

Linear Pasts and Presents: Researching Dykes, Frontiers and Borderlands

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This editorial essay introduces the fifth volume of the Offa's Dyke Journal (ODJ) by presenting a review of the contents, recent related research published elsewhere, and the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory's activities during 2022 and early 2023.

Keywords: borderlands, dykes, frontiers, identity, linear earthworks, memory.

Introduction

The Dyke is a strangely living thing. Farmhouses along its course are much in evidence, for it provided a natural track through wild and hilly country. Even if the Dyke were not there to see, raising up its bulky, primitive bank in the farmyard or across the pastures, the farm names would tell you. With a Plas Offa here, a Bryn Offa there, and sometimes a Tan-y-clawdd – Under the Dyke. There was not a person I spoke to, asked directions from, along the line of the Dyke, who did not know what Offa's Dyke was, where it was found (Bradley 1967: 14)

Writing before the creation of the Offa's Dyke Path in *The Geographical Magazine* for May 1967, Peter Bradley's essay on Offa's Dyke states 'The old frontier has life in it yet'. His sense of the ancient linear earthwork is influenced heavily by the writings of Sir Cyril Fox (1955) and Bradley explains that the monument marked an 'agreed frontier' between the Welsh and the Anglo-Saxons. Bradley also articulated how the monument possessed a legacy in the contemporary landscape from hill farms to steel-works and collieries. It was still 'boldly traversing' the landscape and affords the visitor with an:

...unforgettable excitement in finding it for yourself in discovering the hump of it rising out of an inn yard, swelling the lawn of a cottage-hospital garden, or sweeping up as a hedge-bank to either side of a narrow Welsh lane. The Dyke is suddenly astonishingly *there*. (Bradley 1967: 17)

While inevitably dated in its conception and detail, Bradley affords us a sense of the wonder and mystery that wraps around Offa's Dyke and other ancient linear earthworks. Why, when, where, how were such monumental projects enacted; who commissioned and raised them (see Hill 2020)? The same set of questions might apply to their duration of use, reuse and abandonment. Similar questions apply to their

significance in today's world; this 'wall' metaphorically and physically inscribes a sense of division and nationhood as it is situated between England and Wales. Equally, Offa's Dyke constitutes a sense of a borderland or 'Marcher' identities for those that live in its shadow and recognise its monumentality and legacy in both the earthwork, place-names and other references and stories linked to its presence and/or former-presence (Williams 2020a and b). Bradley only briefly and casually mentions Wat's Dyke but here too we gain a sense of an early medieval monument with a legacy in its contemporary landscape of town and country in the Anglo-Welsh borderlands, considered by Fox a precursor to Offa's Dyke (Bradley 1967: 16–17). Bradley insightfully notes that local people and visitors together might secure the future of these monuments as meaningful elements of the cultural heritage of the Welsh Marches.

What better way to introduce this fifth volume of the *Offa's Dyke Journal* that seeks to promote investigations and understanding of dykes and borders past and present. The journal provides a platform for original interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research on linear monuments, frontiers and borderlands, including the linear monuments of the Welsh Marches. Bradley's essay serves to remind us that these monuments remain a challenge and enigmatic to this day. Yet, they have so much to tell us about past societies and their relationship to the landscape. Furthermore, while they might be long moribund and the focus of considerable neglect, misinformation, speculation, legend and myth, dykes and walls remain active components of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. These monuments can afford senses of identity and harbour complex, often ambivalent, associations and meanings in relation to their landscape settings (cf. Mullin 2011: 102).

By way of introduction to *Offa's Dyke Journal* 5, this editorial sets out to present rationale for this open-access publication and present the 'story so far'. Next, I review the context of volume 5 before reviewing select recent other publications on linear monuments, frontiers and borderlands. The final section provides a review of the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory's principal endeavours during 2022 and early 2023.

Rationale and review

The *Offa's Dyke Journal* is an open-access peer-reviewed academic publication venue for interdisciplinary research on linear monuments, frontiers and borderlands. Since 2019, it has been edited and produced under the auspices of the the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory supported by funding by the University of Chester and the Offa's Dyke Association. The journal is published online by JAS Arqueología and paperback copies are distributed by Archaeopress. *ODJ's* editorial board supports the work of the editor and the journal's quality and character is enhanced by the hard work of multiple expert anonymous referees assigned to each article considered for publication.

Volumes 1–3 for 2019–2021 were co-edited by Howard Williams and Liam Delaney. Each was introduced by an editorial essay and together they contained fifteen original peer-

reviewed research articles as well as five ‘classics revisited’ pieces (re-edited, formatted and re-published with permission, often with revised and augmented maps and images). Volume 4 for 2022 comprised an Introduction, review essay and seven peer-reviewed articles; it was co-edited by Ben Guy, Howard Williams and Liam Delaney and tackled the special issue theme of ‘Borders in Early Medieval Britain’.

Volume 5 extends and enriches the scope and character of the journal and comprises this Introduction, ten peer-reviewed articles and an art project with commentaries. The first half tackles global themes and European case studies. Gideon Shelach-Lavi, Tal Ulus and Gideon Avni provide a transdisciplinary overview of the ‘Walls, Border, and Frontier Zones in the Ancient and Contemporary World’ workshop. They identify cross-period themes for current and future research throughout Eurasia. Next, Lisbeth Christensen provides an invaluable synthesis of fieldwork on, new scientific dating for, and interpretation of, Denmark’s Olger Dyke; this includes Jørgen Andersen’s artist’s reconstruction that, with permission, provides the volume’s front cover. A pair of exceptional syntheses by Florin Curta next consider the dates and functions of early medieval dykes of east-central and southeastern Europe and Ukraine.

For the second half of volume 5, we turn to new research on the linear earthworks and frontiers of Britain in the first millennium AD. The archaeology of Roman Wales is insightfully evaluated by Roger White in relation to popular and academic misconceptions of it as a ‘frontier’. Stemming from a broader study of linear earthworks across Britain, Erik Grigg presents the hypothesis that some dykes in Cornwall might be early medieval in date. The companion article to his earlier research on Wat’s Dyke, the relationship of Offa’s Dyke with water courses is explored by Howard Williams. Next, the early medieval small-finds recorded by the Portable Antiquities Scheme for the Welsh Marches are evaluated by Pauline Clarke. The fluctuating nature of Mercia’s borderlands before and during the Viking period, situating those delineated by physical barriers and natural features and those with more porous or imprecise dimensions, is the focus of Morn Capper’s interdisciplinary contribution. The volume is concluded by the innovative ‘Walking with Offa’ art project by painter Dan Llywelyn Hall in collaboration with a series of poets; reflective commentaries on this initiative are provided by artist Diane Bauer, archaeological illustrator John G. Swogger, and Howard Williams.

New research on linear earthworks

Each introduction article for volumes 1–3 aspired to survey key themes of recent research on linear earthworks (Williams and Delaney 2019; Williams 2020a; Williams 2021a). While making no claims at being exhaustive, I want to use the introduction to survey six relatively recent studies not covered by previous reviews, as well as four outputs that were published just before or since the last review in *Offa’s Dyke Journal* 3. Each is worth considering because of their broader implications for the theory and method of investigating linear monuments, frontiers and borderlands.

Comparing frontiers

Florin Curta (2011) introduced the challenge of comparative investigations of linear frontiers across early medieval Europe. Were practical and conceived frontiers in existence, and in what specific circumstances, across early medieval Europe? The comparison is presented between two ninth-century frontiers – between Bulgaria and Byzantium during the Thirty Year Peace from AD 816 and between the West Saxons and the Danes in the late ninth century, arguing that these frontiers were precise and not zones, and relate to precise and practical roles. The Great Fence of Thrace or Erkesiya Dike is considered the 131km-long frontier established by the Bulgars as a dramatic gesture without military installations, the building of which occupied the bodies and minds of the inhabitants. Curta compares this with the linear frontier boundary established between Guthrum and King Alfred the Great in the 880s, mainly following rivers. In both instances, they served to configure loyalties along ethnic grounds and prevent movement without permission including the activities of raiders, defectors and spies in addition to regulating trade. Establishing a 'peace', each were considered by Curta as not 'segregating' but 'converging directions of political action'. This comparative approach might be extended by integrating detailed landscape analyses. Specifically, it has potential for considering the multi-functionality of linear frontiers and how different kinds of natural and human-made constructions were selected and integrated into frontiers and borderlands. Equally significant, Curta's study prompts us to pose the additional comparative question: when and why frontiers were established and when and why they were not?

Swaledale dykes

A particular focus of debate regarding the date and interpretation in the last decade has focused on the four linear earthworks known as the Grimton-Fremington dykes. Specifically, work has explored their relationship with a proposed early medieval kingdom in Upper Swaledale by Andrew Fleming who regarded them as demarcating their eastern borders (Fleming 1998: 18–32). Ainsworth *et al.* (2015) countered this argument through a field-based and lidar mapping revaluation of the dykes. Focusing on the south-western dyke around Dykehouse Close, they propose a late Bronze Age/early-middle Iron Age date because the dyke here is cut into by medieval settlement and also post-dated by a late Iron Age or Romano-British settlement.

Fleming (2015) conceded to Ainsworth *et al.* (2015) on the dating. However, he noted that the Grimton-Fremington dykes became a boundary zone in the Anglo-Saxon period and that Upper Swaledale and Arkle Beck might have become a discrete territorial entity defined by the prehistoric linear earthworks. Furthermore, he noted that the Rue Dyke and How Dyke remain undated and need not be contemporary with the section re-dated by Ainsworth *et al.* (2015). Fleming even postulated that these dykes may have defended a prehistoric predecessor to his postulated early medieval polity, the dykes serving as boundaries for each successively, with or without refurbishment. In a broader context, drawing on the work of (among others)

Melanie Giles (2012), he identified the complex lives and afterlives of later prehistoric linear earthworks in which linear earthworks relate to ‘congealed history’ involving encounter, confrontation and surveillance. Significantly, he identified the contrasting interpretative frameworks within which first millennium BC and first millennium AD earthworks are approached and considered – the former as constitutive of long-term social identities, the latter in regards to elite agency, territoriality and military strategy. Fleming (2015: 24) warned that interpreting monumental linear earthworks as constituting social identity risk perpetuating a ‘truism’ and ‘not a sufficient condition for explaining phenomena such as linear earthworks’.

Building on both Ainsworth *et al.* and Fleming’s works, Swales (2019) conducted a first full place-name survey of the dykes and argued that they might represent land divisions rather than political/territorial boundaries. He points the way to future work including the need for the scientific dating of the monuments.

Together, this triad of articles have broader lessons for considering the theoretical frameworks. In addition, they show the need for careful and critical applications of survey methods and techniques. The importance of integrating systematic place-name studies is also made clear. Yet, only through sustained survey and excavation incorporating a programme of scientific dating can the chronology, functions and significances of linear earthworks be discerned.

Agential earthworks

Considering the relationship between materiality, movement and memory, Chadwick (2016) adopted a relational approach to considering the agency of later prehistoric linear earthworks focusing on Yorkshire. Such linears were perhaps intended to demarcate claims to territorial spaces and access to grazing and water, and in other cases more to do with channelling movement along agreed or designated pathways. Focusing on the Aberford Dykes comprising of Grim’s Ditch, South Dyke, Becca Banks and Woodhouse Moor Rein, Chadwick identifies their ‘attentive attunement to topography’ (Chadwick 2016: 257), whether as ‘guides to movement, and/or statements of tenure’. Chadwick also considers how assemblies and ceremonies might have taken place in ‘buffer zones’ between communities existing where linears intersect, while overlapping earthworks might suggest the ‘politics of contestation and appropriation’ (Chadwick 2016: 259). For Roman Rig, the impression is of a multi-phased late prehistoric monument whose ‘meanings and purpose might have changed over time, together with the flux and flow of the meshworks of agencies and affordances’ (Chadwick 2016: 262). They may have been accretive monuments persisting and being augmented over multiple generations, acquiring significance in social memories and some passing into associations with legends and myths (Chadwick 2016: 264).

Rather than presuming a singular intended outcome in building linear earthworks, Chadwick’s approach considered intended and unintended consequences – ‘agential presences’ on mobility and memory and thus in constructing power relationships and social

identities (Chadwick 2016: 267). From this perspective, linear earthworks might result from a wide range of 'choices, improvisations and aleatory engagements' (Chadwick 2016: 263).

Chadwick's insights require further consideration and application. Perhaps most significant of all, this approach aids in considering the temporalities and mnemonics of linear monuments by understanding their biographies beyond the initial intentions of their creators and their intended impact and efficacy (Chadwick 2016: 251). Unfortunately, with the brief exceptions of discussions of the long-term use and reuse of the Sledmere Green Lane (Yorkshire), Bokerley Dyke (Dorset/Wiltshire), Portway, Andover (Hampshire), and Aves Ditch (Oxfordshire), Chadwick focuses on late Bronze Age, Iron Age and Romano-British linears. As a result, while recognising the need to consider linear monuments' biographies (Chadwick 2016: 266–267, 269), there remains much untapped potential for considering this approach over the *longue durée* of monumental land divisions (cf. Seaman 2019). Despite Fleming's (2015) aforementioned concerns regarding the 'truisms' of explaining later prehistoric linear earthworks in terms of social identity, there is potential for developing this approach to include moving beyond map-based two-dimensional perspectives. Furthermore, it is important to combine tackling the material agencies of earthworks upon channelling and curtailing mobility with attention to their role in surveillance and communication, and doing so in relation to both movement along and across both land and water features (cf. Williams 2021b).

Dating the Clawdd Mawr cross-ridge dyke

Returning to the Welsh Marches, Mason (2019) reported on excavations ahead of a windfarm's construction of the Clawdd Mawr cross-ridge dyke, Glyncoirwg, Aberwynfi, North Port Talbot. The dyke is one of twenty-three known from the Glamorgan/Monmouthshire uplands. The work did not provide conclusive dates: the monument was confirmed as dating to before c. AD 800 but might have been far older, dating back to the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age: matching the OSL date provided by the buried soil layer. However, the base of the secondary ditch fill indicate that this 200m-long monument had largely silted up during the first to eighth centuries AD, so a Romano-British or early medieval date for the earthwork remains a possibility. This fieldwork provides another example of the importance of excavation combined with scientific dating using Optically Stimulated Luminescence (OSL): the first attempted for the short dykes of south-east Wales (cf. Seaman 2019).

Understanding the Black Pig's Dyke

The monograph presenting the results of the excavations and analysis of the Black Pig's Dyke or Worm Ditch, Co. Monaghan, was released just before the publication of *Offa's Dyke Journal* volume 3 and so has not been reviewed in this journal (O'Driscóil and Walsh 2021). The monument comprises two parallel banks with respective northern ditches, together with a palisade to their north, running for 9.85km between wetlands, loughs and rivers. The

excavations and geophysical survey are placed in wider context and the project has multiple implications of wider importance in the study of linear earthworks.

The first key implication from the fieldwork on the Black Pig's Dyke is how careful excavation and survey combined with radiocarbon dating can together enrich our understanding of the date, extent, character and context of the monument. Black Pig's Dyke is now understood to be a multi-phased earthwork starting life as the southern bank-and-ditch during the second millennium BC (early and middle Bronze Age) and being augmented by a northern bank-and-ditch in the early Iron Age (between the sixth–second century BC) with the palisade added in the first century BC and falling into disrepair by AD 80. The wider context of a largely neglected category of later prehistoric monument is fully explored and their diversity recognised and addressed (O'Drisceoil and Walsh 2021: 111–128); the possible military, territorial and ritual interpretations are outlined as well as limitations identified with each explanation (O'Drisceoil and Walsh 2021: 98–108). The argument is proposed that Black Pig's Dyke, and other larger linear earthworks, might constitute elements of Iron Age territorial oppida equivalent to British sites like Stanwick (North Yorkshire) and Bagendon (Gloucestershire) to 'delineate extensive tracts of strategically situated landscape' (O'Drisceoil and Walsh 2021: 155). As well as controlling strategic routes, the Black Pig's Dyke was one component of broader Iron Age 'powerscapes' (O'Drisceoil and Walsh 2021: 142–157)

The second broader implication for the investigations of the Black Pig's Dyke is the problematic desire in both academia and popular culture to tie together archaeology and mythology. Certainly, it represents yet another example where linear earthworks attract folklore (the nineteenth-century story of a schoolteacher who transforms into a pig and gores the landscape; O'Drisceoil and Walsh 2021: 161–168). Yet for the Black Pig's Dyke the temptation has long been present to match the archaeology to far-older mythology had had overt political aims and contexts in recent times. The dyke was first identified by 'ardent Unionist' William De Vismes Kane from 1909 as an 'ancient boundary fortification of the Uladh'. The monument's proximity to the Northern Ireland border following partition in 1921, and especially since the 'Troubles' from 1969, encouraged both popular and academic attitudes to consider the Black Pig's Dyke to be an Irish earthwork imitation of Roman frontiers 'borders'. This conception fostered considerable interest from both nationalist and loyalist standpoints (O'Drisceoil and Walsh 2021: 40–42, 102; cf. Williams 2020a).

Dating land divisions

Griffiths *et al.* (2022) provided a deep-time perspective on land division focusing on the English north-east Midlands and Yorkshire. They explored the timing and tempo of the emergence of different categories of linear monument and feature, thus exploring their shifting economic, social and political significance. Using scientific dating and deploying Bayesian chronological modelling of the radiocarbon dates, both site-specific and broader long-term patterns of scale and frequency of divisions were discerned.

Specifically, linear earthwork construction was dated from the first millennium BC and considered as part of a broader trend in articulating tenure, inheritance and relatedness as components of social identity (Griffiths *et al.* 2022: 229).

Mapping Fisi Tea, Tongatapu

New research from the Pacific island of Tongatapu analysed the Fisi Tea earthwork at the elite centre of Lapaha using lidar technology in combination with targeted excavations. The research revealed its method of construction, labour organisation and workforce size as well as its significance as a potential indicator of warfare in Tonga's political system. One of seven newly identified linear fortifications, its rampart and ditch were mapped and five radiocarbon dates obtained from two interventions. The monument was dated to the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries AD and comprised of consistent form although sections might have been heightened at specific intervals to afford viewing platforms and may have continued to the sea made of perishable materials. The monument is considered a territorial boundary that was both militarily functional and conveyed prestige and symbolic association with the Lapaha leaders. The study not only showed the global importance of investigating linear earthworks, but also the potential for parallels in considering political organisation and military defence alongside their other functions, significances and agencies.

Drowned dykes

Geophysical and geoarchaeological investigations were conducted into submerged medieval dyke systems in the Wadden Sea off the coast of the Rungholt area of North Frisia. A landscape of reclaimed marsh and fenlands had been developed between the eighth and eleventh centuries AD but larger dykes were constructed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This landscape was submerged by storms of the later medieval and early modern periods, specifically the retreat of the coastline by c. 25km inland by the AD 1362 event. This landscape was identified and mapped using magnetic gradiometry, marine reflection seismics, coring and aerial photographs. The drowned landscape was revised from older records and not only comprised the Niedam dyke but also two tidal gates and several terps. Their location and morphology were shown to differ from expectations and older records (Wilken *et al.* 2022: 18). While different in function from terrestrial linears, there are lessons from this work in regards to the battery of methods and techniques used to investigate them as part of a landscape. Furthermore, the study considered the building, maintenance and significance of dykes as well as their landscape context in terms of long-term development and abandonment.

Together, and alongside studies reviewed in the editorials for volumes 1, 2 and 3, these studies afford a sense of the varied approaches adopted towards, and the developing global reach of, theoretical debates, interdisciplinary approaches and methodological applications for linear monuments. As such, they set the scene for future work.

Collaboratory activities, 2022–early 2023

The mainstay of the Collaboratory activities has been the production of this journal and the maintenance of the Collaboratory website and blog. Picking up on annual surveys of the Offa’s Dyke Collaboratory’s activities reported in volumes 1–3, I here review the principal endeavour which took place during 2022 and early 2023.

Early medieval Wales: research priorities for frontiers and contested landscapes

A critical development for the Collaboratory has been the new ‘Research Framework for the Archaeology of Early Medieval Wales c. AD 400–1070’ (Comeau and Seaman 2023). Due recognition is given to this journal as a venue for open access research alongside other recent publications and theses. The ‘development of understanding of dyke systems’ is recognised as a key priority for future research for not only the development and transformation of frontiers but the concept of ‘contested landscapes’ more broadly. The importance of community engagement and research impact for linear earthworks is recognised as integral to early medieval archaeological research in Wales.

Offa’s Dyke: encounters and explanations¹

A key Collaboratory development has been the ‘Encounters and Explanations’ walk by Professor Keith Ray which involved 23 days’ continuous walking (day by day without a day’s break), and eighteen ‘co-walkers’, covering 336.64km (209.178 miles). It was designed to establish in the public eye that the Dyke and the long-distance Path are not coterminous, given only around 50% of the length of the Dyke is followed directly by the Path. The Walk was also designed to ‘foreground’ the ongoing reconnaissance work being done (especially in the far south and in the far north of its route) which indicates that Offa’s Dyke might have originally run ‘from sea to sea’ and that Asser’s late ninth-century statement to this effect was not mere hyperbole (Ray *et al.* 2021). As such, it was the first walk to follow the whole course of the designed and built linear earthwork. The Walk had two other purposes. The first was to garner further material for Professor Ray’s forthcoming guidebook *Offa’s Dyke: Encounters and Explanations* which aims to complement walking guides by focusing on how to understand the linear earthwork. The second further purpose was to be able to research both route and Dyke while doing a full ‘traverse’ of the border landscapes. This will inform the writing of an entirely new version of the 2016 book (Ray and Bapty 2016), provisional re-titled *Offa’s Dyke: Structures, Landscapes and Hegemony in 8th-Century Britain* to include fresh discoveries and insights. The walk was shared online via a detailed and informative series of videos by Professor Ray.

¹ <https://twitter.com/digitself4>

*Borderland events*²

During 2022 and early 2023, a series of other public events and interdisciplinary meeting took place related to the Collaboratory. These included Howard Williams presenting on 'After Rome: Chester and the Dark Ages' at the Chester Heritage Festival, 27 June 2022.³ Organised by Ray Bailey, the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory North 'The Enigma of the Flintshire Dykes' workshop was held at the Greenfield Valley Heritage Park on 17 August 2022 and included talks and discussion by Ray Bailey and Howard Williams. Meanwhile, the *What's Wat's Dyke?* comic was belatedly launched at the Northop History Day on 1 October 2022 (see Swogger and Williams 2021; Williams and Swogger 2021). The Trefonen Rural Protection Group hosted talks by Howard Williams and Dan Llywelyn Hall on the 'Walking with Offa' project on 11 November 2022. Next, Howard Williams attended and presented in the 'Walls, Borders and Frontier Zones' workshop reviewed in this volume by Shelach-Lavi *et al* as well as participating in the associated two-day study tour, 17–22 December 2022.

Digital dykes

The Offa's Dyke Collaboratory's digital engagement has continued apace. In addition to the aforementioned Encounters and Explanations walk being shared by Keith Ray using videos posted on Twitter, the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory blog has provided a platform for critiques of existing heritage interpretation panels and signs for Offa's Dyke, both along its line (as at Coed Talon) and elsewhere (as for Criccieth Castle). Also, Williams has composed a critical review of past attempts to envision Offa's Dyke as well as reporting on encounters with brand-new heritage interpretation panels for Wat's Dyke at Soughton and Offa's Dyke near Bronygarth. Considering heritage interpretation in new fashions, he presented new initiatives for potential 'London tube map'-style heritage trails along both Offa's Dyke and Wat's Dyke and connecting other sites, monuments and landscape along the border.

Conclusion

This open-access academic venture has established itself as a distinctive venue fostering new research and public understanding regarding the complex global story of walls, barriers and frontier zones from prehistoric and ancient societies to the medieval and modern world. In doing so, the *Offa's Dyke Journal* does not only present reliable peer-reviewed academic research in an accessible venue, it also critiques and combats both misinformation and disinformation shared about this aspect of the human past in popular culture and political discourse in today's world. Promoting an informed and nuanced conversation about their stories and legacies and the positive dimensions of linear monuments is thus a key aspiration of the *Offa's Dyke Journal* as both an academic and open-access resource. In doing so, we can learn about the human past, recognise how

² As reviewed on the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory blog: <https://offaswatsdyke.wordpress.com/>

³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ush52CK_oKo&t=59s

these material traces inform contemporary identities and society, and both recognise their legacies as well as celebrate their redundancies.

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