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## Fabricating Heritage

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### In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Fabricating Heritage\* David Lowenthal Fabrication has two common meanings. One is to construct with divine artifice, like James Howell's "Almighty fabricator of the universe" of 1645. This positive usage, now rare save in archaeology and bookbinding, goes back to Caxton in the fifteenth century. Only in the eighteenth century does fabricate appear in what the OED calls a "bad sense"—forging, falsifying, making up. To "make up" as in build or compose is at least Chaucerian; the current use, making something up, telling lies and tall stories, dates only from the 1850s. From the start, anti-Catholic slurs abound—Henry Hallam's "every saint had his legend, fabricated to enrich the churches under his protection" (1818); Macaulay's "numerous lies fabricated by priests" (1855). One such priestly fabrication sets the stage and the tone for this paper. Milan in 1162 had just fallen to Frederick Barbarossa. As a reward for his help in the conquest, archbishop-elect Rainald of Cologne pillages Milan's relics. Rainald's most notable coup is the remains of the Magi, legendarily brought from Constantinople with Constantine's consent by St. Eustorgio in an ox-cart in 314. Now they are on the move again. Though waylaid en route by minions of Pope Alexander III, the three coffins with their sacred booty reach Cologne unharmed. In Nicolas of Verdun's splendid golden shrine (c.

1200) they become Cologne's main patrons. The Three Kings by the thirteenth century were a royal cult, emperors coming to venerate the Magi after being crowned in Aachen. Otto IV of Brunswick had himself portrayed on the reliquary as the Fourth King. Belatedly the Milanese lamented the theft. The sixteenth-century David Lowenthal Archbishop St. Carlo Borromeo campaigned for their return; in 1909 a few Magi fragments were actually sent from Cologne to Milan. But they were not sent back; they had never been in Milan. The whole story—Constantine, Eustorgio, removal to Cologne—had been fabricated by Rainald. Every mention of the Magi in Milan traces to the archbishop's own account. No wonder the Milanese were tardy in recognizing the theft; only in the late thirteenth century did Rainald's tale reach them. Then Milan mourned the loss of relics it had never had. Rainald's purpose was clear: to promote the power of the emperor and the glory of Cologne. Relics of the Savior were the most precious the Franks got from Italy and the Holy Land. As symbols of Christ's lordship and of divine kingship, the Magi trumped vestiges of Church Fathers and Roman martyrs. But they needed a pedigree; a legacy of veneration was vital to their efficacy in Cologne. Hence Constantine, the ox-cart, stewardship in Milan, their incorruptible state en route. And it worked. It worked even in Milan, where Visconti patronage of the lamented Magi helped scuttle both republicanism and Torriani family rivals accused of exposing the Magi's hiding place to Frederick Barbarossa.<sup>1</sup> This fabrication was worthy in various ways. It confirmed the Empire's sacred roots. It updated and enlarged a useful biblical legend—little before was known of the Magi, not even how many they were. It became an exemplar of other sacred translations—fragments of bone and dust that were easy to fake, easy to steal, easy to move, easy to reassign to new saints as needed. It begot great value from wishful fantasy. It destroyed nothing, not even faith when the fake was found out. The fabrication of the Magi underscores the moral of this paper. Like the medieval cult of relics, heritage today is a popular cult, almost a religious faith. Devotion to heritage is a spiritual calling "like nursing or being in Holy Orders," as James Lees-Milne termed his own career of rescuing historic English country houses for England's National Trust.<sup>2</sup> Talking with me, a successor's verbal slip echoed the analogy: "When I joined the Church—I mean, the Trust." The Trust's supreme tidiness recalls those Victorian restorers who scraped medieval churches and cathedrals clean of the debris of time and neglect, so as to perfect their divinity.<sup>3</sup> The English are not the only such devotees. Heritage Fabricating Heritage awakens piety...

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DAVID LOWENTHAL

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