The New Place of Collective Memory in Brittany: La Vallée des Saints

Eszter Anna Nyúl

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This study explores the Vallée des Saints sculpture park as a symbolic space embodying historical, cultural, and religious memory in Brittany. Building on Norbert Elias's The Civilizing Process, it interprets civilisation and culture as complementary value-based choices shaped by distinct geocultural contexts. The success of the sculpture park, it is argued, lies in its dual function: fostering a sense of local community while simultaneously reinforcing a broader European identity. This is achieved through the integration of Celtic, Breton, French, and Christian elements, and through its capacity to mediate between multiple geocultural spheres.

Key words: geoculture, Norbert Elias, breton identity, European civilisation, Brittany, La Vallée des Saints

Contact: dr. Eszter Anna Nyúl LL.M, assistant professor, PTE BTK French Department, PhD Candidate, PTE TTK Doctoral School of Earth Sciences Hungary, H-7622 Pécs, Ifjúság útja 6, Hungary; e-mail: nyul.eszter.anna@pte.hu; ORCID: 0009-0005-4490-8111

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Introduction

Sixteen years ago, in the inland area of Brittany, a Breton association (L'association la Vallée des Saints) launched a cultural and artistic project aimed at preserving the Breton past. The La Vallée des Saints (Valley of the Saints) project is referred to as a mad gamble for eternity[1], one of its guarantees being the durability of Breton granite over time. According to the slogans, eventually, a thousand statues of local saints will stand here. The twenty-first-century sculpture park commemorating Breton medieval saints is primarily mentioned as an artistic initiative, but the outdoor exhibition space with its several-meter-high carved sculptures also tells stories about Breton land, identity, and Christian culture.[2] The venture is therefore grandiose in every aspect, extending its impact not only on the physical reality but also within the geocultural space.

The site of execution, the Quénéquillec hill, located in the immediate vicinity of the small town of Carnoët, was selected through a call for proposals (Wagner 2019). Since 2012, new statues, developing infrastructure, and colourful programs continue to await visitors year after year. Viewing the park is free, and the sculpture park is maintained through community donations. The statues are made exclusively of Breton granite. While the carved stones resemble statues on medieval church walls, scattered across the field with their imposing size, they also evoke the mystery of stone fields from the megalithic culture. Its existence forms a bridge between the past and present of the people living here.

The sculpture park has become one of the most visited tourist destinations in Brittany, thereby revitalising the depopulating area. So far, three and a half million visitors have frequented the site. The park noticeably changes year after year, which is attractive to many, as they can witness, participate in, and collectively shape the space and Breton collective memory.[3]

The aim of our case study is to examine the Valley of the Saints as a symbolic space of historical, cultural, and religious memory. The significance of the topic lies in understanding how France, as a leading nation within

the European Union, relates to the Breton initiative. For the study, we employed reports, promotional materials, social media, interviews, news, debates, and other internet sources (tourism websites) about the sculpture park from its inception to the present.

Our questions include: How does the sculpture park reflect the relationship between Breton identity, the French nation, and European identity? Can the sculpture park be considered an example of sustainable geoculture? We hypothesise that domestic (French) responses to the rediscovery of medieval saints, who played a role in the creation of Christian Europe and are markedly present in Breton identity and the region's consciousness, can help us better understand French attitudes towards similar decisions and initiatives in the international arena.

Theoretical Background: The Significance of the Valley of the Saints in the Geocultural Space

The coexistence and flourishing of French civilisation and Breton culture raise several questions. Geographic spaces have been shaped by human history, and thus, due to their organization, have become distinct areas (Braudel 1996: 811). In this way, geographic space intersects with cultural space, and we interpret this connection as geoculture in geopolitics. (Wallerstein 1988, 1991; Braudel 1996; Rostoványi 1999; Magyari Beck 2014; Hanne and Flichy de La Neuville 2015) Among geocultural entities, the state is best suited for comparison and uniform procedural practices. We believe this is why geopolitics primarily aims to explain the expected behaviours of states and political nations. However, while every state is capable of presenting a geocultural group identity, not every geocultural group identity can be tied to state border; it can be larger or smaller than that.

According to Olivier Hanne and Thomas Flichy de La Neuville (2015), a civilisation is sustainable and viable when it can integrate external cultural influences without self-abandonment. These influences do not weaken it but rather refresh it; biological survival and the transmission of memory provide continuity. Therefore, the analysis of geopolitical and historical phenomena should begin with identity and memory relations. Such are the roles of ethnicity, time, religion, collective perception, nation, and natural geography in relation to populations.

Thus, we have the European geocultural space, which can be referred to as European culture and European civilisation (Huntington 1996). The consensus seems to be that civilisation is the largest unit of organized human communities in space and time, within which smaller geocultural entities also exist. According to Samuel P. Huntington (1996), while there are cultures within a civilisation that differ from each other in various aspects, they are bound by such strong cultural ties that civilisation and culture reflect the lifestyle of the whole population living there.

However, S.P. Huntington (1996) began his work based on the English and French meanings of the words civilisation and culture, categorically rejecting the differing German conceptual usage. In contrast, Norbert Elias (1987) addressed in a geopolitically-relevant manner how it became possible for the two terms to become opposites. N. Elias demonstrated the process mechanism of European civilisation through changes in French norms and behaviours, and therefore also addressed the German interpretation of the concept of culture. (Table 1)

Dimension	Civilisation	Culture
Time	Present-oriented	Past-oriented
Space	expansion	demarcation
Action	Goal-oriented	Value-oriented
Actor	Individually responsible	Subordinated to collective fate
Social perspective	universal	partial
Relationship with nature	domination	subordination
Mode of evaluation	quantitative	qualitative
Object of evaluation	production	Individual achievements
Mode of reasoning	procedural	substantive

Table 1. The Two Different Systems of Rationality According to N. Elias (Csepeli – Wessely 1992: 3)

He believed that individuals are born into the concept of culture or civilisation and identify with it. This explained why, during World War I, German culture was opposed in the name of civilisation. In his work, he elaborated those different ways of thinking about territory, time, heroes, attitudes towards action, and key values that lie behind the two concepts. The fact that the French used *civilisation* and the Germans *culture* reflected each nation's value choices, which became characteristically and implicitly a national conception.

In today's scientific terms, we might say that N. Elias created the category of qualitative content analysis through the comparative examination of the usage of the terms *culture* and *civilisation* (Sántha 2022). Elias's conclusions allow for a priori coding, as the aspects of his comparisons can also be viewed as categories related to qualitative content analysis.

Culture and civilisation initially served as expressions of national identity, with their application and identification within the European geocultural space first appearing at the level of nations and only later becoming the scientific terms used today. Western/European civilisation is always listed among the largest geocultural entities (Quigley 1961; Melko 1969; Bozeman 1994; Huntington 1996; Eisenstadt 2003; Ferguson 2022), and within this context, there is no separate designation for French, Spanish, or English civilisation, even though these terms exist in the respective languages; the words *culture* and *civilisation* are often interchangeable. Not every European nation feels entitled to call itself a civilisation. Similarly to the German conceptual distinction, differentiation between culture and civilisation exists for other nations as well (for example, we speak of Hungarian culture rather than Hungarian civilisation). The French perceive themselves with the awareness that they played an active role in establishing the European common cultural entity, significantly contributing to the global image of Europe. This is well exemplified by the work *Histoire de la civilisation française*, which has been published multiple times and garnered international interest since its first release in 1958. It openly discusses the material and intellectual development encapsulating the French identity (Duby – Mandrou 1958). However, according to the recommendation for the expanded edition published in February 2025, the phrase 'French civilisation' also signifies the significant French contribution to the entirety of European civilisation (Duby – Mandrou – Sirinelli 2025).

S. P. Huntington, as a geopolitical expert, and N. Elias, as a sociologist, shed light on very important elements of reality. From their work, we deduce that those nations which today also use the term *civilisation* to describe themselves exist as cultural entities within the geocultural space of civilisation. Their identifiable value choices within national identity imply a significant alignment with civilisation as the largest common unit for identification.

The concepts of culture and civilisation cannot be seen as opposites; their associated focuses do not cancel each other out but rather complement one another. The differences in scale between culture and civilisation manifest not only in the size of the geographical space but also in the strength of the geoculture associated with it. For nations clustered around a culture, the aspects of the other perspective are familiar and characteristic, yet they identify with it within a larger geocultural entity. Experience varies, leading to differing perspectives that form the basis for building group identity. This is how people recognise themselves as a national identity and pass that identity on. This is why the concept of German culture fought for its existence.

In our research, we interpret the concept of culture as the geocultural space characteristic of the group identity of a nation or ethnicity, irrespective of the origins of this group identity. The distinction between political and cultural nations appears to be an endless scientific debate, but it becomes more comprehensible through N. Elias's categories and is no longer perceived as a set of rhetorical concepts tied to political interests (Kántor 2007).

The separation between political and cultural nations and the value choices between civilisation and culture are likely to correspond in many elements. However, if we examine only the political and cultural differences of nations, we might understand less about why it is specifically the political nations that today are most inclined to turn away from the heritage of Western civilisation. But if we consider N. Elias's explanation alongside the usage of the term *civilisation* as an aspect of national identity, it becomes clearer why someone who applies this term to a narrower community might feel that the notion has quickly become hollow. Western civilisation is a broader category, including nations that claim it as their own despite never having sailed the seas, built world-famous towers and temples, traded spices, silks, and people, colonised, or lost their global dominance. Instead, they

gathered the latest shared knowledge as wandering students and turned it into common treasure at home. The example was always Western Europe, and the goal was catching up − not out of a desire to surpass, but to reach the same level, achieve partnership, and gain visibility.

Thus, it becomes understandable that the use of *civilisation* in relation to national identity today leads to the dysfunction of European civilisation. The concepts of *civilisation* and *culture* must be set aside so that, within the same civilisation, national identities built from value choices covered by these words can hear each other's needs. Western civilisation is like a coat: over time, one of the brothers has grown so thin that the coat has become too big for him, whereas for the other, it has always been too large.

This issue currently appears at two levels for the member states of the European Union: in the image of national identity and in that of European identity. These can either reinforce each other or hinder self-categorisation (Smith – Mackie 2004: 189). This duality may influence the national attitudes towards EU integration (Unified or United Europe?), as well as comprehension or miscomprehension at the negotiating table. If we understand national identity as a distinctive feature of local cultural variations within Western civilisation, then, within the interpretive framework of geoculture, two paths are available: preserving these differences, or homogenising them.

Breton identity exists as a culture within French civilisation, and thus its struggles and strategies can be interpreted at two levels of the geocultural space. On one hand, Breton and French group identities can be viewed as overlapping geocultural spaces; on the other hand, the differing concepts of nationhood allow for an interpretation that sees a dialogue between *civilisation* and *culture* within it. We consider the example of the Valley of the Saints worth examining because within a single project, it is capable of addressing both group identities: the sculpture park attracts Bretons (40 %), people from other parts of France (50 %), and foreigners (10 %). This indicates that the park is also appealing to those who are not native to the region and who wish to explore Brittany.[2] The project resonates with many within the French majority society, while simultaneously strengthening Breton identity. It successfully meets the characteristics of both geocultural spaces.

Within S. P. Huntington's theory of civilisations, religion plays a key role in defining cultural identities and global conflicts. We agree with the view that religion plays an identity-shaping role, but we also maintain that it can be adequately interpreted within Elias's framework of value choices. In his interpretation of the concepts of *civilisation* and *culture* − prior to developing his process theory of civilisation − he does not explicitly address religion. We do not see this as a shortcoming, since in terms of understanding national concepts, N. Elias highlighted aspects that make the questions of "who does what, when, where, how, and why" unavoidable. The answers to these questions encapsulate the worldview of a given community. Thus, even within Elias's framework, the memory of Christian symbols and figures can be interpreted.

A cross or a statue of Jesus can also serve to examine value choices, but in our view, their message would be at the level of civilisation. The sculpture park under study commemorates Catholic saints, yet it also preserves the memory of local saints who were once the founders of Brittany. Many of the medieval Breton saints were never canonised by Rome; their lives and deeds are largely enmeshed in legend, which intertwines with the origin story of Brittany itself.

According to Tranvouez, there have been two forms of Breton Catholicism for some time: one religious, the other civic. The former has rediscovered its Breton heritage in faith and also experiences it in liturgy; the latter is a secular approach to Christianity, seeing in it a way to reinforce Breton identity—one that, beyond its cultural significance, also carries strong economic interest by promoting tourism. (Gendry 2021) The statue park, carved exclusively from granite native to the peninsula, also serves as a new symbolic space of Breton history and cultural memory.

The Breton Geocultural Space

Within the French nation-state, regional identity is most strongly expressed in Brittany, where it is rooted both in cultural traditions and in a profound attachment to the landscape. The peninsula is the westernmost tip of the continent, jutting far into the sea, with a highly indented coastline. The region is characterized by a distinctive way of life and land use, a formerly independent history, and a strong sense of shared origins among its

inhabitants. There is a widespread pride in the uniqueness of local languages, and in the preservation of traditions and regional festivals. Its boundaries on the mainland are defined by local identity. For this reason, although Brittany is a peninsula, it can be considered a geocultural island within France.

The region's landscape and cultural character – its wild coastline, Celtic heritage, and collective memory rooted in medieval legends – have shaped a unique local narrative that often stands in contrast to, or runs parallel with, the dominant French national discourse.

Breton origin has become a symbolic marker of quality, authenticity, and a nature-oriented lifestyle, particularly in the realm of gastronomy (van Geen 2023). In recent decades, the region has become one of the most popular destinations for domestic tourism, often referred to as a place that is at once part of the national framework, yet culturally distinct from it.

The Breton identity reflects the value choices of Elias's conception of culture. These include the relationship to territory and the role of Breton geographical and historical borders in shaping Breton identity. The peninsula, the westernmost tip of the continent, juts deep into the sea, with a highly indented coastline.

Brittany gained its historical boundary in 851, although its current administrative area is smaller (Rousselot – Aubert 2015). Their territorial independence first faltered in 1341, when they transitioned from a kingdom to a duchy, eventually becoming a French province in 1547.[4] Today, Brittany covers an area of 27,208 km² and is home to nearly 3.4 million people, divided into four departments. Rennes serves as its administrative centre.[5] Historically, Brittany also included the Loire-Atlantique department, which is still considered culturally part of it.

Three languages are spoken in Brittany: French, as the official state language, and Brittany's two regional languages − Breton and Gallo. Breton is a Celtic language, Gallo belongs to the *langues d'oïl*. The Breton language plays an increasingly significant role in shaping the image of Brittany, while the Gallo language, similarly endangered, is a defining element of local identity and culture.

While the number of language users decreases in Brittany, in Nantes this is a means of expressing Breton identity. Local Bretons are dissatisfied with the region's organization, as they seek not only cultural unity but have also initiated the renegotiation of administrative boundaries in order to include Loire-Atlantique in Brittany.[6]

The term *Breton* refers to all individuals living in the administrative region of Brittany in France, as well as those residing in historical Brittany and their descendants. In the narrowest sense, *Bretons* are those whose language is Breton, and this local language has become a symbol of identity and local patriotism (Ádám 2019). Since there is no legally recognized nationality or ethnic minority within the country, Breton identity can be named and interpreted as a local identity or regional identity alongside French identity. The concepts of nationalism and nationalist are excluded, leading to the usage of terms like regionalism and regionalist in this context (Kernalegenn 2017).

Brittany takes pride in its distinctive past and typically looks back to distant eras, which makes the choice of material for the sculpture park, the scattered placement of the statues across the field, and the thematic focus unsurprising. Brittany is quite unique: human life was present here 600,000 years before our era. The earliest traces of fire usage were found on this peninsula, and around 5000 BC, the megalithic culture emerged (Rousselot – Aubert 2015). The stone rows interest people of today, with numerous legends and explanations still surviving (Laville 2023). From the fifth century onwards, the arrival of kindred tribes from Great Britain caused changes in Celtic beliefs; they populated the peninsula, and their Christian priests (saints) undertook the task of evangelisation (Rousselot – Aubert 2015). This period marks the transition of the peninsula's name to Brittany. The expansion of the Bretons and Christianity in the sixth century is reflected in the tales of King Arthur.[7] The Breton language differentiated by the seventh or eighth century. Religion and origin narratives are closely intertwined; Brittany's cultural and historical heritage is deeply rooted in Christianity.

The medieval pilgrimage route, the Tro Breiz,[8] revived in 1994, is a roughly one-month-long, 600 km walking pilgrimage circle around Brittany. The cathedrals of the peninsula's seven founding saints are located in cities scattered far apart (Gendry 2021). Neither Rennes nor Nantes were part of the medieval pilgrimage; the two cities that gained significance only during the Duchy era.

The Association “Les Chemins du Tro Breiz” extended the circle in 2018, resulting in a 1500 km long route. The Catholic pilgrimage “wishes to delineate” Brittany’s historical boundaries with their footsteps, so the city of Nantes was included in the Brittany path (Veissid 2018).

In light of the historical context, we do not view the initiative as an act of economic expansion but rather as an expression of the relationship to territory as articulated in Elias’s concept of culture. A core element of Breton identity is the sense of belonging to a clearly defined territory, along with the commitment to its protection and preservation.

The Brittany peninsula is a geographical and cultural unity (Ádám 2019), and − as a geocultural entity − it has many symbols interpreted nationally elsewhere. Their usage strengthens the group identity, but the interpretive framework varies; a portion of Bretons call it regional identity alongside the French majority, while another group lives in it as a national minority. They have a regional anthem in their own language, their own flag, and a country code − unofficially used on cars, but officially recognised online.

The Breton anthem “Bro gozh ma zadoù” was born in the early twentieth century. It officially became the regional anthem of Brittany only on November 28, 2021.[9] The Breton anthem not only resembles the melody of the (unofficial) Welsh anthem − it is its Breton version. Its melody and content have resonated with other Celtic-origin peoples, leading to its rapid adoption as their anthem, sung in Cornish and Breton languages. There is uncertainty surrounding the Breton lyrics regarding plagiarism. The widespread Breton-language adaptation was published by François Jaffrennou, under the bardic name Taldir (1879–1956), in a Catholic newspaper in 1898 (Le Stum 2016; Chartier 2022). Only recently has the Breton-language text − over 125 years old and expressing a protective and life-affirming view of Brittany − become official in the administrative region, at a time when far fewer people understand the Breton language.

The opening words, “We, Bretons…”, greatly influence the experience of group identity, as self-categorization occurs while singing the song (Smith – Mackie 2004). Breton identity is becoming less dependent on whether one lives in Brittany or has Breton ancestry. From that point on, the individual might see themselves as part of the community.

The anthem’s lyrics fully align with the value choices in Elias’s concept of culture, including glorifying a shared past and attachment to territory, strengthening common fate and solidarity, sacrifices for the community, recognition of outstanding achievements and internal values, and the theme of survival (Nyúl 2025).

The “Gwenn-ha-Du”, Brittany’s black-and-white flag, was designed by Morvan Marchal in 1925 and has travelled a long path over the past 100 years, waved by various interests. (Carney 2023) Today, this is more recognised compared to the official logo and flag of the Brittany Region. The controversy of the 1960s was over the BZH abbreviation seen on cars, standing for Brittany in Breton (Breizh). Today, the BZH abbreviation is also used for origin labelling, and, since 2014, as a country code top-level domain (ccTLD) in the internet realm (Mousnier 2020).

From our perspective, Breton identity within the geocultural space corresponds to Elias’s concept of culture as a form of national identity. This is further supported by the fact that the Bretons requested and were granted entry into European indigenous national minorities,[10] whereas legally such a category does not exist in France. Modern France considers itself unified as a nation (Le Roy Ladurie 2013).

The Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN) represents the Breton community among its 100 member organizations from 36 countries within the European Union, the Council of Europe, the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and international forums.[11] There are three Breton member organizations, which find it difficult to estimate the actual number of Bretons in Brittany and throughout France, as the French government does not collect statistics on ethnic affiliation.[12]

Political centralisation established the elite culture focused on “Île-de-France”, with most other regions considered peripheral, yet it emphasises that Brittany is an integral part of France (Le Roy Ladurie 2013). Brittany today is a particularity in France, which the entire French nation is proud of. In the European Union, Brittany stands as one of its regions, creating opportunities to distance itself from the French state’s harsh centralisation, which offers weaker support for local cultures and autonomy (Pasquier 2020). While the region endeavours to become increasingly “similar” to Breton externally (e.g., Breton flag and anthem), its decision-making power is limited. For example, in summer 2024, the Bretons sought

assistance from UNESCO concerning standardized regulations by the French postal service, as these might lead to a decline in the usage of Breton geographic and place names, potentially resulting in their loss over time.[13]

Breton identity is expressed on multiple levels: regional (Breton), national (French), and European. In a 2019 EU survey, 20 % of those living in Brittany stated that none of these identities felt stronger to them than the others, while most (38%) identified themselves primarily as Breton, then French, followed by the reverse (34 %) (Pasquier 2020).

Since Breton identity is theoretically tied to the smallest of the three geocultural units, it is particularly noteworthy that for 58 % of respondents, this identity is at least as important as their national (French) identity. This suggests that a strong sense of Breton cultural belonging continues to persist. At the same time, the majority of respondents (54–59 %) also consider French identity to be fundamental—indicating that regional and national affiliations are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary.

When examined through Elias's categories, Breton identity reflects the characteristics of a culture-based concept of nationhood, and it is just as strong in practice. However, Brittany occupies a unique position, as its inhabitants are also part of the French civilisational geoculture. Despite this, the region has not become culturally homogeneous, as both cultural and civilisational value orientations − according to Elias's framework − continue to coexist.

The Past and Present of the Valley of the Saints

The history of the sculpture park was reconstructed based on publications, articles, interviews, and videos. Our aim was to examine the collected content through the lens of Elias's categories, narrowed down to five key dimensions as proposed by Wessely: privileged time, relationship to territory, perception of individual life, action and its motivation, and privileged values (Wessely 2003). Given that no comprehensive account of the park's history has been published to date, we consider it necessary to present the most essential information as part of this study.

The association was founded in 2009 and issued a call for a location for the sculpture park, to which nine towns from different corners of Brittany responded. Media explanations indicated that Carnoët was chosen because its geographical location was most favourable, and its medieval past (castle ruins, the battle against Richard the Lionheart) made it attractive (Wagner 2019). The mayor was committed, and Carnoët was in the most challenging financial situation among the nine municipalities; the possibility of providing assistance inspired the project. Carnoët is located within the ring of pilgrimage paths, surrounded by beautiful landscapes, in one of Brittany's more impoverished regions.

When the area was being developed, key stakeholders sought to explain the choice of location with a comparison. The hill rising above Carnoët offers a lookout point that allows visitors to gaze into the distance, almost to infinity. It has been called the Easter Island of the Bretons. Although initially an unusual statement, it has several points of connection.[14] In 2019, the Valley of the Saints established a sister relationship with Easter Island.[15] One reason for this is that the Breton park, too, is filled with giant carved stone figures, whose statues gaze outward from the hilltop, as if from an island.[16]

The town is linked to two famous Bretons: one is F. Jaffrennou, who was born here and wrote the Breton anthem in 1895.[17] The other is Paul-Antoine Fleuriot de Langle, a renowned eighteenth-century sailor, scholar, and explorer, and Carnoët's land was once his estate.[18] His life epitomizes the civilizing aspirations of eighteenth-century France. The first map of Easter Island is credited to him and the tragically fated 1785 La Pérouse French expedition (Grégor 2019).

While it becomes clear why Easter Island is so often referenced, it also becomes noticeable how little attention is given to F. Jaffrennou, a native of the town. In the Valley of the Saints publication, he is referenced solely in connection with the support from the Indian Khasi people, stating the Breton anthem was written in Carnoët.[19] Neither the sculpture park nor the town commemorates Jaffrennou on their websites in any form.

This might be because F. Jaffrennou is a divisive figure, identifying himself as part of the Celtic world, as a Breton poet and bard (Heather 2021), and, during World War II, supported the Vichy government. From 1942, he was a member of the Brittany Consultative Committee until the regime's fall, hoping for a special status for Brittany (Chartier 2022). People are reluctant to associate his collaborationist past with the Breton anthem, as it could have

harmed France's view, seeing him as a symbol of aspirations to autonomy, which may have led to rejection.

The artworks are substantial in size − 3 to 7 metres tall − and are evenly spaced on a hillside in the Valley of the Saints (Chartier-Le Floch 2011). They echo the megalithic stone rows of Carnac, but differ in that each is a unique sculpture envisioned by artists, made from granites of different colours and surfaces.[20] The granite must be sourced only from Brittany, and leftover stones from the quarry and sculpting process are also utilized, for example, to make benches.

More than 5,000 individuals and 370 companies have supported the Valley of the Saints thus far. Some statues are sponsored by a single person or family, while others see community donations (e.g., from a town, or devotees of the saint in question). By 2024, €4.4 million had been raised; only the COVID years temporarily broke the year-on-year growth in support.[21]

The events for visitors are wide-ranging, from various calendar celebrations to concerts, commemorations, and scientific, and artistic engagements, featuring rich programme offerings. They also partake in regional initiatives, such as laying out an oversized Breton flag on the hillside (Louault 2024). This latter initiative fitted well with the site's theme and scale, while its newsworthy nature drew attention back to the Valley of the Saints. Visibility is very important, and social media plays a significant role in this. Sharing photos of statues with geolocation provides free advertising.

Breton and Christian identity connect to the Celtic world, leading to years when statue inaugurations involved statues being launched from boats by Celtic kinfolk, giving the affected ports an opportunity for commemoration − whether through celebrations, or scientific talks.

The sculpture park also seeks sister relationships, through patron-support programmes forming connections with Canada, Chile (Easter Island), Lebanon, and India. Through partnership links, projects similar to the Valley of the Saints are planned elsewhere with local saints.[22] Beyond the realized plans, they often declare emerging ideas, reinforcing trust in their energetic execution. Donors choose which aspect to support, and joining the association is open to both individuals and companies.

A response to this connection was the opening of a section in the sculpture park where statues of foreign saints were placed; the first statue is already there − a Lebanese saint accompanied by Lebanese and Breton songs, erected by Lebanese residing in Brittany. The undertaking, invoking the moai statues of Easter Island, is an exciting venture and much anticipated. The question is whether it will feel out of place or whether it can be realized fittingly within the project.

The biggest criticism against the Valley of the Saints appeared in the opinion-forming daily of the French left, La Libération (Huitorel 2018). The project was challenged on multiculturalism and artistic value. Huitorel called the entire project a fraud in his article, mixing art with ideology and tourism with culture. He disapproved of the Regional Council's support of the statue erection, as well as the entire regional press, which he believed wrote about the project under hypnosis. In defence of the Valley of the Saints, no national paper spoke up, but the project creator's open letter was published among regional news.[23] In his response, he explained that the ideological basis of the article was Marxism, and that neither Brittany nor the sculpture park could be accused of exclusion on the French or international stage, in contrast to ideologies serving totalitarian systems.

In 2022, the region contracted with the French Government for Brittany to be advertised as a tourist destination within Atout France's international promotion campaign.[24] As part of this, Breton travel opportunities were divided into ten units, including Kalon Breizh (Heart of Brittany). On the EU-supported tourism websites, the sculpture park was listed among Brittany's essential tourist sites.[25]

Diverging perspectives emerge from the statements of the association's founders, lacking a clear message that has already started being researched, with its reason interpreted as an overflow of content (Jezequel 2022). The Valley of the Saints needs to skilfully juggle programmes to maintain interest, while ensuring that renewal in the programme offers does not alter the original goals of the project. It must open in such a way that every attraction ultimately leads back to medieval Brittany. The information gathered from the Valley of the Saints was organized according to categories to discern what characterizes the place. (Table 2) The project engages with both geocultural levels through its objectives and themes. It provides a sense of familiarity while also offering the possibility of new experiences.

Civilisation values associated to France	**The main dimensions of national identity according to N. Elias** (Wessely, 2003)	**Values associated with Breton culture** related to Brittany
the present and the future **A bold wager for eternity, tracking changes**	Distinguished time WHEN?	the shared past **Celtic heritage, Breton Middle Ages**
expansion **outdoor program** **Paul-Antoine Fleuriot de Langle's land of exploration** **underdeveloped countryside** **tourist routes**	Relationship to territory WHERE?	Demarcation **The heart of Brittany** **Taldir's birthplace** **around a medieval earth fort**
subject of personal responsibility, universal social perspective **Paul-Antoine Fleuriot de Langle, explorer and cartographer** **Association for the purpose**	Assessment of individual life WHO?	subordinated to the shared fate, particular social perspective **Breton saints (local saints, legends)** **Donors**
aligned with changing external goals: goal-oriented **Regional development** **social innovation**	Action and its reason WHAT? WHY?	aligned with enduring internal values: value-oriented **Enduring commemoration: homeland, faith, community, language**
the process of progress, production, quantitative evaluation **Expanding park, shop, accessible tourism, developments, increasing recognition and visitation**	Distinguished value HOW?	preservation, outstanding achievements, qualitative evaluation **Record for the number of statues** **community donations** **superlatives: saints, largest flag**

Table 2. Value Choices of the Valley of the Saints

Balance Between Civilisation and Culture

In our study, we found that Breton responses need to be thoughtful and prepared to avoid criticism or negative sentiments against the experience of Breton identity, both from the perspective of French national identity and French expectations. Breton identity has enjoyed a positive appraisal in recent decades, if it avoids radical politicisation (Jezequel 2022). When we view the communication from the Valley of the Saints with this realization, its messages become more understandable. Currently being one of the most visited tourist sites in Brittany, any news related to it applies to Brittany as a whole, and its political echo can impact the perception of the region.

The most neutral reference among all is to Easter Island, as reaching it in the eighteenth century was a tremendous achievement, as was the science of map-making, making it easy to identify with. We know little about the island's culture; its statues are mysterious and no longer associated with any religion, remnants of a bygone culture.

In contrast, the Christian faith, particularly Catholicism, is less unified today regarding a shared memory of its saints, yet medieval Christian Europe is a common heritage, valuable to more than just one nation. The close connection between the local history of Brittany's towns and geographic names with the medieval era and its saints creates a memorial site that can address Brittany's residents, where they can see the saints, their names, and their attributes in one place.

The author of the Breton anthem's text is not coincidentally placed last and is seldom mentioned in this sequence. Simultaneously, Carnoët, as a location, is much more closely linked to F. Jaffrennou than to Easter Island. This silence is more a form of waiting on their part. The closing lines in the Breton anthem invite association with a pounding heart: "Even if broken by great wars, /The language still lives as it did, /In the centre its warm heart still pulses, /You have just awoken, my land of Brittany!" Carnoët might most deeply feel the mission of the final lines of the Breton anthem and the commanding force of the national awakening, as the region is also called the Heart of Brittany (Cœur de Bretagne).

Currently, the Valley of the Saints project is not at liberty to risk the positive and broad supportive community surrounding it. Therefore, any report linking the site with autonomy efforts could harm a favourable decision hoped for purely as an administrative issue and only in cases of regional identity.

The Valley of the Saints is a successful social innovation working on creating a new local site of memory, boosting the life of the local community and mobilizing all of Brittany. The Valley of the Saints is not closing off but rather seeking every connection and carefully choosing among them, opening itself to connections without abandoning its original plans. The latter is the key to its survival, achieved over the past sixteen years, with hope it does not lose direction in the future.

Since every town is somehow connected to medieval legends and saints, it is not just a possibility for communities to erect statues in the Valley of the Saints, but also a task inspiring and reinforcing group identity. The notion of nationality behind Breton identity corresponds to Elias's concept of culture, cleverly and diplomatically able to survive a situation where identity can only manifest concerning territorial ties. The spatiality in the sculpture park's concept is so multi-layered that the sculpture park becomes a message of "I was here, I am here, and I will remain here."

The Valley of the Saints emerged as a new narrator of history, offering a plan and space capable of attracting people and communities to remind them of shared history, thereby circumventing those situations where the "conquering" consciousness of civilisation would feel violated, and instead found those positive messages it can identify with. Bretons have lived within French civilisation and Breton culture for centuries, both affecting them and working within them.

The memory of Breton history and the revival of local languages is the locals' task, and neither the current French public opinion nor politics is an obstacle. However, Bretons know from history that the state can decide to exclude a particular group identity from the country's image.

For every programme aimed at strengthening Breton identity, the sculpture park is also able to articulate a modern European objective that reflects civilisational values, thereby allowing a broader audience to connect with the site.

The example of La Vallée des Saints is a successful model for dialogue between regional, national, and European identities, connecting and differentiating geocultural levels simultaneously. The example of the sculpture park shows that the culture–civilisation boundary is not static but continually regenerates and rearranges through the involvement of various actors. In the Valley of the Saints, we can learn the method of experiencing regional/national and European identities peacefully and mutually reinforcing each other. It provides an example and a basis for arguing for better mutual understanding. Since French national consciousness identifies with the concept of civilisation and its value choices, its successful relationship with the Breton identity appearing as a regional culture in the sculpture park can be interpreted as an example of sustainable geoculture in Europe.

It is up to the park's management to determine what aspects to highlight − whether to position the site as a vehicle for local Breton identity politics, and cultural and regional narratives, or to adopt more universal themes. At present, both geocultural spaces are represented. The Valley of the Saints maintains a balanced communication strategy, presenting just enough of Breton identity to remain relatable within the broader French and civilisational geocultural context. Its operation does not contradict the theories of either S. P. Huntington or N. Elias; in fact, the case under study highlights the interconnectedness of the two frameworks.

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