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# Realism, Historical Traces, and Unintentional Evidence. A Look at Charles S. Peirce

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# Realism, Historical Traces, and Unintentional Evidence. A Look at Charles S. Peirce

Charles S. Peirce is primarily read and discussed today for his contribution to logic and semiotics, and as a key figure in pragmatist philosophy. Much less known is his interest in history, both as a scientific discipline to be cultivated alongside philosophy and as fertile ground for philosophical reflection. In my book, *Peirce on the Uses of History*,<sup>1</sup> I aimed to provide a comprehensive picture of the diverse ways in which Peirce's philosophy intertwined with historical reflection. Here I would like to present and add further detail to one of the topics I explore in the book: Peirce's thoughts on the logical-epistemological status of historical evidence. I will also show how this topic intersects with recent discussions on realism in the philosophy of history.

## "Documents" and "monuments," criticism and archaeology

The theme of Peirce's treatise is the logic of historical research. Peirce's intention was twofold: to express his optimism about the possibility of achieving a true reconstruction of ancient history and to engage in a dispute over the methods used by the "critics of documents," by which he meant the German historical-critical school:

*Ancient history is drawn partly from documents and partly from monuments. The last generation has afforded so many examples of the refutation by archeology of the conclusions of the critics of documents as to suggest the question whether the whole logical procedure of the latter class of students has not been radically wrong. The purpose of the present paper is to show that this is the case; that the logical theory upon which the critics proceed is as bad as logic can be; to set forth and defend the true logical method of treating ancient historical documents[.]<sup>2</sup>*

This polemical introductory passage is based on two conceptual distinctions that underpin the entire argument of the essay. The first distinction is between two kinds of evidence, *documents* and *monuments*. The second is between two scholarly disciplines, *texts criticism* and *archaeology*. By combining these two distinctions, a scheme is suggested according to which the two disciplines look at ancient history but favour different kinds of evidence. Archeology mostly relies on monuments,

whereas criticism works with documents. Peirce's sympathy was clearly with the method of the archaeologists. In fact, he credited archaeology with refuting the false conclusions of the critics.

To fully understand the meaning of this scheme, we must start by defining the first of the two distinctions, that is, the distinction between document and monument. This conceptual pair has a long and intricate history, one told, among others, by Jacques Le Goff in a seminal article.<sup>3</sup> Its meaning results from the fusion of at least two simpler conceptual oppositions. The first and most obvious opposition is between *written source* and *material object*. The second is between *intentional* and *non-intentional source*. This latter opposition overlaps unevenly with the former. The "monument," a term initially suggesting a commemorative object intentionally constructed to offer a public and orientated view of the past, gradually took on the connotation of non-intentional evidence, to be contrasted with the intentionality involved in the production of written evidence.

As Lisa Regazzoni has recently shown,<sup>4</sup> in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France the two meanings of "monument" – commemorative object and non-intentional evidence – overlapped, but the latter gradually became predominant. "Monument" was understood to mean a form of testimony whose historical value consisted in offering unfiltered access to information that would have otherwise been lost (think of archaeological remains, coins, practical implements, as well as non-material evidence such as oral or performative testimonies). The "epistemological primacy" of the monument as non-intentional evidence<sup>5</sup> played a central role in the disputes against historical scepticism and in establishing the autonomy of history as a scientific discipline. The situation changed again, however, in the late nineteenth century, when, under the influence of positivism, the written document – intentional or otherwise – became the historical piece of evidence par excellence. The concept of monument thus returned to primarily denote commemorative objects. That said, the emphasis on the epistemic value of unintentional evidence, which eighteenth-century scholars had associated with the concept of monument, was not lost. Rather, it migrated to the concept of document (think, for instance, of Marc Bloch's emphasis on reading sources against the intentions of historical actors).<sup>6</sup>

Viewed in this light, and despite its relatively late date of composition, Peirce's text seems to fall on this side of the late nineteenth-century watershed. Peirce upheld the epistemological primacy of the monument and linked this idea to a non-sceptical view of historical practice. He also stressed the value of monuments as

unintentional evidence, which he associated directly with their materiality. Monuments, for Peirce, are all physical objects that reach us from the past and carry information about that past. In a sense, this category *also includes* written documents, but only insofar as they, too, are material objects – inscriptions on stone, on papyrus, on paper – that endure over time. (So, we could say that the distinction between documents and monuments is, for Peirce, a functional distinction between two ways of looking at evidence rather than a substantial distinction between two classes of things, namely, physical versus written remnants of the past). Precisely because of their materiality, monuments always reveal information that goes beyond the intentions of their creators.

The minimum degree of such unintentional information is the mere existence of the written source to be analysed. This was a crucial point for Peirce. A written document that intentionally asserts a fact – for example, that Caesar crossed the Rubicon – is not so much evidence, reliable or not, that Caesar crossed the Rubicon, but rather that someone in the past had asserted that Caesar crossed the Rubicon. It is precisely in this sense that Peirce insisted on the epistemological primacy of monuments in opposition to the German historical-critical school. In his view, the representatives of the latter fell into an exaggerated subjectivism that fueled a sceptical attitude, since they focused on the message rather than the object itself.<sup>7</sup> In other words, they looked at historical sources as documents before seeing them as monuments, and considered themselves justified in completely disregarding a document deemed unreliable instead of attempting to explain its existence.

The model Peirce set against historical criticism thus hinges on the idea that sources cannot be dismissed solely on the basis of their supposed unreliability. Even if sources are deemed unreliable, the historian must first explain their existence. It can therefore be concluded that historical reconstruction is based on the same practices of fact collection and hypotheses formation that characterize other scientific disciplines (despite certain local differences, for example regarding the different roles of description and generalization).<sup>8</sup> Its primary task is not so much to interpret the content of documents as it is to provide the best hypothesis accounting for their existence.

But the analogy with science goes even further. According to Peirce, once a historical hypothesis is formulated, it can generate predictions that need to be tested inductively, as in the natural sciences. However, while the inductive test in most natural sciences is conducted through experimentation, in historical

reconstruction (and ancient history in particular) this task falls under the purview of archaeology. For instance, the hypothesis that a certain battle was fought at a particular location generates the prediction that excavations in that area might lead to the discovery of battle remains.

As we can discern from the passage I quoted at the beginning of my text, Peirce was indeed convinced that archaeology had, on the whole, demonstrated the limitations of the historical-critical method through its discoveries, precisely on account of its reliance on the incontrovertible materiality of objects. Unfortunately, Peirce did not provide much detail about what examples of archaeological rebuttals he had in mind, but it seems likely that a key case for him was the Homeric Question. We know that the questioning of Homer's historicity was a foundational moment of the historical-critical school.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, Peirce attributed to Heinrich Schliemann – who discovered the remains of Troy and defended the historical unity of the Homeric poem – the role of having imparted “the first soc[k]dolager that ‘higher criticism’ received. It has since got many others.”<sup>10</sup>

## Realism and scientific practice

Looking at recent debates in the philosophy of history, it might be useful to note a parallel between Peirce's argument and Adrian Currie's recent reflection on archaeology as an epistemological model that helps us articulate a realist conception of the historical sciences.<sup>11</sup> Currie focuses on the opposition between textual and non-textual sources, one of the two dichotomies on which the traditional document/monument binary was based. The crux of his argument is that thinking of historical sources as material objects rather than textual traces may help us avoid excessive theoretical abstractions. Disciplines such as archaeology or paleontology stand as a model for historical sciences in general, as they accord a “privileged epistemic role” to the interpretation of material objects rather than to the reading of texts.<sup>12</sup>

Currie speaks of the materiality of historical evidence as a “constraint” or a “point of resistance to [...] theory.”<sup>13</sup> These words recall another key ingredient of Peirce's scientific realism, namely, his emphasis on what Peirce called the “outward clash” of material reality. In his critique of Hegelian idealism, Peirce notably insisted on the importance of taking the power of reality into account to constrain or invalidate our theorizing.<sup>14</sup>

The notion that material reality creates friction with theory should not be taken to mean we can gain direct access to unmediated historical truth devoid of language or concepts. Indeed, we could use the title of Hasok Chang's recent pragmatist book<sup>15</sup> and say that Peirce sketches a "realism for realistic people," more concerned with working out the philosophical attitude that best accords with the heuristic practices of scientists than with advancing a metaphysical thesis about the possibility of reaching the ultimate truth about the world. In the specific case of Peirce's philosophy of history, this pragmatic (or pragmatist) strand of realism is made explicit in his rejection of the idea that historical reconstruction can offer a neutral and definitive image of the past. Peirce's conception of historical truth is far from the proverbial Rankean ideal of a reconstruction of the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. On the contrary, in his 1901 treatise, Peirce emphasized the value of venturing into what Currie<sup>16</sup> would call "empirically grounded speculation." Speculation, for Peirce, is necessary and legitimate as long as it is carried out with respect for the data so far available and, most importantly, with acceptance of the fundamental component of scientific fallibilism, namely, the possibility that future inductive tests will correct or invalidate our hypotheses.

This brings us to one of the more surprising aspects of Peirce's treatise on the logic of history. The first part of the treatise, which is devoted to the critique of historical criticism, is followed by three case studies in which Peirce applies his model of inquiry to unresolved issues in the history of ancient philosophy. The case studies in question refer to the reconstruction of Pythagoras's life, a chronology of the Platonic dialogues and the vicissitudes of Aristotle's manuscripts. These are surprising cases, because the role of archaeology appears very limited compared to Peirce's programmatic statement. The inductive testing of his hypotheses lies with philology rather than archaeology. But they are in part also disappointing cases, since Peirce's speculations are often less grounded empirically than one had hoped.<sup>17</sup>

It is important to note, however, that Peirce seems to have deliberately selected case studies in which the scarcity of written testimonies made the detailed presentation of facts particularly challenging. This is particularly true of his attempt to reconstruct the biography of Pythagoras:

*In such a case, we must renounce at the outset any attempt to reach anything approaching certainty. Yet we are not to aim at verisimilitudes, which are merits in romances, but not in scientific results. What, then, are we to do? We are to embody [...] all the pertinent facts, that is, the facts that those writers make those*

*statements, in such a hypothesis as best unifies them, and will serve as a source of experiential predictions, whenever, in the future, it may be in our power to verify or refute any predictions on the subject.*<sup>18</sup>

The italicized phrase returns to the idea that even written sources should be viewed as monuments. Instead of accepting or discarding them on the basis of their plausibility, it is the very existence of these sources that must be explained by a hypothesis, one that subsequently undergoes inductive testing.

It is no coincidence that Peirce chose ancient history as the preferred terrain to elaborate his logic of historical inquiry. Situations of epistemic scarcity are a perfect fit for his model, which lays out a strategy designed to compensate the underdetermination of sources with a series of hypotheses and inductive tests. It is more difficult to see the relevance of this model in situations where sources are abundant rather than scarce (think of contemporary history); or those where historians, rather than primarily establishing the existence of facts or working out a chronology, are engaged in the activity of providing different (and divergent) interpretations of macro-historical phenomena. To appreciate the relevance of Peirce's philosophy in such cases, it will be useful to go beyond the treatise I have analyzed here and look at other branches of his thought, such as his semiotics, his theory of interpretation, or even his detailed analyses of the history of the natural sciences in the early modern period.

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**Tags:** documents / materiality / monuments

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<sup>1</sup> Viola Tullio, *Peirce on the Uses of History*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 705.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Le Goff, "Documento/Monumento," in *Enciclopedia Einaudi*, vol. 5, ed. Ruggiero Romano. Torino: Einaudi, 1978, 38–48.

<sup>4</sup> Lisa Regazzoni, "Unintentional Monuments, or the Materializing of an Open Past," *History and Theory* 61, no. 2 (2022), 242–68.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 266. In an influential paper from 1940 (“The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline”), art historian Erwin Panofsky revived the dichotomy between document and monument from a different perspective. In his view, monuments are neither commemorative objects nor pieces of unintentional evidence, but rather texts or artefacts to which we attach a special cultural significance. On Panofsky’s argument and its relevance for a history and philosophy of the humanities, see John Guillory, “Monuments and Documents: Panofsky on the Object of Study in the Humanities,” *History of Humanities* 1, no. 1 (2016), 9–30.

<sup>7</sup> Peirce, “On the Logic of Drawing History from Ancient Documents,” 707.

<sup>8</sup> See Serge Grigoriev, “Hypotheses, Generalizations, and Convergence: Some Peircean Themes in the Study of History,” *History and Theory* 56, no. 3 (2017), 339–61.

<sup>9</sup> See Paul Michael Kurtz, “A Historical, Critical Retrospective on Historical Criticism,” in *The New Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Ian Boxall and Bradley C. Gregory. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, 15–36, here 15.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss and Arthur W. Burks. 8 vols. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1931–1958, § 1.113 [c. 1896].

<sup>11</sup> Adrian Currie, “Of Records and Ruins: Metaphors about the Deep Past,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 17, no. 1 (2023), 154–175 and “Narratives, Events & Monotremes: The Philosophy of History in Practice,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 17, no. 2 (2023), 265–287.

<sup>12</sup> Currie, “Of Records and Ruins,” 174.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Viola, *Peirce on the Uses of History*, 109–12.

<sup>15</sup> Hasok Chang, *Realism for Realistic People: A New Pragmatist Philosophy of Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Adrian Currie, *Rock, Bone, and Ruin: An Optimist’s Guide to the Historical Sciences*. Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press, 2018, 285–291.

<sup>17</sup> On the analysis of Aristotelian manuscripts, see Maria Liatsi, *Interpretation der Antike: die pragmatistische Methode historischer Forschung. Ein Kommentar zur Abhandlung von Charles S. Peirce “On the logic of drawing history from ancient documents, especially from testimonies.”* Hildesheim/New York: Olms, 2006, 60–76.

<sup>18</sup> Peirce, “On the logic of drawing history from ancient documents,” 791f.