

## **Brute force: medieval foundation myths and three modern organisations' quests for hegemony**

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### **Stream: Management and Organizational History**

A cursory glance at the business section of the average modern airport will reveal the popularity of the celebrity CEO autobiography or the story of a major corporation (for example, Iococca & Novak, 1986; Roddick, 1991; Gates, Myhrvold & Rinearson, 1995; Packard, 1995; Spector & McCarthy, 1995; Branson, 1999, 2000). Throughout much of European history, the equivalent best-selling account of foundation and colonisation has been the Aeneas story and its medieval off-shoots, concerning the foundation of states, cities and dynasties by the descendants of Trojan refugees, most notably Brutus, or Brute, founder of Britain. At first sight there might appear to be few similarities between modern foundation narratives and the account of the aftermath of the Trojan War, but this paper will argue that corporate bestsellers are drawing on ubiquitous narrative archetypes which reached their first apogee in a European archetypal foundation story and its medieval development. The genealogy of the story can be traced from Aeneas to

Brutus and through to modern leaders such as Phil Knight. The paper will describe the Aeneas and Brutus foundation myths and will then trace the re-emergence of the main elements of the narrative in accounts of the beginnings of three major modern organisations: Marks and Spencer, Nike and Starbucks.

### **The Brutus Myth**

Foundation myths, whether of nations, dynasties or cities, have been at the heart of western culture since classical times. Europe's archetypal national foundation myth was the subject of Virgil's *Aeneid* (Camps, 1969). Present in Virgil's poem are three key elements which appear repeatedly in western foundation myths: the wanderer/outsider making good; the foundation prompted by divine prophecy or visions, and the planting, by the 'chosen people' of their new (and often superior) culture in a foreign land. Most medieval states, cities and dynasties were comparative newcomers, and many sought to obscure their uncomfortably recent origins in a cloud of myth. Troy provided the ideal means to do this (Constans, 1904-12; Federico, 2003; Frazer, 1966; Meek, 1974; Tanner, 1993). In medieval England, the Trojan myth received perhaps its most elaborate and fantastical development. The Ur-text of the English tradition was the *Historia regum Britanniae*, written by Geoffrey of Monmouth in about 1135 (Babington & Lumby, 1865-79; Benson, 1980; Brie, 1905, 1906, 1908; Parry & Caldwell, 1959; Tatlock, 1950; Thorpe, 1966). Geoffrey begins his work with an account of Brutus, or Brute, Aeneas's grandson, who is expelled from Italy with his followers, and wanders the Mediterranean. In a vision, the goddess Diana tells Brutus that his destiny is to lead the Trojans to an island in the west, where he shall found a race of kings. Brutus eventually realises the prophecy, founding Britain, and supplanting its primitive aboriginal giants (Matheson, 1998). Thus, Brutus's tale exhibits the 'Virgilian' *topoi* of the outsider, divine intervention and colonisation.

The three central elements of the Brute narrative re-emerge in three well-known corporations: Marks and Spencer, Nike and Starbucks.

### **The foundation of a major empire by immigrant principals – Marks and Spencer**

Marks and Spencer was founded at the end of the nineteenth century when Michael Marks, 'fleeing the anti-Semitic pogroms' (Bevan, 2002: 10) in his native (Russian) Poland, went into partnership with Tom Spencer. Corporate mythology celebrates the company's rise from its humble origins in Leeds Market (or possibly Stockton on Tees according to Briggs (1984) to international operation by the end of the following century. Throughout her biography of the company, Bevan makes frequent reference to the energy of the immigrant enterprise as a motivating force in the company's development. From its early days, Marks and Spencer traded on its royal associations and after the iconic shopping visit of Queen Mary in 1933, Simon Marks commented to Willie Jacobson, one of his executives, 'Well, Willie, that wasn't

bad for the son of a peddler!' (Bevan, 2002:10). Acceptance by royalty represented assimilation by the apex of the ruling elite, and this desire to integrate marked the early progress of the company. On the other hand, throughout the early years of the company when the founding dynasty was in control, the company donated considerable money and time to the Jewish communities in Europe. Thus, the company embodies the total assimilation of immigrant entrepreneurial spirit, but in its early years internally at least remained conscious of and drew strength from its immigrant origins.

### **Foundation as a result of a dream or vision – Nike**

The foundation of Nike is often celebrated in accounts of its phenomenal global success (Christensen & Rikert, 1984; Greenberg, 1994; Katz, 1994). Accounts of the rise of the organisation tend to stress the effortless of its ascent in terms of the founder's vision. Knight dreamt up the idea for Nike, originally named 'Blue Ribbon Sports' as the subject of a term paper during his MBA studies. The company's second and more famous name came to one of Knight's colleagues in a dream, and happened to be the name of the Greek goddess of victory. The design of the innovative new running shoe sole came to the co-founder in a flash of inspiration over breakfast. Nike employees describe a supernatural element to the company:

When we do it right, the shoe has magic. You pick it up and it glows with the concern that Nike has with the athlete, the care we take in designing and making the shoe. There is something in our shoe that is special. (Christensen & Rikert, 1984: 13)

The Nike story also contains the element of overcoming enemies on the road to success.

### **Bringing civilisation to the natives – Starbucks**

Howard Schultz was not the actual founder of Starbucks. He took over from the founder of a fairly ordinary coffee shop in Seattle and turned it into the global concern which now has such a presence on so many high streets. In his corporate autobiography, *Pour Your Heart Into It* (Schultz & Yang, 1997) ascribes his motivation for building the coffee to his love of Italy and its fine coffee. According to Schultz, the rise of Starbucks has less to do with the drive for profit than with a mission to introduce the unsophisticated denizens of the United States to two things: quality coffee and coffeehouses. Schultz describes this project as a desire to give American consumers access to what he describes as the 'romance of coffee'. There are many ironies apparent in this position. The United States, Native Americans notwithstanding, is an immigrant nation with Ellis Island as a powerful national symbol and heritage site and a richness of ethnic cultures reflected in much of its cuisine (Italian Americans being a striking example). Many of the ancestors of the current customers would have sought to escape the realities of their home countries and would probably not recognise Schultz's construction of a romantic old

country such as Italy or Austria. And a striking irony for many European consumers is that Starbucks' colonising project has contributed so powerfully to the homogenisation of the high street, effectively sweeping away the romance of the indigenous coffeehouse that Schultz seeks to manufacture. Thus, in many European capitals (for example Budapest) the glorious indigenous coffee house stands opposite the incoming Starbucks and finds itself with a precarious future as a result.

## Conclusion

In this paper we shall trace the historical antecedents of some popular elements in modern foundations myths. We will consider the symbolic power of these elements and, through, dissecting them, will demonstrate the persistence of certain narrative elements in the legitimisation of corporate power. We will demonstrate the propagandising properties of a well-constructed corporate foundation narrative and suggest how it can be used to legitimate colonising corporate objectives. We conclude that although organisations may not be aware of the historical genealogy of some of the major thematic elements they employ, there is no such thing as an innocent text, and that the legitimating project of using these powerful narrative elements retains a high degree of diachronic intention.

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