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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Disability, Living history and Experiential Archaeology

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Disability and the presence of disabled individuals in prehistory and history is well established, attested through the archaeological record as well as in available contemporary written accounts. What seems less self-evident is how the presence of disabled individuals in a particular setting should be interpreted; practically, socially and in terms of the social agency where disabled individuals are concerned. Arguably some of the most significant developments in the understanding of prehistoric/historic crafts and life, particularly outside the purview of purely empirical academic research and especially where the public are concerned, come from those engaged in experiential archaeology and living history activities.

> This article has focused primarily on experiential archaeology and living history. There is another discussion to be had regarding how experimental archaeology can be used to develop an understanding of disabled individuals and their place in their society in the past.

Introduction

Experiential archaeology groups and open-air museums are undoubtedly some of the most important settings for developing and presenting accounts of prehistoric/historic life and activities. This is particularly the case when we consider how the public develop their understanding of the past (Paardekooper, 2013, p.300). Therefore, I believe that it is important to consider how the lives of marginalised and/or minority groups such as those with disabilities are explored and expressed by those within the experimental archaeology and living history sectors. This area of research and discussion is yet to be fully explored and through this article I hope to instigate such debate and discussion. I also believe it is important at this point for me to acknowledge my own perspective in carrying out this research as someone with physical disabilities - specifically left sided paralysis (Hemiplegia) acquired in childhood. I also have epilepsy, dyslexia and other neuro-divergent traits. I attempt to remain objective in this research however, I believe it is important to incorporate and consider personal lived experiences in this discourse.

When reproducing and presenting prehistoric/historic life and activities, it is important to consider to what extent those presentations are, or should be, representative of the period portrayed. No reproduction or re-enactment will be 100% representative. Even in the rare cases where we have a relatively full picture of the time and setting, recreations will not be entirely representative as materials may no longer available or exact replicas of objects could be prohibitively expensive to recreate. We can, and perhaps should also apply the same questions to ourselves as practitioners and re-enactors when we consider disabled accessibility to the field. We are as much a part of a reproduction as any tool or piece of clothing.

Perspectives and representation

We must recognise that any activity will be seen through the lens of our own experiences and cultural identity and this is something we must always be aware of. We should perhaps also consider whether our reproductions or re-enactments will be seen as representative of the lives and activities of potential cohorts that are being portrayed. It is generally well accepted that the field of archaeology, like many others, has historically had its research significantly skewed by the identities of those carrying out the research, with individuals outside of the lived experiences of researchers being under-investigated as a result the perspectives of straight, cis-gendered, able-bodied, white, males, who are overrepresented. Meanwhile the lives and activities of those who do not fit into this social paradigm are marginalised. Feminist

and LGBTQ+ approaches, and those based on specific racial or socio-economic backgrounds are being developed as a response to this disparity. To my knowledge there has been significantly less exploration of the past through the perspective of those with disabilities. “Able-bodiedness, even more than heterosexuality, still largely masquerades as a non-identity, as the natural order of things” (Heath-Stout, 2023.). When discussion is made of the lived experiences of those who fall outside the perceived ‘default’ social identity the discourse tends to circulate back to a discussion that relates and compares individuals, experiences or perspectives to a straight, cis-gendered, able-bodied, white, male perspective. It can therefore become impossible to discuss female identity without reference to male identity, queer identity without reference to straight identity, or disabled identity without reference to able bodied identity (Meskell, 1996). I must acknowledge that this article essentially is an embodiment of this comparison. Nevertheless it is interesting to consider what a discourse on disability would look like without reference to able-bodiedness, in that the language we use fails us, as the term ‘dis-ability’ describes a lack of ability.

It is perhaps this limitation of language combined with ableism, both external and internalised, that led to the development of the “cripple punk” movement as a means of reclaiming an identity of disability through language previously used as an ablest slur. The importance of addressing this issue is exemplified by the fact that the first recorded use of the term ‘Cripple Punk’, by Tyler Trewhella (2014) elicited almost immediate reaction claiming that “ being handicapped is not something to be proud of”(Anon). Reaction to Trewhella’s initial post went so far as to suggest they were to blame for their own disabilities. Perhaps the field of archaeology would benefit from a similar movement to develop an approach to disability that reclaims the cripple/disabled identity both for those working in the field of archaeology today and perhaps for those who we study through the archaeological record.

The price of participation and passing privilege

As discussed previously the presence of individuals with disabilities in the archaeological record is well established and discussed. There is a significant question of representation regarding whether or not research is done from a disabled perspective, but that is perhaps a question for another time. It would seem self-evident given that the presence of disabled individuals is established in the archaeological record, and that the participation of individuals with disabilities in research, reproduction, or re-enactment should only enhance the authenticity. This is, however, often not the case.

Within experimental archaeology and living history communities there are well established paradigms of what it means to reproduce the past, as well as which aspects of historical accuracy must be exactly adhered to and which aspects may be considered more flexible. These preconceptions can make some aspects of experiential archaeology and living history expressly inaccessible to individuals with disabilities. In some cases, this inaccessibility is

made very direct. For example, a disabled individual is prevented from participating due to them needing the use of a disability aid, the presence of which might be seen to break the immersion of a living history setting or the perceived accuracy of a craft activity. I believe this is an issue that the community is yet to address.
These obstacles to participation may affect individuals with disabilities differently depending on factors relating both to their own condition(s) as well as to the actions and attitudes of those around them. Some people with disabilities who do not require the use of any modern technology to facilitate their participation in a given activity may be able to take part without their disability(s) being apparent to others. They may also possibly be able to represent the disabled individuals who we know are present in the archaeological record. This however presents significant issues as disabled participants may feel pressured to conceal aspects of who they are in order to participate. “The option of passing as nondisabled provides both a certain level of privilege and a profound sense of misrecognition and internal dissonance.” (Samuels, 2003.). This is clearly not an acceptable situation, however, an all too common one with direct parallels to the experiences and treatment of people from other marginalised groups.

It is also important to recognise that there will undoubtedly be some who would like to participate but are unable to ‘pass’ as a non-disabled person or to participate as a person with a disability within a given historical context. When this is the case, we must ask what adaptations can and should be made to make living history and experimental archaeology more accessible.

Accessibility

The question of accessibility more generally in the experiential archaeology and living history sectors is an important discussion, which in my experience is distinctly under examined even in more formal museum settings where necessary consideration to the needs of people with disabilities should be made. Accessibility in this case may take many forms, the most well recognised perhaps being issues of mobility and what provisions are made to make activities accessible to people with mobility and/or other physical disabilities. This may include adaptations to buildings or workspaces. There are however many issues related to accessibility which are less obvious to those without first-hand experience of living with specific disabilities, for example certain environments may be inaccessible to people with neurodivergent conditions such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Adaptations for individuals with neurological conditions may include actions such as limiting the use of flash photography in the presence of people with conditions such as photosensitive epilepsy where the use of strobe or flashing lights may pose a significant threat and could therefore exclude them from participation. It seems clear that given the wide range of conditions which may require adaptation but which may not be initially evident that a discourse on accessibility becomes a regular part of the planning process for any given setting.

Reproducing and re-enacting Disabled life

If, as discussed previously we consider disability as a sociocultural identity, the presence and participation of disabled individuals in the experimental archaeology and living history community should, I believe be seen as an asset and not as an obstacle. As mentioned previously the presence of disabled individuals in the archaeological record is well documented. Therefore, our absence from living history and experimental archaeology communities maybe seen as an inherent inaccuracy of modern living history paradigms. We should ask ourselves if perhaps enforced able-bodiedness has become a re-enactorism embedded in our own physicality. Re-enactorisms as they are informally known occur when people within a living history community regularly reproduce an object or practice which may in fact be anachronistic to the period being replicated and is instead a manifestation of the living history culture collectively.

When examining disability in the archaeological record there are a wide range of examples from which to draw and with which we can inform the reproduction of disability culture. Within prehistoric lithic culture (which is the period I have primarily investigated) there are a range of significant examples.

One of the most well-known and well-documented examples of disability in lithic culture is that of the Neanderthal male nicknamed Shanidar 1 , whose remains were excavated from Shanidar cave, Northern Iraq, in 1957. The skeletal remains of Shanidar 1 were dated to 40,000 - 73,000 BP and exhibit a wide range of physical conditions which would have no doubt required extensive adaptation both on the part of Shanidar 1 himself and those around him. These include amputation of the right arm, severe trauma to the orbit of the left eye and skull, most likely resulting in sight lost in the left eye, hearing lost in the left ear, and damage to the left hemisphere of the brain. The fact that he lived to a very mature age of 35 - 50 (Kent, L., 2016) demonstrates that he received a significant level of care and support from the community he was a part of. Given the resources most likely required to enable Shanidar 1 to live to such an old age, it seems reasonable to assume that he was a valued member of his community with much to contribute. It is difficult to speculate on the specific social position he held, but given his advanced age at time of death it seems reasonable to assume that he would have been able to develop a significant amount of valuable experience to contribute. It has been speculated that Shanidar 1 may have been able to adapt to carry out many tasks: “Shanidar 1 could have compensated for his ineffective right arm by developing his left arm to perform tasks or using his teeth as additional tools” (Kent, L., 2016. p 87). As an experimental archaeologist with the use of one hand/arm I can attest to this.

Another example of a prehistoric disabled individual to consider is that whose remains were excavated from Structure A in Hilazon Tachtit Cave, Israel, dated to 12,000 - 12,400 cal BP (Grosman, Munro and Belfer-Cohen, 2008). This individual demonstrates a range of congenital deformations including vertebral curvature, fusion of the sacrum/coccyx, and

asymmetric joint wear of the lower limbs. Associated grave goods included animal bones which have been interpreted as evidence of the individual having shamanic or magical significance to her culture. This social identity is often seen both archaeologically and in contemporary culture.

This magical or shamanic association with disability potentially carries both positive and negative connotations for the depiction of disability in living history. It provides a specific identity which could be depicted by disabled individuals but this is potentially problematic as it is could re-enforce the othering of the disabled individual concerned with their primary identity directly tied to their disability, something they cannot alter. On this point we should also consider whether the disabled shaman bears their liminal and prophetic identity for their own benefit or for that of their culture.

That being said there is a strong argument to be made that as a community we should not replicate disabled culture based only on the archaeological record if that would lead to the re-enforcement and embedding of stereotypes and prejudices of disability in our modern culture. Just as I would hope that as a community we would not reproduce homophobia, racism or sexism if it were a feature of a time period being re-enacted.

Looking forward

As stated previously the purpose of this article is not to draw conclusions on the place of and depiction of disabled individuals within the experimental archaeology and living history/experiential archaeology sectors. Instead, I hope that this can be a starting point for further discussion, given that approximately 15% of the global population has some form of (United Nations, 2014). On the subject of disability through an experiential archaeology and living history lens there are many areas that seem worthy of further research.

One clear avenue would be to explore specific activities and/or crafts from a disabled perspective, to identify what adaptations are required to make them accessible to people with specific disabilities. This may help to expand ideas of what activities may have been carried out by individuals with disabilities in an archaeological context beyond what is explicitly demonstrated by current paradigms of research. This approach would clearly require the participation of researchers with a range of disabilities themselves, to share and develop their skills reproducing historic crafts and life with disabilities.

Another potential avenue would be to reproduce in a living history setting, activities or roles within society for where there is specific evidence of being carried out by disabled individuals in an archaeological context and then to examine how these roles interact with contemporary thinking on disability culture.

This article has focused primarily on experiential archaeology and living history. There is another discussion to be had regarding how experimental archaeology can be used to develop an understanding of disabled individuals and their place in their society in the past. Undoubtedly there are many experimental archaeologists like myself working within the field. The adaptations we make must surely be relevant to the study of individuals with disabilities within the archaeological records.

In summary it seems clear that it would be impossible to reproduce or represent the past without reference to this huge cohort of society. Likewise as an academic and creative community, the accessibility of our field to individuals with disabilities would seem to be a prerequisite if we are to consider ourselves to be an inclusive community.

Keywords accesibility
archaeological open-air museum
living history
teaching

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