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Statues are back in the news; I suppose I ought say something about statues, because I'm a historian and people keep saying that statues are about 'remembering history.'

Folks, statues are not about remembrance, they are about commemoration; not teaching, but moralizing. 1/22

Let me explain that a bit. Our statue tradition comes from Egypt, by way of Greece; most of the Egyptian mega-statuary that compares to the statues we are talking about was state art. It was paid for by the state, and the state was the pharaoh.

Smaller statues might be....2/22

...used for the private commemoration of the deceased. But you can see what was important in the design of these sorts of statues. They are mostly formulaic and idealized (<https://t.co/oVsExk9Njl>), often presenting a 'standard' face rather than the face of the deceased. 3/22

Even larger statues in this tradition are very standardized, not individualized (<https://t.co/hzS86O8xQ0>). Because - beyond their religious significance - they're not about remembering the deceased ("Hank here liked propane...") but about revering them more generally. 4/22

Meanwhile, the big expensive statues for pharaohs were all about communicating state power. It's legitimacy artwork, designed to confirm in the viewer that the pharaoh is big and powerful and doing a good job. Once again, nailing the facial features was not a big issue 5/22

The thing is, Egyptian religious practice *did* care about remembrance, but they used inscriptions, not statues for that (because the thing that needed to be remembered was the name). This is going to be a theme: you remember with words, you transmit *values* with statues. 6/22

Ok, so the tradition comes to Greece and they make statues mostly...of gods and heroes. When regular people do get statues in a Greek polis, it is explicitly because they have done something that community values and they express some value the community wants. 7/22

The irony here is that the first historian to complain that statues don't teach history *is* the *first* historian himself, Thucydides. Seriously, Thucydides points out that the story behind the statues of the 'tyrannicides' in Athens (<https://t.co/RCFbmcRFlg>)...8/22

...is a bit of a fib. The public assumed these guys killed the tyrants - after all, we made statues of them - but they didn't, they killed his brother. As Thucydides notes, "So little pains do the commons take in the investigation of truth, accepting readily the first..." 9/22

"...story that comes to hand." (Thuc. 1.20).

Statues have always been about commemorating values, and have never been about teaching history.

The statues of the tyrannicides communicated "Athens doesn't like tyrants" not "these two fellows specifically killed tyrants." 10/22

Now, it isn't that we don't have large, publicly funded history teaching tools! We do! They're called museums (and also to an extent, battlefield parks)!

But statues are not teaching tools. No history is lost when a statue comes down. 11/22

On the flip-side, that means statues aren't *about* the people they're *of.* The statues of the tyrannicides weren't about Harmodius and Aristogeiton (the two fellows in question), they were *about* the overthrow of the tyrants in Athens. 12/22
So don't expect historians to rush to defend the statues. We've been complaining about them being bad teaching tools for 2,400 years.

The thing is, you don't pay historians to get misty-eyed over statues, you pay us to uncover, remember and explain uncomfortable truths. 13/22

So when we are asking "should this statue stay up or should it go away" the question is not about 'heritage' OR if the person in the statue lived a perfect, saintly life.

The question is, "what values does this statue express?" 14/22

And here's the thing: for those confederate statues, we *know* what values they expressed, because the people who made them *told us.* They literally told us: <https://t.co/RAJdXVoQgn>.

These statues stood for hate. That was their 'value.' 15/22

And I hear the hemming and hawing and "but did they really mean it" in the back.

They *really* meant it. They wanted to be *very* clear: <https://t.co/ko2bUYaGFY> (content warning on that one, the speech, dedicating a now fallen statue, is disturbingly hateful) 16/22

And that's why I'm not persuaded that there's some statue slippery-slope that will lead us towards total de-monumentalization.

There are a lot of statues up of people with imperfect pasts that no one is seriously suggesting taking down... 17/22

...because statues fundamentally are not about the people they depict but about the *values* that person represents. Jefferson is safe not because he was perfect (he was *not*), but because he doesn't represent his imperfects, but rather his finest words. 18/22

So if you are thinking, "should this statue be here?" The question you want to ask is not "what history is it connected to?" but "what values does it express right now ?" Not who does it glorify, but WHY does it glorify them?

And for the person saying, "well, maybe it..." 19/22

"...was because they were good soldiers" let me ask this: where are James Longstreet's statues? Why is there one confederate general left out of all of this soldierly commemoration? <https://t.co/Dh0NsKyKom>

Why? Because after the war, he supported reconstruction. 20/22

It was never about generalship or leadership, these statues were always about hate and Longstreet didn't hate quite enough for the hateful people who put these statues up.

That's the *value* they communicate. Hate. 21/22

So when evaluating a statue, ask yourself, "What values was this statue created to communicate? Are they good values? Are they values I believe in?"

And if the answer is "no" - remove that statue and replace it with one that *does* represent our values. end/22