

Brute force: Medieval foundation myths and three modern organizations' quests for hegemony

Ann Rippin University of Bristol

Peter Fleming University of the West of England

Abstract

Foundation myths have been at the heart of western culture since classical times. Business foundation myths lie at the heart of corporate culture. Here, the nature and purpose of foundation stories are questioned, as is their status as innocent narratives. This article takes the narrative tropes of Europe's archetypal national foundation myth, the founding of Rome, retold in the epic Latin poem, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and traces their re-emergence in the foundation stories of three major modern organizations. The narrative elements are the foundation of a new empire by immigrant principals, the empire inspired by a dream or vision, and the establishment of a culture superior to that of the indigenous inhabitants. The three cases are Marks and Spencer, Nike and Starbucks. While it is impossible to state that organizations consciously have recourse to this archetypal myth, a comparison of the context in which the elements of this ancient tale are retold is a lens through which to examine organizational claims to legitimacy and autonomy, in order to pursue corporate agendas unopposed.

Key words • Aeneas • Brutus • foundation myths • Marks & Spencer • Nike • Starbucks

Foundation myths, whether of nations, dynasties or cities, have been at the heart of western culture since classical times. Today, organizations' foundation myths lie at the heart of corporate culture. The genre is, in fact, so familiar that it has become an accepted artefact of corporate life. Induction programmes and other orientations often contain an element of storytelling that details 'where it all began'. In this paper we examine the nature and purpose of foundation stories and question their status as innocent narratives. Our method is to use two closely related ancient foundation myths – Aeneas's foundation of the Roman race and the foundation of Britain by Brutus, or Brut – as a heuristic device to examine three modern corporate foundation stories. In employing this strategy, we do not assume that any of the latter were inspired, or even influenced, by the former, but

rather we use a comparison of the circumstances of production of both sets of stories to suggest shared political imperatives.

The three modern cases are Marks and Spencer, Nike and Starbucks. In the cases of Marks and Spencer and Starbucks, there are executive 'memoirs' to consult. With Nike, the account is written by a journalist but with the full cooperation of the notoriously taciturn chairman and founder, Phil Knight. These form the primary texts. In all three cases commentaries on the companies are also examined. The three elements of the Aeneas/Brutus narrative to be explored are the foundation of a new empire by immigrant principals, the empire inspired by a dream or vision, and the establishment of a culture superior to that of the indigenous inhabitants.

The article begins with a brief consideration of organizational foundation stories and the importance that commentators have placed on these narratives in the creation of corporate culture. The Aeneas/Brutus narratives are then examined, including their political deployment in particular historical circumstances. The three main common themes (or tropes), which occur in both the ancient and modern stories, are presented. This section considers the Marks and Spencer, Nike and Starbucks cases. The article ends with a discussion of what these similarities might mean, focusing on their role, not in the formation of corporate culture, but in the legitimation of current and future strategy.

Foundation Stories

Two of the best-known commentaries on foundation stories in the organization theory literature are those of Schein (1983) and Martin, Sitkin and Boehm (1985). Both of these studies are concerned with the role of the founder in creating corporate culture. Schein (1983) traces the lasting impact of the founder on the organization through the imprinting of his or her values on the organization's culture (cf. Stinchcombe 1965). This is very much in the tradition of heroic or charismatic leadership which has recently been subjected to a great deal of critique (see, for example, Fletcher 2004; Gronn 2002; Yukl 1999). For Schein, however, it is clear that the founder shapes culture 'by force of his or her personality' (Schein 1983, 13) and that this legacy ensures immortality.¹ Martin, Sitkin and Boehm are not convinced by this correlation, rejecting the position that 'organization is the founder "writ large" without mortal limitations' (1985, 100), and arguing that instead organizations are made up of many subcultures.

The aim of this paper is not to critique the existing literature on foundation narratives, but to point to the use of such stories as a technique available for organizational researchers to read organizations in a particular way. It is about method rather than content in the spirit of Gabriel's observation that 'stories open valuable windows into the emotional, political and symbolic lives of organizations, offering researchers a powerful instrument for carrying out research' (Gabriel 2000, 2). While this study does not offer a critique of the literature, it does seek to highlight two issues. The first is that organizational storytelling has chiefly been taken to mean stories told within

organizations. The cases here, however, are taken from publicly available documents that have a number of purposes, one of which is to communicate with a wider population outside the organization itself. The books under consideration here are not documented instances of a particular organization telling itself stories, exploring or constructing its own meaning and creating or refreshing its own culture. They rather represent a leading organizational actor or his amanuensis telling the story to an external audience. This is extra-organizational storytelling. The stories are told by, or on behalf of, an organization *about* itself but not, primarily, *to* itself. This is an outwardly directed rhetorical act aimed at shareholders, customers, legislators and general readers.

The second point is that this article moves away from a focus on the role of the founder in creating culture or organizational meaning. Culture is composed, at least in part, of the stories people create, select and tell, and this is a process which takes place in a specific context, often retrospectively. It is not possible to generalize about foundation stories and then learn anything very meaningful about an individual organization. What is needed is what Boas called 'historical particularism' (Sykes 2005). We have to consider the circumstances of production to understand the symbolic importance of the story. One way to do this is to use the template of a story that has been repeatedly adapted to suit the particular imperatives of many different historical situations. This allows us to isolate the purposive nature of a particular storytelling episode. The central question of this article is, why do people tell this sort of story at these sorts of times. The storytelling in the three cases here, and their historical antecedents, responds to what Schein describes as 'problems of external adaptation [and] external survival problems' (Schein 1983, 14). Public narratives such as memoirs, authorized biographies and accounts of business success, such as those under review here, are written retrospectively, but they imply a call to the future. Present justification of past activities through assumed innate superiority, survival or divine providence, which are among the themes of these narratives, imply future legitimacy. Or, as Orwell more elegantly put it in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 'Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.' This tactical move is about strategy rather than culture, although culture might be an organizational resource allowing the company to succeed. As Martin, Sitkin and Boehm claim, 'Rather than creating a culture in his or her own image, the founder is cast into a system moulded by forces beyond his or her individual control' (1985, 102), but what comparative reading of these accounts can do is to show that the storytelling represents an attempt, however futile, to shape the target audience's understanding of events and to thereby control those forces. Schein claims that the creation of corporate culture involves an element of teaching, a process which he describes as 'not necessarily an explicit one' but one which carries 'implicit messages of which even the founder may be unaware' (1983, 21), but whereas Schein presents this as an internal process, it seems just as likely that by deploying certain story tropes in the wider world, the founder is attempting, explicitly or not, to teach the organizational constituency how it should be treated: with respect.

The Aeneas/Brutus Foundation Story

Europe's archetypal national foundation myth, the source and inspiration for a whole host of tales, was the subject of an epic Latin poem, the *Aeneid*, by the Roman poet Virgil (70–19 BCE).² The story of the Trojan refugee Aeneas, and his establishment in Italy of a colony that would eventually give rise to Rome, was not simply Virgil's invention – Aeneas appears in Homer's *Iliad*, and in some ways the *Aeneid* can be seen as a sequel to this work and as a companion to the *Odyssey* – but his poem is now its most famous literary representation. Aeneas was the son of the goddess Venus and a mortal, Anchises, whom he carried to safety on his back as Troy was sacked by the Greeks, a powerful image of the hero's devotion to his lineage. This was matched by his devotion to his family gods (*lares*), whose images he also rescued. Guided by divine visions, which reveal his destiny as the progenitor of the Roman race, Aeneas and his followers wander the Mediterranean in a manner broadly similar to that of the Homeric hero Odysseus. At Carthage, in North Africa, the queen Dido falls in love with Aeneas, but he spurns her, aware that his destiny lies elsewhere, and she commits suicide after the Trojans' departure. Arriving in Italy, the Trojans ally with the Arcadians and Etruscans in a war with the Latins and their allies over the hand of the Latin princess, who is prophesied to be Aeneas's bride. The Trojans are triumphant, and the way is clear for the eventual establishment of Rome. Shortly after the poem opens, Jupiter reveals that after 300 years, Mars will father a child on Aeneas's descendant; this child would be Romulus, Rome's founder.

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. Of course, the Trojan myth, as told by Virgil, was not the oldest expression of such *topoi*. The Bible contains several foundation myths. The Fall can be seen as a kind of foundation, as can the re-stocking of the world by Noah and his family after the Flood, but the most significant Biblical archetype was surely the story of the Israelites' search for the Promised Land. Whatever the relative antiquity of these tales compared with the Trojan myth, however, they only became part of the core of western culture after the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity under Constantine, long after Aeneas was a household name. Also, while the myth of Moses and the Promised Land was sometimes used as an image of state or dynastic formation, its sacred nature probably inhibited rulers and their apologists from using it freely in this way. The Trojan myth, on the other hand, while lending enormous prestige to any who could appropriate it successfully, was not imbued with such sacred associations, and so could be exploited with far fewer constraints.

While Virgil was venerated in the Middle Ages (he was, for example, chosen by Dante to be his guide in the Underworld), medieval readers were more likely to have encountered what they believed to be the genuine 'history' of Troy through Guido delle Colonne's *Historia destructionis Troiae* of 1278, a Latin version of Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Le Roman de Troie* written about 1160. In turn, Benoît based his work on late Roman

forgeries, supposedly eyewitness accounts of the siege by two combatants, a Cretan, Dares, and a Phrygian, Dictys (Constans 1904–12; Frazer 1966; delle Collone 1974). However, the Trojan myth received its perhaps most elaborate and fantastical development in medieval England. The Ur-text of the English tradition predated both Benoît and Guido's versions; it was the *Historia regum Britanniae*, written by an Oxford cleric of Welsh origins, Geoffrey of Monmouth, in about 1135 (Tatlock 1950; Parry and Caldwell 1959; Thorpe 1966; Benson 1980). This too was widely read as genuine history and was subsumed into many subsequent chronicles, most notably Ranulph Higdon's *Polychronicon* and the *Brut*, both of which were extremely popular, the latter surviving in more copies, in Anglo-Norman, Latin and Middle English, than any other secular manuscript text produced in England (Babington and Lumby 1865–79; Brie 1905, 1906/1908; Matheson 1998).

Geoffrey begins his work with an account of Brutus, Aeneas's grandson (the *Brut* chronicles took their name from this fabulous hero). After killing his father in a hunting accident, Brutus and a band of followers are forced to leave Italy. Having freed a group of Trojans from captivity in Greece, Brutus leads his people to a deserted island, where the goddess Diana comes to him in a vision. She tells him that his destiny is to lead the Trojans to an island in the west, where he shall found a race of kings. Brutus and his followers set sail and are joined by another group of refugee Trojans, led by Corineus. They reach Gaul and defeat the king of Aquitaine. They found a new city at Tours, named after the Trojan warrior Turnus, who is buried there. They set sail again, and reach Britain, at this time called Albion, their 'promised land', making landfall at Totnes in Devon. Albion is inhabited by giants. The Trojans slaughter all the giants save one, Gogmagog, whom Corineus wrestles into submission and casts into the sea. Brutus renames the island 'Britain', after himself, and his Trojans' royal descendants include Lear, Cymbeline, Cole and, most famously, Arthur. In his development of the story, Geoffrey repeats the Virgilian *topoi* of the triumphant outsider, divine guidance and the introduction of a superior culture.

The central contention of this paper, as mentioned above, is that in order to understand the function of foundation narratives we have to understand the circumstances of their production. Virgil began writing the *Aeneid* in 29 BCE, supposedly at the behest of Octavian, and worked on it over the following 10 years. That decade also saw Octavian's transformation into Augustus and the establishment of the Principate, with himself as Emperor. This novel position was only possible after complex negotiation with the institutions of the old Republic. Virgil's poem can be seen as a crucial rhetorical underpinning to the new regime since it portrays Augustus as the prophesied heir to Aeneas the founder (Scullard 1959/1976).

The European Middle Ages, from the fall of the Roman Empire in the 5th century to the Renaissance and Reformation in the 16th, was an immensely fruitful period for the development and use of the Trojan myth for political purposes. During the medieval millennium realms, governing dynasties and cities came into existence in great numbers and competed keenly with each other for precedence. This was a combative and fluid environment, but it was not without espoused principles. Within a Christian

worldview, rulers and dynasts felt impelled to justify their positions through the articulation of a legitimating discourse. In the absence of any notion, let alone practice, of a democratic mandate, it was precedent that provided such legitimation. All legitimacy came ultimately from God, and the continued exercise of power, through several generations, was taken as a sign of divine approval. Lineage, the precedent of generations past, was therefore the touchstone of legitimacy. Medieval polemicists and apologists thus sought to outdo each other in the length of the genealogies they could claim for their kings, cities or countries.

Both the Papacy and the Holy Roman Empire claimed to be the true heirs to late-Imperial, Christian Rome (in the words of Voltaire, the Holy Roman Empire 'was neither Holy, nor Roman, nor an Empire', but a loose conglomeration of German princes under the nominal rule of an emperor drawn, from the later Middle Ages, from the Austrian Habsburg family). Competition between Pope and Holy Roman Emperor for the leadership of Christendom split Europe. Kings, jealous of these two institutions' ancient genealogies, could convince themselves, and attempt to convince others, that their lineages were actually more venerable by 'discovering' their Trojan ancestry. Troy, of course, pre-dated Rome by centuries.³ Thus, the Valois kings of France claimed Trojan descent, and some 15th-century French writers went so far as to claim that the Trojan race originated in France, moved to Troy, and so 'came home' when refugees founded Gaul (Beaune 1991). Even the Habsburg Holy Roman Emperors, not content with their claimed Roman connection, publicized their descent from Aeneas.

Geoffrey of Monmouth was writing at a time when the Anglo-Normans were embarked upon the conquest of Wales, thought to be the last outpost of the Trojan race. Geoffrey's appropriation and embellishment of Welsh tradition can be seen as an important part of the cultural assimilation, and legitimation, that accompanied military and political colonialism (Davies 1991). From its origins in both Roman and medieval culture the Aeneas/Brutus myth was deployed in the interests of legitimating empire and secular authority.

Having established a political imperative behind the telling and retelling of these stories we can turn now to the three contemporary cases, considering the three themes of the immigrant founder, the divine ordination and the establishment of a superior culture.

The immigrant founder

Marks and Spencer is remarkable for its self-mythologizing culture.⁴ The energy behind this mythologizing is something verging on ancestor worship in which the forefathers overcame persecution to find a new land in which to settle and establish an empire and dynasty. This process was possible because of an implied divine ordination, which in turn gives legitimacy to future business strategy.⁵

The story of the origins concerns the flights from persecution of the two principals, Michael Marks and Ephraim Sieff, whose children, Simon and Israel respectively, would go on to form the partnership which created the company. Tom Spencer was Michael

Marks' partner for 11 years but is largely absent from the story. He never wrote his account of the foundation of the company and so he has largely 'disappeared' from the published record. The Marks and the Sieffs take centre stage. Marcus Sieff introduces his memoirs thus:

I am and have been a very fortunate man. I was born into a remarkable family; my two grandfathers came to this country as young Jewish immigrants from Poland and, starting virtually without a penny in their pockets, founded companies which made their heirs into wealthy men. (Sieff 1986, 1)

All the elements are introduced with the two principals: the notion of good fortune which transmutes into divine ordination; the importance of Jewish, or more particularly Zionist, identity; the notion of immigration; the rags to riches rise to power; and the foundation of a dynasty. These elements will form the basis of this section.

Divine ordination is seen clearly in Michael Marks's escape from persecution in the Russian Polish settlement of Grodno and his journey to England in 1882. He made his way from either Grimsby or Hull to Leeds, which was then known as a mass tailoring centre. Shortly after he arrived in Leeds he met Isaac Dewhirst, who owned a wholesale warehouse. Marks could only speak one word of English, 'Barrans', which was the name of a tailoring factory where he had been told to go to look for work. According to Alistair Dewhirst, Isaac's grandson, Dewhirst was 'fascinated by the stranger' (Bookbinder 1993, 14) and, instead of directing him to the factory, offered to lend him five pounds. Marks asked to use it to buy goods from the warehouse, and he paid it off in instalments and was then allowed to make further purchases to the same amount. The divine intervention element is pointed out by Bookbinder:

Fate now took a hand, for if Dewhirst had given Michael Marks the directions to the nearby factory, it is most unlikely that Marks would ever have met Isaac Dewhirst's cashier, one Tom Spencer. (Bookbinder 1993, 14)

Marks started the business empire as a pedler selling the Dewhirst goods door-to-door and then eventually with his first market stall. Again destiny intervened. Because Marks did not have the English to haggle with his customers he had a sign made: 'Don't ask the price, it's a penny'.⁶ Thus circumstances led to the development of the brand identity of the penny bazaar and the single unit pricing strategy which was a mainstay of the company for many years. This sign and its ramifications feature throughout the memoirs and official writing. The initial five-pound investment growing, beanstalk-like, into a multi-million pound enterprise is also frequently repeated and, towards the end of his memoirs, Marcus Sieff describes the symbolic repaying of the debt with a 1887 five pound gold coin on the night before his last AGM. He comments:

The following day at our annual general meeting, the last I was to chair, I was able to tell the assembled shareholders that finally after one hundred years, Marks and Spencer was out of debt. (Sieff 1986, 242)

Sieff's story shows the symbolic importance of the foundation narrative for both organizations, but it also indicates the fulfilment of a covenant and the resolution of a narrative.⁷

The story of Ephraim Sieff is not told as often but it has even more of the character of a providential tale about it. As told by Israel Sieff, it contains elements of the miraculous flight. Ephraim Sieff took the decision to leave the Russian Pale of Settlement, a huge area of land in Poland in which 'the Czars concentrated its [sic] Jewish citizens' (Sieff 1970, 4) and to smuggle himself into Germany. His son continues the story:

It was his mother who organised the escape ... There was a covered wagon ... which frequently carried sacks of corn across the German frontier. It was a familiar sight to the guards, and had dozens of frontier clearances chalked across it. My father filled the wagon with sacks of corn, the horses were harnessed, my grandmother took the reins. My father, with the equivalent of £40 upon him, hid himself in the furthest corner. When they reached the frontier they did not pass without notice, for it was known that Jews had used similar methods of escape. The guards climbed on to the wagon and thrust their bayonets into and between all the outside sacks. My father used to say that it was his cowardice that saved him: only because he had crept into the furthest corner did he avoid a most painful detection. The wagon was allowed to proceed. (Sieff 1970, 9)

Ephraim's explanation may be the more compelling, but the presence of this part of the foundation narrative serves to suggest that even if divine intervention could be questioned, there was a providential element to the escape.

Links to the divine are also suggested in some elements of the importance of a Jewish identity in the narrative. As we have seen, the Sieffs and Bookbinder are at pains to establish the genealogy of the principal families. But it is Israel Sieff's account which is most arresting when considering the provenance of the Sieff family. Sieff begins his account thus:

The story of my life, and of the people who gave me life, is a story of chance and coincidence, of actions taken on impulse, of the faith and the hope of the Jewish people, and of the goodness of God. (Sieff 1970, 1)

He then goes on to claim a thousand-year-old heritage:

The family of Sieffs, Ziffs, Zievs, and there are many other ways of spelling the name, are scattered all over the earth, a diaspora within a diaspora. To find the first of them, so family legend has it, one must look back a thousand years to Pum-beditha, a city of Babylon [which] ... became a great centre of Jewish life and learning. It was the seat of the head of the Babylonian Jewish community, the *Rosh Ha-Golah*, or Exilarch. Around the year AD 900 at Pum-beditha the works and wisdom of a certain Rosh Ha-Golah shone out like a guiding light. He was learned, and he was holy: a *Tzaddik* or 'most right righteous man', *Chasid* or 'most pious man', a *Talmid chachem*, 'the wisest of the wise' – of such spirituality, it was said, that he communed directly with the great spirits of the Jewish past. His

teaching and example were so luminous that he was given the name of 'Shining Light'. The Hebrew word for this is *Zief*. All of us Sieffs, Ziffs, Zievs, are said to be descended from him. (Sieff 1970, 1–2)

Consciously or not, Sieff is making a strong claim for legitimacy here. He comes from the line of a man so great that he communed with the divine. Righteousness, piety and wisdom are in his bloodline and are self-evidently attributes associated with leadership and authority. To underline this, he adds:

My great-grandfather also added a little to my knowledge of our family history. He explained to me that in the city of Vilna, in Lithuania, then part of Poland, in the eighteenth century lived a great and good Jew called Elijah Ben Solomon Zalman. He was famous throughout Europe for his knowledge of the Torah and the Talmud. Vilna was one of the greatest Jewish centres in Europe, and Elijah Ben Solomon Zalman became its Gaon. Gaon meaning the supreme authority. The Vilna Gaon, my great-grandfather told me, had a brother called Joshua, and it was from Joshua that our branch of the Sieff family was descended. We should be very proud to be part of the family of the Vilna Gaon. (Sieff 1970, 2–3)

From this we can extrapolate that legitimacy comes from a lineage which is not only a long pedigree, but which is imbued with wisdom, righteousness and authority of the highest order. The establishment of legitimacy through association with the great, the good and the divine, is seen in the identification of the company with Saint Michael. The adoption of the trademark was motivated by Simon Marks's desire to have a badge on his goods which assured high quality, and the idea came from Corah, one of his main suppliers who had a Saint Margaret trademark (Bookbinder 1993), but it can be construed in more symbolic ways. As Bookbinder comments, 'It was during this time [1928] that Simon "sanctified" his father' (Bookbinder 1993, 99), described by Marcus Sieff as "'canonizing" my grandfather' (Sieff 1986, 39–40). The conjunction of *pietas* and *familia* is reminiscent of Aeneas and the Roman ideals he represents. The element of ancestor worship is apparent, as is a possible desire to integrate with a then largely Christian customer base, but the move towards legitimacy through associating a firm with the Archangel Michael, celebrated vanquisher of the devil, is also powerful. The move is also another marker of the Jewish culture of the firm and of the element of mission of the company:

In 1928, when Marks and Spencer registered their own brand name for goods manufactured to their orders, a number of saints' names were considered ... Simon Marks finally chose 'St Michael', partly because his father's first name was Michael and partly because the archangel Michael was the guardian angel and patron of the Jewish people. (Tse 1985, 23)

Thus, the company could, in a sense, claim to be under the protection of the Archangel Michael, and the superstitious might pause to consider the decline in the company's fortunes since it abandoned this relationship.

The rags to riches element of the story is part of the immigrant theme. Ephraim Sieff escaped the pogroms, as we have seen, with the 1970s equivalent of £40 and Michael Marks started with a borrowed five pound float. Ephraim Sieff literally went from rags to riches as his business involved sorting waste scraps for resale (Sieff 1970). From these humble origins the two families rose to positions of wealth, power and influence and the memoirs are full of stories of government appointments, royal connections, personal honours and friendships with the rich and famous. Marks received a knighthood in 1944 and a hereditary peerage in 1961; Israel Sieff became a life peer in 1966 and Marcus Sieff became a life peer in 1980. The photographs in Marcus Sieff's memoirs, for example, illustrate just what a mainstay of the establishment he had become, showing his meetings with, for example, Golda Meir, Shimon Peres, James Callaghan, Harold Wilson, Henry Kissinger, President Sadat and Queen Elizabeth II. After the iconic shopping visit of Queen Mary in 1933, Simon Marks commented to one of his executives, 'Well, Willie, that wasn't bad for the son of a peddler!' (Bevan 2002, 10). All this suggests that the company was aware of and used its status as an outsider institution as a part of its culture.

The notion of the dynasty is clearly important in this organization. In a tour de force conclusion to his biography of Simon Marks, Bookbinder makes this dynastic statement:

Simon Marks had been Chairman of Marks and Spencer through four reigns and almost half a century. In that time he turned a successful chain of bazaars into a national institution. He had been the rightful heir to the business that his father had created but he had to struggle to gain control of it – and once he had that control he carried his birthright like a sacred trust, striving to perfect the business with a zeal and certainty of purpose that were almost religious. This he did without faltering until, literally, the day he died. (Bookbinder 1993, 154)

Affiliation to the principals is always valuable, especially when legitimating succession. Richard Greenbury, who became chairman in 1991, said of himself and Derek Rayner, who preceded him as chair, 'Derek and I were brought up by the family. They took us under their wing and developed us. And although we were not family, we were the nearest thing.' (Bevan 2002, 62). And in the recent takeover battle, Stuart Rose sought in an interview to legitimate his claim to the succession through his ability to trace the dynasty and thus suggest a thorough grounding in the folklore and mythology of the firm (Pratley 2004, 34).

The potency of the Aeneas/Brutus story can be seen in the Marks and Spencer story. The immigrant founders did indeed go west from Poland to found an empire in Britain. There is an aura of divine providence about their enterprise. But unlike the descendants of Aeneas this race was not to last, and it seems possible that it was the very strength of the bloodline that proved fatal. The overwhelming influence of previous dynastic leaders may have had a stultifying effect on creativity and innovation in the company, leading to uncompetitive, pedestrian thinking. As Bevan notes wryly:

M&S [*sic*] had become so mired in its own history that when in September 1998 it was asked to make a contribution for a time capsule to be buried in the

Business Design Centre in Islington, it contributed nothing more imaginative than a selection of knickers. (Bevan 2002, 179)

The Empire Inspired by a Dream or Vision

Both Aeneas and Brutus received divine visions guiding them towards the foundation of a promised land. Thus the element of supernatural aid and purpose is established – the gods are on their side. While Nike does not have such explicit divine intervention in its foundation narrative, it is an organization which explicitly associates itself with the supernatural. This can be seen in the adoption of its name (see below), the badging of its Goddess marketing campaign to women (Rippin 2003) and, as will be seen, in its organizational discourse.

Nike has established its global business empire through the careful cultivation of its brand (Goldman and Papsen 1998). This brand plays on the company's magic, which is first established in the organization's foundation stories. The elements are that Knight came up with the idea of the company for a term paper as part of his MBA studies at Stanford; that he and his college athletic coach, Bill Bowerman, started the company together, each investing a modest sum; that Bowerman invented the legendary 'Waffle' sole over breakfast one morning when he experimented with latex in the family waffle iron; that the name 'Nike' came to the first employee, Jeff Johnson, in a dream; and that Knight and Bowerman began their operations in Knight's mother's laundry room. Some of these elements of the story are lovingly illustrated in a book aimed at instilling the entrepreneurial spirit in young adults, which has drawings of both the laundry room and the 'Waffle Iron Idea' (Greenberg 1994).

There are the usual rags to riches elements in the seedcorn investments and the laundry room, but there are also the beginnings of the mythologizing process: the divine intervention of the goddess Nike coming to Johnson in a dream, and the creative spark in the inspiration behind the idea for the company and the invention of the innovative new sole.

Competition with other shoe companies is not only about market share; it includes a moral dimension. Reebok is described by Katz, in the biography endorsed by Knight, as 'the Great Satan' (1994, 30) and when Strasser, a former Nike employee and great friend of Knight, switched his allegiance to Adidas, he started a feud which has the almost mythical or folkloric overtones of former friends becoming the bitterest of enemies. In addition to this:

In the view of Nike's anti-establishment founding fathers, Adidas was an elitist organization that was deeply entwined with the corrupt and aristocratic international sports authorities of the day. (Katz 1994, 24)

Thus Nike is perceived by its members to be sweeping away a corrupt old world order, and establishing a new one built around the morally pure and righteous athlete.⁸ Might

or prowess, rather than inherited authority, is right in the same way that, in fulfilment of prophecy, Aeneas and Brutus overthrew established kingdoms.

In addition to freeing their customers from bondage to established authority, Nike also brings enlightenment to the natives through the creation of Nike Town. There are Nike Towns in a number of locations and they are part shop and part museum. This ambivalent status indicates that their purpose is more than straightforward distribution of goods for sale, although as Penaloza points out, their aim is essentially commercial: 'In its exchange of products for money Nike Town was commercial to the core' (Penaloza 1998, 389), but she also reports the staff saying that they were frequently asked if things were for sale. Penaloza makes the valid point that the display of artefacts associated with sporting heroes functions to valorize the company:

At Nike Town the company's possession and displays of artifacts of highly valued athletes totemically transferred power from the athletes to the corporation and its products. (Penaloza 1998, 389–90)

The company, then, re-enchants itself through its collection. Penaloza sees this in terms of the accumulation of social capital: 'Museums house objects of high social value, and in this sense are the secular church. Nike Town was ultimately a *house of high value*' (Penaloza 1998, 387, emphasis in original); a shrine to the company's origins, at the centre of which are its very own *lares*.

In a consideration of Nike as an imperialist organization, the Nike Town phenomenon represents a clear stage in the colonizing process. It is one of the basic rules of colonization that the colonizer establishes a town and thus a powerbase as the incursion progresses, Brutus and his followers follow this pattern, establishing, among several other towns, London (known as 'New Troy') and Bristol (Rosser 1996; Federico 2003). However, Penaloza interprets Nike Town with reference to another tradition, commenting, 'Even the name Nike Town harkens us back to an earlier time, before suburban flight, when the market was the center of town' (Penaloza 1998, 377). This frames the Nike Town initiative not as a colonizing move, but as a nostalgic one involving a Capraesque return to a close-knit community of shared, localized values. As Penaloza is American, it may well be that this is the intended reading of the initiative, but it is also redolent of a deeper and more universal set of historical references, those relating to the colonizing practices of territorial empires.

The Nike Town in London, for example, is built around a large central column with glass cases inviting reverential inspection of important sporting objects and with uplifting slogans painted on the wall. The central column is encrusted with photographs and other images of sporting heroes. This baroque piling on of imagery is designed to invoke awe in the viewer; it may also evoke memories of Trajan's Column, encrusted not with images of sporting paragons, but of Imperial Rome's military heroes, shown vanquishing their Dacian foes, and thereby stabilizing the empire's eastern frontier. Penaloza describes the magnification of photographs of the celebrity endorsers/heroes and the flying 'athlete angels' suspended from the ceiling (1998, 364) and she comments, 'I was awed' (1998, 365). Within this excessive, awe-inspiring architecture, there is a kind of enchantment

which leads back to the colonizing process. There is a glimpse of this project in the use of compasses, described by Penaloza in the Chicago store:

...scattered throughout the buildings [...] were compasses cast in concrete in the floor, marking the four directional poles of north, east, south and west, with Nike Town spelled out in a map of the world, the US at its center. (Penaloza 1998, 364)

This is a direct claiming of territory and brings to mind the medieval *mappa mundi*, an expression of the totalizing claims of Christian empire, placing Jerusalem at the centre of the world, as well as the imperial Habsburgs' tag, itself adapted from Roman imperial usage, of *plus ultra*, indicating the global extent of their reach following the Spanish conquests in America. The Nike building itself functions as a proselytizing experience. Penaloza describes feeling disorientated by the Chicago store, despite the compasses set into the floor. This is because she has, in her own words, been transported into 'another place, an otherworldly site inhabited by super athletes' (Penaloza 1998, 379) and describes it as 'a reality somewhat removed from the everyday' (1998, 380). Thus, the Nike Town stores establish a magical kingdom and a home worth having for their citizen/consumers.

The Establishment of a Superior Culture

The story of the expansion of one small and fairly unexceptional coffee bean shop in Seattle to the creation of the global Starbucks empire is the subject of Howard Schultz's business autobiography, *Pour Your Heart Into It: How Starbucks Built a Company One Cup at a Time* (Schultz and Yang 1997). It is, as one journalist put it, an 'oddly emotional business manual' (Moir 2004, 21), in which Schultz describes something verging on a love affair with the company. For example, he describes an early encounter with the store in the following terms:

I couldn't stop thinking about Starbucks. Although it was much smaller than the multinationals I had been working for in New York, it was much more intriguing like a jazz tune you can't get out of your head. (Schultz and Yang 1997, 38)

Schultz describes his acquisition of the company and his development of it into a global concern. The process starts with a vision, and one to which only he is party: 'My parents could not understand what it was that attracted me to Starbucks' (Schultz and Yang 1997, 4) but he persevered because 'for my part, I saw Starbucks not for what it was, but for what it could be' (1997, 4). And in order to achieve that vision, Schultz, who tells us repeatedly of his humble origins, had to enrol supporters, which he did through further invocation of the vision, 'I became CEO of Starbucks in 1987 because I went out, as an entrepreneur, and convinced investors to believe in my vision' (1997, 5). The book gives an account of his struggles to achieve that vision, which was to introduce the American public to good coffee, and in particular the coffee of the great European coffee houses:

Just as I didn't create Starbucks, Starbucks didn't introduce espresso and dark-roasted coffee to America. Instead, we became the respectful inheritors of a great tradition. Coffee and coffeehouses have been a meaningful part of community life for centuries, in Europe as well as in America. They have been associated with political upheaval, writers' movements, and intellectual debate in Venice, Vienna, Paris and Berlin. (Schulz and Yang 1997, 24)

History and heritage, then, matter to Schultz, and this is a recurrent theme in his account. His problem is that not everyone sees this process in such benign terms. For example, one of his most vocal critics, Bill Talen, also known as the anti-globalization protestor The Rev Billy of the Church of Stop Shopping, suggests:

Starbucks is worse than most because it is entirely unaware of the contrast between its corporate drabness and the glamorous history of café life that it employs as an enticement to customers. (Talen 2003, 4)

One of the criticisms of Starbucks is that it homogenizes the high street and expunges local indigenous culture. Schultz's answer to his critics is unambiguous: he is introducing them to a superior culture – the elegant, sophisticated ambiance of the Milan coffee house:

At Starbucks, our product is not just great coffee but also what we call the 'Starbucks experience': an inviting, enriching environment in our stores that is comfortable and accessible yet also stylish and elegant. (Schultz and Yang 1997, 251)

And the customers can experience the benefits of this trading empire through exotic delicacies brought to their door from 'Kenya and Costa Rica and Sulawesi' (Schultz and Yang 1997, 246).

And all this began with Schultz's delight in the romance of Italy – 'There's no better place to truly savor the romance of life than Italy' (1997, 49). As he states:

Our mission is to expand the number of people who appreciate great coffee, to make it ever more widely available and enjoyed. (Schultz and Yang 1997, 278)

This is an interesting clarion call to embrace cultural imperialism in the land which is so often seen as the greatest of all cultural imperialists, but the call is modelled closely on the rhetoric of colonization in general: the colonized would embrace their colonizers if only they understood what was in their interests. He states, 'Most of the opposition we've encountered has been in close-knit urban areas or small towns, where people are highly protective of their distinctive character' (Schultz and Yang 1997, 278). That is, they fear the imposition of one culture on another. Schultz does not address this by claiming to preserve that character or distinctiveness. Instead, he implies that these unsophisticates do not appreciate his civilizing project. What he brings as a colonizer is civilization and sophistication:

Some communities don't know what to make of Starbucks. We don't fit neatly into existing categories of retail, restaurant or fast-food [...] Then there are people who expect a coffeehouse to be bohemian with wooden floors and fabric wall hangings and worn tables and mismatched chairs. When they see Starbucks is clean and efficient with a complete line of coffee-related merchandise, they are baffled. (Schultz and Yang 1997, 278)

Having suggested that his potential customer base lacks the vision or aesthetic sensibilities to understand the Starbucks offering, Schultz's knockdown argument is that ultimately everyone benefits from the company's colonizing project. Group lots of coffeehouses together, he suggests, and people will flock to the area: 'They may vary their choice of establishments, depending on their need or mood. In the end, all of us benefit' (1997, 279). And the customer ultimately benefits because 'the way I see it, we've enhanced the coffee category' (1997, 279).

Schultz's argument is that with sufficient education the world will welcome the Starbucks empire. Its business opponents are morally weak because they fear healthy competition, and its 'activist' opponents are culturally weak because they have not properly understood the full extent of the coffee category. His promise, then, is of morally superior culture; the proceeds of his book go to a literacy fund, and one which will benefit all. The central irony is that this is an immigrant nation (Native Americans notwithstanding), several elements of which (the Italian- and German-American communities), have a strong coffee culture of their own. He concludes his argument with a return to his theme:

...we need to communicate our mission better, to help Starbucks people understand that our goal is not growth for growth's sake (or worse, for Wall Street's sake) but rather to bring our great coffee to the widest possible audience. We needed to reinvigorate their emotional connection to the company. (Schultz and Yang 1997, 287)

The need to improve communications and state the message more clearly is an argument that will be familiar to students of change management and political projects alike. The message deployed by Schultz, of bringing higher civilization to the natives, is also inherent in the colonial narratives of Aeneas and Brutus.

Discussion and Conclusion

Historically, foundation stories are about legitimization in the past, present and future. As Rosser says of medieval English towns, 'Their lack of a dignified past required that one be invented, as legitimization and guarantee of *de facto* economic prosperity and political force' (Rosser 1996, 7). This implies an element of uncertainty and vulnerability, the need to vindicate corporate activities. It suggests the possibility that the institution feared that it did not have the right to exist or act, and the foundation story was a way of claiming legitimate hegemony.

Given that there are similar elements in the foundation narratives of Nike, Starbucks and Marks and Spencer, as well as those of Aeneas/Brutus, it is worth considering whether they also share the same rhetorical function. Kearney points out that the use of a story goes some way to create a community. Basing his analysis on Aristotle's claim that the art of storytelling gives us a 'shareable world' (Kearney 2002, 3), he states:

... myth, the most common form of early narrative, was a traditional plot or storyline which could be transmitted from one generation of tellers to the next. It generally had a sacred ritual function, being recited for a community in order to recall their holy origins and ancestors. (Kearney 2002, 8)

Thus, while foundation stories are frequently told on organizational induction programmes to inculcate new recruits into the corporate culture, all three of these case examples suggest that they may also be addressed to a wider community, that of their shareholders and, ultimately, other stakeholders. The aim is to create through storytelling not only a community of investors, but also a community of customers and, beyond that, a more general understanding that the stories of Nike, Marks and Spencer and Starbucks in some way form part of the common culture of the societies in which they operate. Nike and Starbucks do this in their contemporary marketing practices. The publication of the memoirs of the Marks and Spencer principals obviously suggests an expectation that the public will be sufficiently interested in their stories to want to read them.

Continuity is also important in the telling and retelling of these stories. The dead live on in them. Kearney writes:

Such narratives of genesis were often linked to tales of fatherland and motherland, serving as potent symbols for reanimating the power of 'dead generations' and establishing a conviction of unruptured continuity with one's tradition. (Kearney 2002, 87)

He adds that if this could be sustained 'the narratives came to serve as national myths of sovereignty' (Kearney 2002, 87). What is at stake here is territorial sovereignty so unimpeachable that external interference or criticism is unthinkable. The truly powerful myth, according to Kearney, narrates a 'sacred history, namely a trans-human and trans-temporal epiphany which allegedly took place in the Holy Time of the Great Beginning' (Kearney 2002, 87–8). The most compelling example of this is Israel Sieff's attempt to trace his lineage back to the biblical time of the great beginning, but Nike also has recourse to the time of the Olympian gods. Starbucks is less ambitious but in its name and the iconography of its siren logo evokes a vague historicity designed to evoke longevity.⁹

Kearney also draws our attention to the dual use of fact and fiction. Discussing the *Aeneid*, he comments:

Virgil's fantastic narrative, in short, is an attempt to combine story with history so as to suggest that Rome owes its origins to both a celestial order of divine blessing

and a temporal order of genealogical events. And the basic persuasion that this 'mixed' narrative of fantasy and fact promotes is that the great Roman Empire of Augustus was historically and theologically *inevitable*. (Kearney 2002, 85, emphasis in original)

The storyteller therefore makes a crucial move from legitimacy to inevitability through mixing fact and fiction. All three cases combine their essentially rags to riches rise to prominence with the hint of divine approval and an appeal to a dynastic legitimacy. Marks and Spencer has Saint Michael and Rosh Ha-Golah; Starbucks has its siren logo and its evocation of Starbuck, the first mate on the Pequod in *Moby Dick*, and Nike has the goddess, Nike Athene, and the continuing presence of Coach Bowerman in Nike Town, its corporate shrine. All three combine events very much of this world with elements of supernatural destiny. The subtext, then, is that not only is the organization operating in a legitimate space in the present, but the inevitability of its success, ordained by higher powers, gives it the authority to pursue whatever course it wants in the future. Hegemony is therefore assured.

To return to Aeneas/Brutus, these narratives were constructed at points at which the elite felt in some way vulnerable about the status of their empires. In this article we are using this Ur-story as a template against which to assess the corporate foundation narratives to see if we can trace common concerns. In this way the circumstances of the modern foundation stories are thrown into sharp relief. Phil Knight defends his empire against charges of the exploitation of labour in sweatshops and the destruction of the world of professional sport through excessive endorsement deals. Howard Schultz defends Starbucks against charges of homogenizing the high street. Even the Marks and Spencer's accounts, which at first sight appear to be celebrations of corporate success, betray a desire for assimilation and legitimation in their cataloguing of associations with the great and the good. The Jewish origins of the Marks and the Sieffs jeopardized their acceptance as members of the British establishment, as is shown in the story of Israel Sieff ejecting Oswald Moseley from a dinner party when he began to proclaim his anti-semitic views, which is quoted by both Israel and his son, Marcus. The memoirs also describe a period in which the founding dynasty was beginning to crumble: Marks's son refused to follow him into the business, and after Marcus and Teddy Sieff had held chairmanships, the next leaders had come from outside the family. The legacy no longer appeared invulnerable.

To conclude, one way of investigating what is going on in a story as opposed to what is described as happening, is to go back to an earlier version of the same story and, by identifying similarities in narrative elements and circumstances of production, to identify possible common political objectives. The adoption, then, of the template of the Aeneas/Brutus acts like a filtering lens, in the way that a red filter might be held in front of an image to foreground certain colour values. It does not preclude the possibility of a different way of judging colour (a reducing lens could be used to show colour distribution, for example), but it does reveal elements that are present but might otherwise have been left unexposed. Read through the lens of the Aeneas/Brutus Ur-story, these corporate foundation narratives stand revealed, not as innocent accounts of events 'as they

really were' (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*), but as tales to legitimate colonization and contested authority.

Notes

1. Interestingly in this context, Schein (1983, 13) begins his account with a slightly mangled version of an ancient myth: 'Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom, is said to have sprung full-blown from the forehead of Zeus [*sic*]. Similarly, an organization's culture begins life in the head of its founder – springing from the founder's ideas about truth, reality and the way the world works.'
2. A convenient survey of the poem and its author is that of Camps (1969).
3. So did the Greeks, equally obviously, but their medieval descendants were the 'degenerate' Byzantines of the eastern Roman Empire, for whom there was no equivalent mythical link with western Europe, and who were in any case regarded as schismatics by the western Church.
4. Briggs comments, in what is significantly the official history of the company, commissioned for its centenary, '...there are perhaps more elements of philosophy and legend in the story of M&S [*sic*] than in the story of most successful businesses' (Briggs 1984, 10).
5. The primary referencing in the Marks and Spencer foundation narratives must be to the biblical Exodus, but the enterprising impulse can also be seen in the *Aeneid*, going elsewhere to seek fortune or a better life. This plot device of a journey going from the known to the unknown world is universal, and a mainstay of the monomyth described by Joseph Campbell (Campbell 1949/1993).
6. There is another connection with the Aeneas story in the adoption of English as the trading language. Aeneas adopts Latin from the latin tribe he conquered.
7. Briggs, however, casts doubt on these sacralized events:

The story may have an element of truth in it. Yet, leaving on one side the key question of whether or not Michael Marks started in Leeds [Briggs favours Stockton-on-Tees], what has hitherto been left out of the account is that in 1884 Dewhirst himself was only 21 years old. Far from being a well-established wholesaler with a secure business behind him, he had only just started his own business after a romantic journey around the world. (Briggs 1984, 101)

It is significant that this account was not published on the watch of one of the direct descendants of the founder.

8. Although as Ing-Chambers sardonically points out, 'By athlete they mean anyone who has a body' (Ing-Chambers 2005, W6).
9. Schultz also notes at a number of points that one of his aims in making Starbucks a success is to form a monument to his father.

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Ann Rippin is a lecturer in Management at the University of Bristol. Her research interests include management and history, with a particular interest in how organizations use their histories. She also works on organizations and aesthetics.

Peter Fleming is Principal Lecturer in Medieval History at the University of the West of England, Bristol. His recent publications include, with Michael Wood, *Gloucestershire's Forgotten Battle: Nibley Green, 1470* (2003) and, with Keith Dockray (eds), *People, Places and Perspectives in Later Medieval and Early Tudor England* (2005).
