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## Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

# Discussion: Inclusivity in historical interpretation: Who has access and who is erased?

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**Author(s):** Andrea Mariani <sup>1,2,3</sup> ✉, Sverre Christoffer Guldberg <sup>4</sup>, Sophie Jorgensen-Rideout <sup>5</sup>, Vera Bos, Paul Edward Montgomery Ramírez <sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> APS Popolo di Brig, Italy.

<sup>2</sup> APPA-VC, Portugal.

<sup>3</sup> CITCEM - Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto, Via Panorâmica s/n Torre A – Piso 0, 4150 -564 Porto, Portugal.

<sup>4</sup> Arkeologisk Museum, Universitetet i Stavanger, Peder Klows gate 31A, PB 8600, Forus. 4036 Stavanger, Norway.

<sup>5</sup> Independent researcher, address withheld by the editors (GDPR), Germany.

<sup>6</sup> Independent researcher, address withheld by the editors (GDPR), the Netherlands.

<sup>7</sup> Independent researcher, address withheld by the editors (GDPR), USA.



The discussion of 'authenticity' in living history has been one of the main themes since the conception of contemporary historical interpretation. Our quest for authenticity should, in my opinion start with a thoughtful discussion: What goal do we want to reach through living history? What does 'authenticity' mean in living history? And, in which context does 'authenticity' matter? We need to have frank conversations about this. Do we consider historical interpretation an academic endeavour? Or a set of phenomenological experiences through which we can gain a deeper understanding of the past? In which case we should be very critical why people are included or excluded. Does skin colour really matter when experimenting with historical baking techniques? Or why am I, an able-bodied white woman, not questioned about my place in the community when my height (around 1.85 m) would be an extreme statistical anomaly. Historical interpretation is, on one hand, a mental exercise, consisting of a phenomenological experiment, where striving for inclusiveness will add to our understanding of the past. On the other hand, there is the educational context, where we use visual shorthand to convey information. Here a tension arises; we should not discriminate our interpreters based on sex, ethnicity or disability, however, historically speaking they might not have been present or equally present in the situations we are showing. This brings us to a difficult position. These are themes we need to question together; the answer will vary per individual, institution, marginalised group, and the specific context. (by Vera Bos)

Moderator: Jess Shaw

**Jess:** Is re-enactment theatre? Can we treat it like theatre and use suspension of disbelief to 'bend the rules'?

**Andrea:** Here in Portugal, it's really theatrical. I spent the last four years participating in Congresses, doing seminars and talking about the situation in Portugal. In one Congress, the chairman of my session was one of the organisers of a big event near Porto. It was supposed

to be a Knights Hospitaller event, from the 14th century. They added Muslim warriors from the 10th - 11th century and in another event, a Roman market showed products coming from America.

I was very critical toward the organisers, and concurred with my comments. However, they think the public doesn't care; they want to see people fighting; they want to have exotic food and see people dressed 'strange'.

So my work in the last four years, has been to try to push towards better historical re-enactment.

The problem is how to teach the public what is right, and what is wrong?

**Jess:** So, to summarize you're saying that you want to avoid anachronisms of people dressing with the wrong period pieces, and that the best approach isn't theatrical, but it should be more scientific and demonstrative?

**Andrea:** We can represent theatrically but correctly.

**Vera:** I think re-enactment can be a theatre. Theatre is one of the tools museums or reenactors can use to engage with the audience, but it's broader.

And the other thing is suspension of disbelief. And I think that this is a very interesting phenomenon, because we are always playing with that, just the whole concept of walking into an open air museum – people need to suspend their disbelief

**Jess:** That's a good point, humanity has changed. Variety of people, very tall women or people who are from different countries but would identify as let's say English.

**Jess:** So, at what point do we draw the line and say that they're English enough to play an English role?

**Paul Edward:** It all depends on the specific agenda. When talking about re-enactment, is the word 'experimental archaeology' even the right word. Is this an experiment or is it an engagement? What are the outcomes that we want to achieve? Because if we are talking with a specific group and say we're wanting to represent the Roman Legion, people are going to expect a very specific look. But that image they have didn't exist in the end of the Roman period. But the minute you would take that, you would spend all that time talking about the change. Are there other sides of this story that we are considering for the event or for the museum - other items that are more important?

So, I think absolutely, always, theatrics are incredibly important because they draw people in. Chances are they'll remember their experience more. And then they can go and learn in their

own time. We can't control their learning, but we can steer their experience a bit so that way it might get them to want to learn more.

So, we have to work with who we're trying to tell these stories to and what stories we're trying to tell. If people don't see themselves as being possibly a part of a story, they're not going to care about that story.

So, I think that's also an incredibly big part. When we think about inclusion, we need to think about the modern populations that we're interacting with. Because when I was doing work with a number of sites in the UK, and Sweden as well, when people of colour showed up as part of this story, suddenly visitors who were also people of colour, they really lit up about that aspect. Other people either chose to ignore it or didn't bring it up.

### **Jess: Should we change our approach for different audiences, or should audiences take from what they can?**

**Jess:** I really like the use of engagement and bringing in and including the people. Re-enactment it isn't just something to watch.

**Sverre:** Part of doing good dissemination, regardless of the sort, is to be honest about what we can't know, and that everything we do is dependent on interpretation.

There will always be some degree of fantasy, although that doesn't have to be a bad thing. We just have to be as honest as we can about it. For example, we could say that perhaps this didn't happen this way in the past, but we're doing it now because we need everyone to be included and that's a part of learning as well. Also, a point that I wanted to bring up is who writes history, and what roles may disappear as a result of some people not being included in the writing of that history.

**Sophie:** Yeah, I actually really liked the last phrase you just said, about the ambiguity because the time period I study (Palaeolithic) is a lot emptier than later time periods. We have less evidence and people tend to have more defined preconceptions about 'cavemen', men as hunters and women as child bearers/homebound.

So then when you try and engage with people, going back to that suspension of disbelief, you have to already get people to do that to get them to engage with the Palaeolithic. And then once you have that envelope open, you can get more stuff in there. I mean, the Palaeolithic is really good, from a theatrical perspective, for engaging children, even though we don't always have that much evidence for them. The lack of evidence here can be a benefit.

**Andrea:** When we are talking about re-enactment for the age I recreate, we don't have very specific information. That's why we work on a century, but I am a medieval historian. I know

that I can re-enact five years perfectly, and not 300 years together.

It's correct what Sophie said, but it depends on the period we are presenting. If we are representing soldiers from Vietnam, we have 100% information. If you are doing a caveman, not so. It's okay to leave things open to interpretation, but we also have to be honest. We can't use one example, one case and make it a rule. For example, women fighting for the Celts. Everybody started to talk about Boudica, the warrior princess. She was not fighting; she was leading the armies. That's different. When I'm talking about weapons and warriors, I must talk about exception in particular cases, like the find of a weapon in a female tomb near Turin, but it's not a rule.

So, my point of view does not allow to have in a group of 20 or 30 warriors 15 girls - for accuracy. Accuracy is not racist, it's not something against gender. For example, we have some groups in Italy that have girls being legionnaires. They are clearly women, but they are dressed as and are acting like men. That is a compromise that works.

And we can try to contextualise their presence to everybody, or just be intellectually honest. We do a theatre representation, but at the beginning or at the end, we must tell clearly what is accurate and what is not for a specific historical context.

### **Jess: Where do we start compromising and what compromises can be made?**

**Vera:** It all depends on context. Within experimental archaeology, one's gender, age or race should not matter. My speciality is the late Middle Ages, 14th century Hanseatic league. For example, this summer I was at the medieval centre to show a craft; I did a tailoring display. In the historical reality I wouldn't have been able to own property and have my own tailoring shop. From experimental archaeology perspective, I'm more than capable of making clothes and knowing more about the craft than a random dude would. But I always told the audience that I would have been a widow and that statistically speaking, it would have been fairly unlikely for me to sit there as a tailor and own property.

This is an interesting case of 'suspension of disbelief' and shows how people are willing to interpret the past as long as it lines up with their modern preconceptions. People are very willing to accept me as a tailor because of our 21st century perspective, that makes a lot of sense. But if I would have been the blacksmith, in a dress, people would have asked questions. It's again, what the audience expects and what we're mirroring back to them and we fall in a bit of a risk, especially in periods where we know that there is gender inequality or racism, or class inequality, of erasing this narrative. I don't think we should discriminate. As a hobby, it should be completely open, but from a storytelling perspective, I'm afraid that we will erase historical inequalities/differences.



From an experimental archaeology perspective, I think gender, sex, skin colour, class, education level, ability, don't matter. From an educational perspective, it maybe does matter. I want to make this separation between experiment and education.

**Sverre:** Let's talk about blacksmithing. In the class below me, at the at the school of traditional craft (Handverssskulen Hjerleid, Norway), a friend of mine – a young woman of probably less than 160 cm (her name is Ida Moi, see @the\_blacksmith\_lady on Instagram) – won the national Norwegian championship in Open Class as a student, and later received an apprenticeship at the UNESCO registered Nidaros Cathedral restoration workshop. There is a long-lived myth that craft is about raw strength, whereas it is highly dependent on technique and material knowledge. It's also inherently co-operational – you very rarely work alone and very often across materials.

**Andrea:** Yes. That is my point. Re-enactment is one thing, it is to appear and, experimental archaeology is more on technique. So it doesn't matter a lot of times.

**Vera:** But if we bring those two together, then something interesting happens because then we can have a young, small woman who was actually the expert in a specific field. But saying, no, you cannot do this because you don't match the external features associated with that craft. That's actually really, really weird, right? Of denying audiences the opportunity to actually talk to an expert because they don't suit the appearance.

**Andrea:** It depends if you are doing a re-enactment with experiments or pure didactics.

**Paul Edward:** Why should we shy away from reactions? Isn't that what we want? It kind of seems like a fairly moot point to argue about if we know this young woman, this young girl, as a blacksmith as if there's any potential for an issue there. I think what it just comes down to is if whomever has the technique in the end. If any visitor has an issue with it, I think that says a little bit more about them than anything else.

**Jess:** Does this help people question the past and the present? We're talking about women's skills, why they didn't represent men.

**Paul Edward:** With a lot of the work that I was doing, this is going to be less about gender and more about our perception of race.

On a number of the sites that I was working with, there were reenactors or displays that featured people that we today would consider to be black and the ways that those were navigated ended up not being pretty.

One case involved the burial of an individual that we would now see as being black, their ancestors were from Africa. They grew up in Britain, over a thousand years ago. Which

somehow was a controversial thing. One of the things that I saw at that site was, when people were talking about it, the only people who mentioned it were themselves people of colour. When I was looking at people who were engaging with this topic, it was assumed by many that that person must have been a slave, which does not make sense. None of the information pointed to that at all, quite the opposite. The museum didn't do anything about that, didn't engage.

**Jess:** I remember you mentioning that. It's really important for people to see themselves in history, but then actually challenging people's perceptions and inherent biases is a really important thing that re-enactment can be used as a tool for, and that applies to disabilities as well.

**Sophie:** Coming from the disability angle, with Neanderthals we always say that there are individuals who have evidence of traumatic injuries or congenital disorders, and we always go for the compassion angle - we always say, this person had a disability and their community looked after them. We always follow the 'medical model of disability', which is that there's something wrong with the individual.

More and more in disabled communities we have moved to the social model of disability, which is saying that there are social barriers in place. There's nothing wrong with the individual. The 'best' way to deal with the issues we face is to remove the barriers, not to try to fix people.

I wrote on the issue of compassion versus capability, that we always approach disabled people with compassion in the archaeological record and by doing that we dehumanize them. If we always see disabled person and say 'incapable, kept alive purely by compassion', we take away their humanity. We ignore the fact that the social issues we face currently are a creation of our current lives. It's our own perspective that completely colours it. I think that must be very difficult to handle in re-enactment, because there does need to be compassion, but there also needs to be a recognition of capability, showing that these people were part of the community.

**Andrea:** I have another example from Italy.

A fortified place (that nowadays still exist as a rural complex) that belonged to the Milanese monastery of S. Ambrogio, a site for which we have material evidence from Roman period and written documents from 8th century. DNA specialist found that one of the women buried under the church was from Sub-Saharan Africa. But this doesn't mean that all people that worked for the monastery were from Africa.

So that will open inclusivity, but that will not make the rule.

**Vera:** I want to go back to something that Andrea said earlier, because I do strongly disagree with one point. I totally agree with your statistic rule in general, but people are not objects. I don't think we should treat skin colour or gender as a statistic that should be used to measure accuracy. We are not objects. So I don't think the same rule logic applies to us.

But the reason why I'm still holding back on showing women in specific positions, is because women have fought and died to be where they are now. It is important to show women in the roles they occupied to show how far they have come and this is also true for all other historically marginalized groups.

**Sverre:** My speciality is Late Iron Age, Viking Age, their craft and ideology. When we find an exception to the binary gender rule, someone that crosses the boundaries – of which there are lots of examples in both male and female graves, usually gendered by grave goods rather than the skeleton – these are often interpreted as ritualistic. Yet, there seem to be so many of them that it is odd to exclude them as exceptions.

It is said that gender roles were really strict in the Scandinavian Viking Age, but we also have to consider that the sources available were written in the 14th century – three hundred years after the period ended (ca. 1050 CE) – at which point these accounts were written down by Christian men inside a whole new framework of morality. I think it's interesting to look at the written sources and then back at the archaeological evidence, weaving back and forth and seeing what makes sense from the perspective of the archaeological data.

Looking at this material has made me very conscious of my own biases; the things that we grow up thinking about gender, colour, ability and skill, and how it carries over into our interpretations of the past. In this way, archaeology becomes two-way: Through studying the past I can also study the ideas of my own culture.

**Jess:** Absolutely, thank you so much.

**Jess:** And there's several cultures that have evidence of a third gender or gender that isn't male or female. That is a really interesting one to consider. And how do we represent that and explore that with our biases that we have at the moment?

**Paul Edward:** I think, the idea of erasure is incredibly important because we tend to talk about what we think is statistically normal. Very often we fail to realize that that's our modern idea. Very often we have difficulty navigating the people history puts on the margins, we as modern society put on the margins, because it's easier to not have that discussion.

We're used to thinking about gender as a binary thing, which for pretty much most of time and across cultures that's not a thing, but certain groupings of people, are invested in



declaring that this is one or the other thing. A lot of museums that I've engaged with have been very apprehensive to even talk about that because they don't want to scare away their clientele.

How can we talk about people in these margins? I work with museums that discuss issues of Native American people. I live in a state that had the Indian Removal Act. So there are urban native communities, but they're not very big. There are no reserves for hundreds of miles. There is a site that was a mission of the Moravian Church for the Lenape people whose community used to live there, and about 15 minutes' drive east of there is a massacre site of Lenape. How can interpreters possibly tell that story? Do they try and pretend that they're Lenape? It's sometimes a very murky thing to try and bring people out of the margins.

**Jess:** It is such a tricky topic to approach, especially as cultural appropriation comes into that.

**Jess:** Would it be better to have white people representing cultures that they have suppressed because at least the story is being told, but is it okay for white people to tell that story?

**Sophie:** Coming from the disabled community where we call it 'cripping up', for someone who is not disabled to pretend to be disabled...

Part of the answer from the disability community is to engage with local groups and reach out so they are aware and it avoids anyone trying to pretend that they have lost a limb or that they have had a head trauma or anything. And I think that would be good if we avoided that.

There is no "silver bullet" of accessibility. Every individual has different needs and every situation is different. There should however, be a desire to do more than the bare minimum, by engaging with different disabled/enabled communities to make sure that their needs are met. Inclusive re-enactment and experimental archaeology should be proactively supported by institutions and guided by disabled communities, who are given time, money and resources for these efforts.

**Paul Edward:** To your point, colonial Williamsburg has portrayed people with amputations, with pronounced limbs, disabilities, and similar. The research ended up showing that people who were watching saw it as almost comical, and it sometimes seemed to be played for laughs. And we must consider that, and how that is inappropriate.

**Sophie:** It's done as a parody. I think the theatre point is really important, it can be such a useful way to engage with people and to make what we do interesting and relatable. But there is the line, between serious theatre, trying to educate and trying to make people enthusiastic, to comedy and parody. It might not be necessarily done with a poor intention, but if it is done without knowledge, then it's very uncomfortable for those communities.

**Sverre:** It also has to be done with consent. People shouldn't be forced, even if they are a part of the community that they are supposed to portray, because it could be very traumatic. There has to be really good communication.

**Vera:** I was thinking about what Sophie just said that there are two things playing at the same time. One is about inclusion, making sure that visitors are included, but also ensuring diverse perspectives from reenactors or diverse professionals are included in telling stories. Drawing a line about who can tell which story must also be considered, so a sort of *exclusion*. And I think that we will always circle around these two. The answer will never be the same depending on different contexts. We may find an answer for now, but in five or ten years we will think differently about it.

**Jess:** It's such a good point that the conclusion we come to now could absolutely change in the future.

**Andrea:** I think that we, as re-enactors need to offer an accurate job. We know we are in the 21st century, but we want to do our job as best we can. For example, it's a must to cover all the modern tattoos, and to remove all modern or inappropriate jewellery, in order to be accurate. It's not for other reason.

**Vera:** Whatever you do, it must be professional. That's such a broad ambiguous statement. Do we need to hire professional actors as re-enactors, if we decide that re-enactment is acting, but I think that's not what re-enactment is. It's research based and it's more of about didactic methods.

**Andrea:** I knew a person that to me was one of the best, his knowledge on historical archery was phenomenal. He only completed primary school, but he dedicated more than 25 years of his life to ancient archery. It is not a title, it's the commitment a person gives to the research in general.

**Jess:** In experimental archaeology in particular, there's a lot of crafts people who don't have formal qualifications, but unparalleled knowledge.

**Jess:** Who decides how we compromise in re-enactment and who can play what parts? Is it the audience who should have a say? Because I remember Paul, you were saying it's a problem for some museums where their audiences don't want to see the truth, say a black person who isn't slave, who's a warrior. So, should museums they be the ones deciding how they present information or is it the community who should have that part to play?

**Sverre:** It's also about seeing what resources people actually have. Although they may not necessarily have the appropriate academic education, they may be experienced in crafts, or other practices and cultures. As academics, we don't always have the practical experience needed to understand bottom-up perspectives. I believe re-enactment, experimental archaeology and craft has the potential to function as important points of critics to blind spots in academia.

**Paul Edward:** This goes back to museums; they have to be responsible.

There are so many people that have interest in museums. They have to always look at the layers of responsibilities that they have to all the people who *could* walk into those doors and who *could* walk away with... I use the term 'spirits'. When you have an engagement in something like that, you are interacting with spirits. And so what spirits do you walk away with? Those are incredibly important. An experience for somebody to remember, to dwell upon, to think about, to grow with.

**Vera:** I might be stepping out of bounds now, but the starting question of this conversation was a fairly concrete example of 'do we allow women to represent knights in our open-air museum?' And I'm interested on how you as professionals would answer this question.

**Paul Edward:** I do not see any compelling reason for a woman to not be able to play a knight. Because in the end we're talking to a modern audience that has modern needs.

In our modern society we don't have issue with women serving in the military. Serving in all types of what we consider to be 'masculine roles'. If a little girl walks away from seeing a joust where the woman knight absolutely knocked out the big burly dude knight and walks away feeling really good, what's the problem?

If a little boy sees that same thing and suddenly says: "Oh, wait a minute, we say: you play like a girl, you fight like a girl as if that's somehow an insult." Then I think that outweighs any kind of consideration, any kind of like hand wringing over an anachronism.

**Sverre:** I really agree with Paul. I also think it's really problematic if you have an event about knights that potentially excludes half the people attending – that they have to sit and watch because they're not allowed to take part. It also strengthens old biases.

**Andrea:** I didn't understand one thing you said, that if you don't allow in your example in a knight's event for girls to act like knights, they will have nothing to do and have to stay seated. Are you talking about the reenactors or the audience?

**Sverre:** I would say you would risk reducing some reenactors to an audience if they're not allowed to actively participate, or that you risk forcing people into a role that they may not be

comfortable with. It could also make it hard for them to learn and engage in an active manner.

**Andrea:** Let's you do, in a future event, something vice versa. You're organizing an event where you are doing a medieval embroidery. In general, you can have an event where the women should be the protagonist.

**Sverre:** Are there many? I feel like men often get the main roles.

**Andrea:** That's your feeling, but is your idea to allow men there as well?

**Sverre:** Yes, of course, as long as they are not forced into it.

**Andrea:** But it is different, because you don't know if they are doing that, just to give the audience an appropriate vision. It is the same as the example I mentioned before, where a girl is portraying a legionary, not acting as a girl that was fighting in the Roman army. So it's pretty different.

**Sverre:** If it's not historically accurate according to evidence that is something that you can inform about without excluding people.

**Andrea:** It's the wild card that I was talking about in the beginning. If you're honest and you frame the context, you say we don't want anybody left out, I totally agree.

In reply to Vera, if we are doing a re-enactment to show a period, we should stay in the period. And then using the evidence I can introduce the events saying, *but* we want everybody to participate, so you will see something that is not historically accurate.

Finally, I do understand the others point of view but as (serious) re-enactor my will is to represent specific moments in History. If we do not show their peculiarities (bad or good, no matter), if we show ancient time with our 'modern eyes', how can we appreciate all the progress and social conquests they were made during the last years?

**Sophie:** For me, the past is always the mirror of our present. Our interpretation is always somewhat based on what we currently expect. We can't think without a framework. There's Sverre's very interesting point regarding the issue of what we value currently in our society, where things like fighting and being strong and traditionally 'masculine' traits are seen as cool and exciting. So our interpretations are typically about the stuff perceived as cool, about violence, about war, about horses, about what the men are up to.

I don't know if we have more evidence for those things, but it's what we always look at, so then we run this risk of always putting masculine activities on top - there's jousting, there's people being knights... And then there's also women with food over here, the sausage and

beer stand, which I feel there always is at these kinds of fairs. And so there needs to be this balance of accuracy - because there's also a class element to being a Knight. Being a Knight was not for everyone. It was like today's 1%. And I don't really know how we put that across in re-enactment - class and gender, you can't separate them. There is more difference between being a rich person and a poor person than there is between being a rich woman and a rich man. That class separation for a lot of time periods has been as vital. I feel that the class aspect is very difficult to show, but I think that in a lot of re-enactment it's important because there would have been men as servants, it's just that we always put the men in armour and give the women a pitcher, but there would have been guys out back shovelling horse poop.

So yes, for gender abolition within the knights, but we need to show the class element.

**Jess: Vera - you asked the question; can you answer it?**

**Vera:** The reason I asked is because I'm still doubtful. As I said earlier, the whole question of erasure of inequality really scares me. On the other hand, from an educational perspective both approaches make a lot of sense.

One is inclusion - people go to museum to see themselves, to recognize themselves in their heritage. So it's really important that we have diverse stories being told by diverse people. Also from a pragmatic perspective, there are groups where you cannot select on gender because there is only a handful of excellent people who can do a particular thing. I don't have a clear answer. I think it's more about what exactly the museum wants. What is their goal and how do they want to approach it.

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| **Corresponding Author**

**Andrea Mariani**

CITCEM - Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto

Via Panorâmica s/n Torre A – Piso 0



4150 -564 Porto

Portugal

E-mail Contact