EXARC JOURNAL 2012/1
34 Articles | Open Access

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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Book Review: The Archaeology of Time Travel by Anders Ödman (ed)

Persistent Identifier: https://exarc.net/ark:/88735/10026

EXARC Journal Issue 2012/1 | **Publication Date:** 2012-01-15

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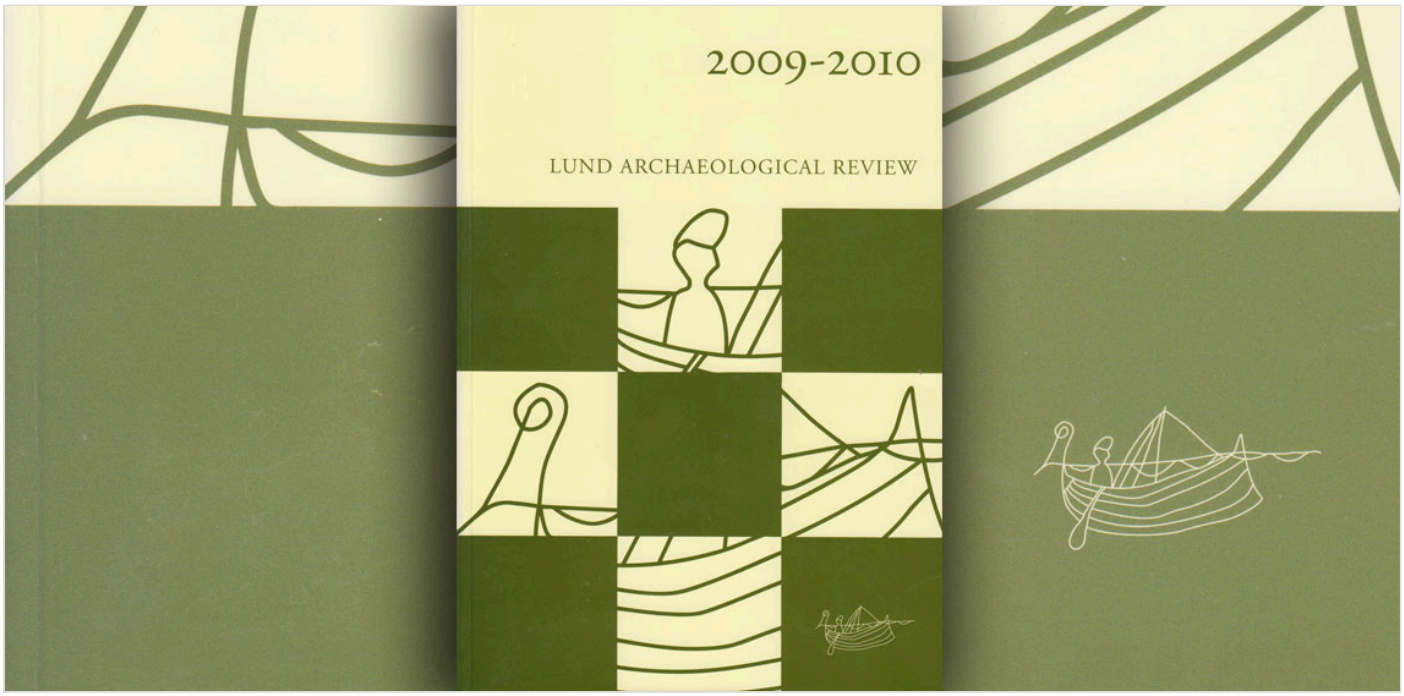

At the European Association of Archaeologists' meeting in Malta, September 2008, a session was held on the topic of *Archaeology as Time Travel*, dedicated to exploring the popular phenomenon of time travel to past times, including a variety of aspects related to materiality/virtuality, the market of time travel experiences, design issues and how time travel should be evaluated as an experience.

> For anyone interested in public archaeology, experiential and hands-on communication of the past or the more theoretical aspects of why we look to the past, these articles are a good introduction to the topic of time travel.

The concept of time travel has gained popularity in recent decades, fuelled by a growing tourism and an increase in interactive technologies and experiences, and therefore new demands regarding presentation (Petersson and Holtorf 2010: 28-29). Time travel presents a modern way of experiencing archaeological periods, and the seven papers reviewed here take different views on the concept of time travel as seen today.

Cornelius Holtorf's article 'On the possibility of Time Travel' sets the scene for the following articles by discussing the premises of time travel. He points to how these have changed over the last decade, with the intervention and supplement of advanced information technology. This has influenced the way we now wish to gain information about the past, from being spectators to more or less 'participating in' the past through direct sensual experience.

Holtorf proceeds to discuss whether the popularity of time travel experiences has led to a less true presentation of the past, and what a 'true' past actually means for academics and the audience alike. He draws up an interesting perspective in which he sees time travel experiences as a parallel reality for the participant, and also as a new form of meaningful social practice. A view of reality as a sum of all social practice and experience is put forward and leads to the interesting conclusion '...that all reality is virtual, and all time travel is real' (Holtorf 2010: 34). However, what we experience through time travel is not 'the past', but 'pastness' – a sense of humans come and gone, in a context that we understand. Holtorf's conclusion is that time travel has become an integrated social practice that is used to understand our innate 'humanness', and that we need to evaluate time travel as such. Should we steer time travel in the direction of ethically 'sound' places and periods? Should we consider time travel real in light of its place in the present day? Thought provoking questions are posed by Holtorf in his quest to define time travel and its place in modern day society.

Lars Erik Narmo works at the Archaeological Open Air Museum (AOAM) Lofotr in Lofoten, Norway, which offers a reconstructed Viking Age site with several buildings. Narmo begins his article *Handcraft as Time Travel* by discussing whether actual, physical time travel is at all achievable. Possible or not, Narmo highlights that time travel through Archaeology comprises contemporary actions that illuminate the past. He then goes on to discuss what form such actions should take.

Narmo poses the question what role Archaeology should hold in a time travel context. An important issue for Narmo is participation versus observation, and he promotes action-

mediated knowledge as a way of time travelling, for example through handicraft demonstrations and experiments. But what is experimental Archaeology, and can it be merged with action-mediated knowledge in an audience-friendly setting? What's more – are experiments and experiences really two sides of a craft? The discussion begins with a thorough reflection on what makes up experimental Archaeology, both from a theoretical and practical viewpoint. Narmo advocates the view that 'non-academical' experiments also hold a significant amount of value as an aid to archaeological interpretation, but a lack of publications from non-academic contexts prevents the knowledge from reaching the academic discourse, and hence is not authorized by academics in archaeology – a view that can be provocative to academic archaeologists and therefore truly needs attention.

Roeland Paardekooper sets out to explore the functions of AOAMs in time travel experiences in his article *Archaeological Open Air Museums as Time Travel Centres*. What distinguishes an AOAM from a traditional glass-case museum is mainly its focus on activities rather than static displays of artefacts, and the greater focus on education, experimentation and living history.

Paardekooper offers a good introduction to what AOAMs are and stand for, and concludes with what he sees as future success factors for meaningful time travel within this museum format. Hopefully, hands-on experiences will lead to minds-on awareness of past times and why they are significant to us. A focus on local heritage as opposed to national perspective, will most likely awaken interest through offering a more tangible view of the past, and is already on the rise. The centres should look 'authentic' and aesthetically pleasing, but what is pleasing must constantly be reconsidered as styles change. However, what is most important is that the actual archaeology needs to be up to date at all times, so that these centres can convey what we as archaeologists see as a 'true' past – but of course this is forever debatable, and to offer good time travel experiences, the AOAMs should keep track of the archaeological discourse and the science behind the presentations. Otherwise, Paardekooper states (2010: 68), they are nothing but dead museums. Of course, this begs the attention of every one working for museums or with presentation of past times, and it should.

Bodil Petersson is looking into the role of modern day rune carvers in her article *Travels to identity. Viking Rune Carvers of today*. The question she poses is why a time suitable for an upsurge in rune carving has now arrived, and who is in need of these monuments in a present day context.

Modern rune stones are most often found in areas which saw a Viking influence in the Middle Ages, but does not necessarily follow the pattern of the location of original stones. Instead, modern day rune carving follows an interest in the Viking Age – as exemplified by the erection of a rune stone on Newfoundland in remembrance of the Viking discovery circa 1000 AD. Today's rune stones are nevertheless real monuments, often commemorating real events.

Petersson explains their existence by looking to living history groups, where an involvement in a 'Viking' lifestyle helps contextualise the past and makes it identifiable, much the same way as ethnic groups confirms their identity through tradition. Petersson therefore puts forward the making of rune stones and other crafts as 'handicraft time travel' (2010: 85), and as such, a project of identity.

Erika Sandström explores the 'Medieval Week' at Gotland and the type of experience it provides for its audience in her article *Visiting the Middle Ages*. The 'Medieval Week' is held every year, and caters for intellectually interested audiences through lectures and workshops, and entertainment seekers through various re-enactments, costume displays and the whole festival format. Sandström, who has written a Ph.D. on the 'Medieval Week', discusses the way of reliving the Middle Ages through a popularized version – all the while most of the visitors know it not to be authentic. Is this time travel for history's sake, or is the entertainment value the dominating factor that attracts around 150 000 visitors every year?

Sandström has interviewed a number of visitors and presents some of her results in this article. It seems that quite a few visitors to the festival are attracted to its 'festival-ness' rather than by an interest in the Middle Ages, which by most are seen as a rather unattractive period of time. Nevertheless, people who claim to not be interested in history still wear medieval-style attire to the festival. The issue arises whether one can re-enact the Middle Ages to suit one's own needs, and the startling answer is seemingly 'yes'.

Sandström also touches upon the meaning of time travel. Since the Middle Ages are often seen as filthy, poor and unattractive, time travelling to this era seems not to be based on nostalgia, nor seeking identity through cultural heritage – directly. In stead, to Sandström, the experience of time travelling to the Middle ages highlights our own 'progress' as a society: '...every past is compared to our present, and the comparison tends to come out to our advantage' (Sandström 2010: 89).

The last article from the EAA session on time travel is Lynn Åkesson's *Waste and Garbage as Time Travel*. She considers the role of cultural waste from a time travel perspective. Archaeological artefacts, structures and remains are more often than not waste or garbage left by people passed. How is it that what we might see as garbage today can become meaningful for future audiences?

As a medium for time travel, we tend to separate 'clean' from 'unclean' waste to take us back in time. Where 'clean' waste is a suitable vehicle, 'unclean' – such as for instance sewage systems – tend to be overlooked. However, even severely 'unclean' waste can be transformed into 'clean', simply through time. Åkesson points out the exhibition of concentration camps or monuments of Stalin now displayed in Stalin World in Lithuania. Even dead corpses can

become cleansed by their age, and instead form interesting specimens for study.

But why is it that whole sciences like archaeology can be founded on the study of refuse? Åkesson finishes off her discussion by stating that waste holds both personal and communal memories that testifies to worldviews gone by, and as such can be powerful instruments in taking us back in time.

Together, this collection of papers presents different takes on time travel. All bring to light new perspectives that need constant consideration, such as the meaning and value of time travel, the form of an ideal time travel situation and the lessons learned so far. For anyone interested in public archaeology, experiential and hands-on communication of the past or the more theoretical aspects of why we look to the past, these articles are a good introduction to the topic of time travel. They all share a common aspect – the importance of an audience to archaeology; and every one of the authors demonstrate an understanding of the significance of an earnest communication between archaeologists and non-archaeologists, in order to make archaeology worthwhile for everyone. Nevertheless, the reviewer felt one topic to be missing from the collection; the actual Why-do-we-time-travel discussion. Where every author has touched upon the reasons for time travel, most get there from the angle of real experiences in real places. A general discussion of the true meaning of archaeology and its place in a modern society would be a welcome follow up in years to come, if the discussion on time travel is allowed to continue.

Book information:

Lund Archaeological Review 2009-2010, vol. 2009-2010, Lund, Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, University of Lund, 2010.

Keywords review
public archaeology
crafts
book

Country Norway
Sweden

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