

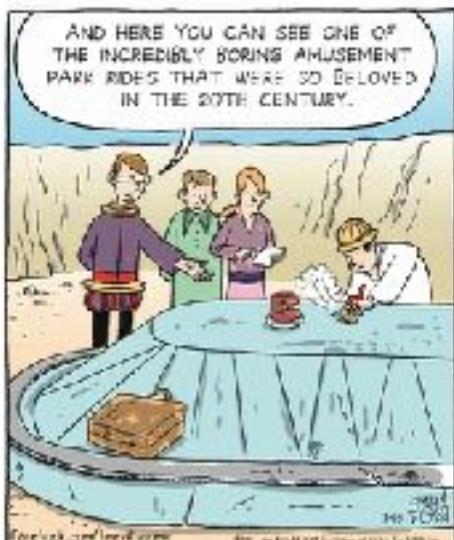
MEANWHILE, THIS WINTER STARS WILL BE GRAVING BRUTALLY HOT WEATHER TO EXCAVATE AN ANCIENT "PARKING LOT" IN THE SUBMERGED LAND OF "NEW ENGLAND".



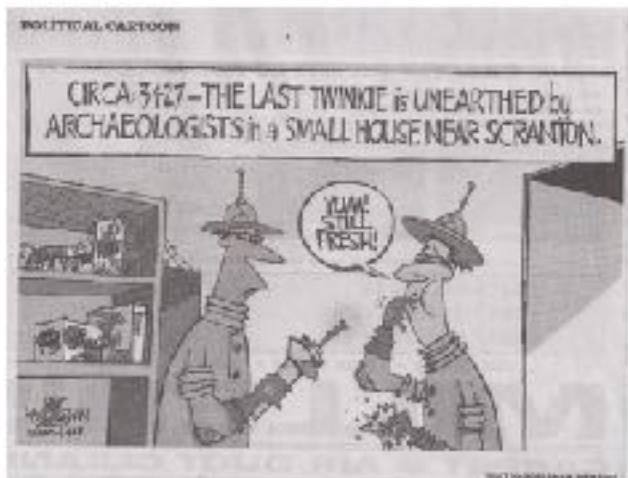
Ruben Bolling (Ken Fisher), *Tom the Dancing Bug*, 4 May, 2002.



Scott Hilburn, *The Argyle Sweater*, 24 July, 2009.



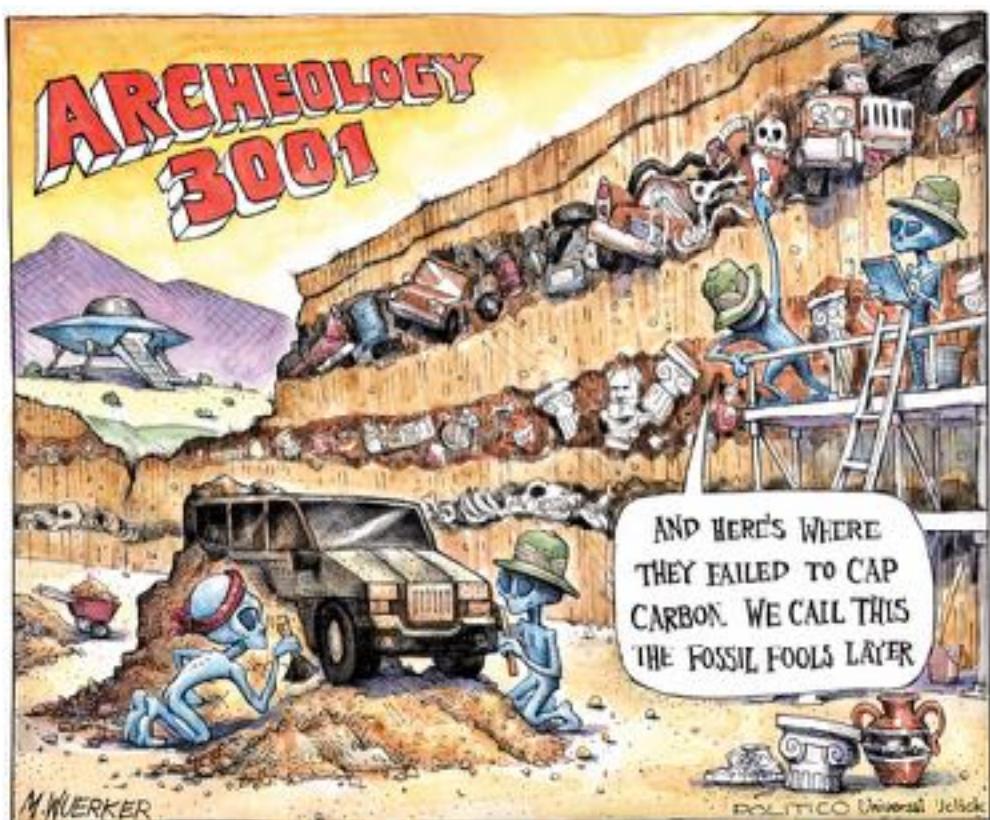
Guy Endore-Kaiser and Rodd Perry, *Brevity*, 13 July, 2011.



Walt Handelsman, *Newsday*, 19 Nov., 2012.



Wayne Honath, *WaynoVision*, 7 Oct., 2015.



Matt Wurker, 12 July, 2012.

And, so it seems, the past *is* in the eye of the beholder. Or, as Alice said after she went down the rabbit hole, curiouser and curioser.