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Reviewed Article:

To Be or Not to Be: Thoughts on Living History - Some Personal Remarks

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This article is based on personal experiences and observations conducted through many years as a volunteer at the Middle Age Centre in Denmark and later as a student at the Open Air Museum, Sorgenfri, Denmark. Observations and remarks made are solely personal and the article reflects thoughts I have had throughout the years. The article is based on a report I wrote during a class at university in 2009 and many things may have changed in the way both museums incorporate living history. However, the points made are still valid.

> It is very important to remember that the museums are for the visitors and not for the people working there.

During the past decade museums has started to incorporate living history as part of their communication of history to their visitors. This way of telling history comes in many forms, can be performed by different kinds of persons, and can be settled in different theoretical frameworks. In 2009 I wrote a report on the way living history was implemented at the Open-Air Museum in Sorgenfri, Denmark versus the use of living history at the Medieval Centre, Nykøbing Falster, Denmark. I have personal knowledge and experience with both museums as I have worked as a student at the Open-Air Museum from 2009-2012 and have been a volunteer at the Medieval Centre since 1998. The two museums have very different approaches to the way of communicating stories through living history, and I thought it would be interesting to compare the two approaches and come up with some thoughts on the phenomenon of Living History. While I do not have a traditional education in this field, my knowledge is based solely on personal experience and the article is a reflection upon thoughts I have had during my years as an interpreter at the two museums.

There are, of course, vital differences between the two museums. The Open-Air Museum is a traditional open-air museum with old buildings that have been moved from different parts of Denmark to create a mini-Denmark in Sorgenfri. The buildings are not replicas but real buildings with a story to tell. Whereas the Medieval Centre is an experimental centre that shows the life in a small town, Sundkøbing, in the year 1402. The buildings are new, but built based on archaeological findings and historical accounts. The Medieval Centre has living history throughout the season, whereas the Open-Air Museum only gives this kind of interpretation for six weeks every summer. This article will only focus on the period during summer where the Open-air museum has living history as part of the daily program in order to be able to compare the two ways of incorporating living history.

It has been a while since I wrote the report in 2009 and a lot may have changed in the business of living history, although I still think my points are valid today. One thing that has changed is the kind of living history applied at the Open-Air Museum. From this summer, 2012, there are no longer hired personal to interpreting the daily lives of the inhabitants of the houses as the Museum is shifting from student-based, everyday-history communication to theatrical small-scale scenarios done by professional actors. I have not experienced this new way of living history at the Museum yet, and I will therefore focus on the form that I was a part of at the Museum from 2009-2011.First I will start off by explaining the ways of incorporating living history at the two case studies, as there are differences that are essential for the conclusion and the overall interpretation of implementing living history at museums.

Living history at the Open-Air Museum

The Open-Air Museum has, for the past ten years, used a mixture of students of ethnology, history and archaeology; actors; musicians and people from other works of life to make selected households come alive during six weeks of the school summer holidays. Four houses from four different eras have been chosen to give a wide picture of life in the countryside from the 1700 to 1930.

I was part of the household at the small manor of Fjellerup (See Link 1). This house is set to show the period from 1910-1915. My part was to be the maid, Ane (See Figure 1) and my work area was the kitchen. Besides me, there was another maid and the housekeeper in the kitchen. In the living room the lady of the house reigned, and sometimes her husband and her children were present. This way it was possible to show the difference between upstairs and downstairs in 1910.

Before the six weeks of living history began, there was a week with introduction to the museum's strategy in this field and some lectures about how to be in character and how to communicate with different types of guests. There were also some lectures on subjects concerning the way of living in the periods in question, and time to work on the characters.

Because the houses in the Open-Air Museum are authentic, historical houses and have been lived in, there were some restrictions. Open fires were only allowed in two of the houses, and the furniture was not useable as they are registered museum objects. At Fjellerup the kitchen has been made to be a working kitchen and parts of the living room could also be used. It is known who lived at the Fjellerup farm in the period 1910-1919 and therefore the characters were roughly built upon these known stories. The lady of the house from 1910-1919 was Mrs Nielsine Justesen. She was married to Mr Adser Justesen and the mother of three girls. She started out as Mr Justesen's housekeeper but they fell in love and married. It is also known that Mrs Justesen suffered from nerves and therefore spent some time at a sanatorium. All this is known from letters she wrote home, from pictures and from her daughters who donated the house to the Museum. Mrs Justesen therefore was quite restrained, and yet the girl who played her made the character her own and quite different from the previous Mrs Justesen. The girls in the kitchen had much more freedom in the way of building their characters. Their names were known through the historical accounts, but nothing much about their personalities. It was decided to make the two maids quite different as to have a wide range of visions to show of life from 1910 and therefore being able to show different perspectives on life in 1910. The characters of course were very stereotypical but this was done in order to make the characters approachable, readable and understandable for the visitors.

Events that the households wanted to focus on during the living history period were planned during the initial period in order to make the 'scenes' as believable and historical correct as possible. If a changing session for Mrs Justesen was planned it was made sure that everything

from undergarments to jewellery was made and ready for use. If a birthday party was planned it was talked through and it would be the subject for the week and the kitchen would be baking and cooking the entire week in order to give a realistic picture of how long time it took to plan and prepare such an event in 1910.

The curators at the Open-Air Museum were part of the process but it was very much up to the students and the hired staff to plan and decide what to focus on during the six weeks of living history. The curators trusted that the students and staff was professional and knew what was correct for the period in question.

Living history at the Medieval Centre

At the Medieval Centre the living history is based on a large group of volunteers and a smaller group of employees. The employees are the core, and they all have a specific craft they use as their way of communicating with the visitors.

To become a volunteer at the Medieval Centre it is necessary to participate in a compulsory weekend course before being included as part of Sundkøbing (See Link 2). During the weekend the curators at the Centre teaches the new volunteers about the middle ages, way of life, religion and the rules of the Centre. Nothing modern is allowed during opening hours, make up, glasses, cell phones etc. are banned and this is something that the centre takes very seriously and the older volunteers are very good at helping the new ones to get settled.

The new volunteers also get a try-out weekend in the beginning of the season when the number of visiting tourists is at a minimum. In this way the families volunteering can get used to how things work at the centre, get used to cooking over open fire, wearing funny clothes and learn a craft or two. After the course and the try-out weekend they are can go and can book a house whenever they want to. The group of volunteers is big and varied. There are families with small children, young couples, single persons, groups of friends and people come from Holland, Portugal, Italy, England, et cetera, and spent a week or more as a person from 1402.

During the compulsory course the volunteers work with building up a character they can use when living in Sundkøbing. Every person should be able to tell why they are living in the town, why they live in that particular house, what they are doing for a living, who their parents were and so on (Krogh 2010, 8). The difficulty is that when booking a house for a period, it is not possible to book a certain house and it is often not known which house is yours until you arrive at the Centre. Therefore the character and story needs to be adaptable to the current situation. At the same time it is not possible to build your character upon a person who lived in the Middle Ages, as was the case at the Open-Air Museum. Only very few can do so, and possibly only the riches of characters in the town can roughly build their character upon a

real person. This gives some advantages and leaves space to personalize the role. It would be impossible to build characters upon persons who once lived during the Middle Ages for several reasons. First of all the profile of the Medieval Centre is to show life in a town from around 1400. It is not possible to find historical evidence and documents for all the characters needed to populate a town of this size. Therefore the characters used are roughly based on general knowledge of how people lived, their relations and their jobs. If, for instance, a volunteer is very interested in shoe making, the character is build to fit this profile. For women it is different as they rarely had a profession. Their character should be adaptable to the house they live in. If they for instance are given the shoemaker's house for a week, they need to work out why they are cooking and living in that house. They can be cousins to the shoemaker visiting from another town, or the shoemaker's sister or wife. Second if the characters were to be built upon real persons the volunteers would have to have the same house to live in every time and probably also have to be at the Centre at a certain date to make the stories fit.

The characters generally work very well and often people are visiting with their families and the adaption to the house and the story of the house is smooth. This way of using characters is probably the best way to do so in this particular situation as the means to hold more courses are limited and working with characters for 150-200 people is very time consuming for both curators and volunteers. This time could be used by the curators to research and interpret new investigations and by the volunteers to do some research themselves. People are allowed and encouraged to do research and find out more about the period and their character after the course is finished.

The vision of the centre is to give the visitor an impression of time travel. The visitor should feel when he or she steps through the city gate that they have gone back in time to 1402, and therefore the inhabitants in Sundkøbing know nothing about television or the current politics (See Figure 2). They might not even know anything about the politics of 1402 – it is limited how much knowledge a simple peasant would have had. The inhabitants are in character throughout the day and should always answer according to the characters' knowledge (See Link 3). Sundkøbing gives a varied image of a medieval town and shows the life of peasants, craftspeople, women, rich people and warriors. The volunteers are not allowed to step out of role unless it is absolutely necessary.

Communicating through living history

The two museums are clearly different form each other, but they still have the goal of communicating history and inspiring people to learn more about history in common. They also apply living history as their mean of communication the stories. Living history is the new trend in interpretation of our common prehistory, despite the many positive responses from tourists and the results of many analyses a fair part of historians and archaeologists do not

really approve of this way of telling the history. They prefer the traditional ways of lectures, books and articles. Living history should not stand alone as it cannot show a complete story but merely bits and pieces of the history. At the same time this is the new approach academics can use to communicate knowledge to others and a way to reach outside the academic world. This does not mean that every museum has to be a circus. Not every museum needs to be a museum that incorporates living history, but it needs to be taken into consideration, and it needs to be discussed what kind of knowledge guests obtain during such a visit.

Do guests leave knowing more about the past or do they leave after just being entertained? How do we make sure that the guest, knowingly or unknowingly, leaves with more knowledge? How do we make visitors ask the relevant questions and how do we spark their interest in the period shown?

Houses cannot tell their own stories themselves, and an old, cold, dark house at the Open-Air Museum is nothing like it used to be 200 years ago. This is where living history can bring buildings to life and communicate some of the stories hidden in their walls. A visit to Sundkøbing would be quite uninspiring and merely a study in medieval architecture, not life in the middle Ages, if it was not occupied by inhabitants. The buildings come alive when they are used, and this makes them relevant to the guest, it makes the buildings understandable and gives the visitors tools that they can use to make relations between their own reality and the prehistoric reality they witness at the museum.

We also need to make sure that the stories we communicate are relevant to the guest and that the guest can compare it to something he/she knows. The guest has to be able to tie a knot between their own story and the story told, otherwise it will not be understood or remembered as something important. We are mediators or translators between the guest and the history (Tilden 1977, xiii).

This is where living history has its main strength. It makes history come alive and make the persons of a distant past approachable. It takes history to a level that is understandable and at everyday level that every visitor can relate to. Through the character of the maid Ane from Fjellerup at the Open-air Museum, it was possible to tell stories from a life that took place not so long ago, and it was possible to, without saying much, draw a line between 1910 and the present. To draw comparisons between the two periods, the fact that in the 1910's bacteria had just been discovered and the effects of this discovery were as an example. Mrs Justesen had knowledge of the bacteria from the magazines she read and her talks with high society people. She made her maids clean everything thoroughly. The girls in the kitchen thought it was very strange and did not really believe their lady. To them, with their limited education, it seemed very strange that something that it was not possible to see could be dangerous. The only thing they could not see that was present in their lives was God. They therefore thought

it was silly, but they did what their lady said. Through this little story the story of the discovery of bacteria was told and thereby part of the story of modern medical science. The visitors learned that in 1910 there was a difference in education between the classes and that the lower classes only knew what they had learned in the short time they went to school and learned in church every Sunday. It might not have been completely new knowledge for the visitors, but it was entertaining and something they could remember because they could use their own knowledge of the present and compare it to the knowledge of the past (See Figure 3).

At the Medieval Centre it is more a general way of life that is shown, because it is so different from the present. Small stories are told and if people walk by wearing sandals or flip-flops the shoemaker might make a comment about the odd look of their shoes. A great way to communicate history is through food and cooking, something which is very much applied at the Medieval Centre because the volunteers actually live in the houses and need to eat. Again the ingredients and recipes are based on knowledge of what was available for common people during this period. It is easy to get in touch with visitors when cooking. Everyone needs to eat, so the common ground is found right away and there are basis for giving a lot of information about life in the Middle Ages through cooking. People often make a comment about one of the ingredients that they think did not exist in that period – often if almonds or cinnamon is used. Or the visitor asks where the almonds comes from, then the volunteer can answer, that she does not know from where it comes, but that the merchant brings it home on his ship when he has been out sailing. And that almonds are only used on special occasions. This small talk gives a lot of information, for example that almonds were available, but expensive and that they were imported. It also shows that it was possible to get exotic products in the middle ages and that the import was from a wide range of places.

It is not world history or the story of world changing events that are shown and shared, but it is the life on a farm in 1910, where the people were aware of the changing politics and interested in the news of the day. And it shows the life of the average peoples living in the Middle Ages.

At some museums it has become very popular to show historic battles that affected the history of the world, but what does the guest learn from this kind of show? Does their knowledge about the winning army and the loosing army improve? Do they understand what effect the battle had and how it changed the world? Or were they just entertained with sword fights, dying men and heroes? I believe that in order to understand world-changing events a basic knowledge of everyday life is needed. Therefore I believe that what these two museums are doing is very important and makes the gaps between the present and the past a little smaller.

Is it important that they learn anything at all?

If it is believed that the mission for interpreters is to make our visitors able to understand why the world is the way it is today, we need to start off with teaching them small things that they can relate to – create a little spark of interest in their mind (Tilden 1977,xiii). That is why I find that the living history at the Open-Air Museum is important and relevant. Everyone can relate to cooking, cleaning, family, love and death. They gain an insight into a story that could be their own, and this way we might create a spark of interest.

This of course is a bit more difficult at the Medieval Centre as the period shown is 600 years old. Therefore it can be difficult to relate stories to the guest's own story. Still people had to cook, give birth and make a living and via these activities it is possible to connect with the guest.

The difficulty that the Medieval Centre faces is, as I see it, the fact that the volunteers are not allowed to leave their role and sometimes have to give the impression of being 'stupid' when the guests attempt to compare what they just heard to something they know, and therefore they use modern words like television, stove and car. If the volunteer cannot step out of the role and explain to the guest how and to what they can compare their new knowledge, they will just take it as a kind of play and not relate it to history. This way it loses some of its integrity. The idea of stepping back in time and experiencing a small town as it might have looked 600 years ago is great, but not realistic. To a certain point it is possible via character to guide the guest and give them the needed information, and the Centre does have some great employees that master this way of communication but it is something that takes years to learn and requires some sort of acting ability, which not everyone has. Also I find that sometimes you need to step out of the role. I find it fairly difficult to keep my character. I am too influenced by my education to do so, and therefore I often step out of role and explain as the archaeologist I am. This way works for me, and as I see it, the most profitable way for both parties, when I'm one of the parts. It is easier for me to make the guest feels like their needs are being met and that their question is taken seriously! And I feel like I can communicate my knowledge and am being heard, understood and accepted, which is highly important. At the same time, as written above, I know of people who master the communication while being in character and I highly respect this as it is a fun way to learn about history.

So what is the point with this rather long article?

The point is that incorporating living history into the world of museums has come to stay and it is a great way to relate to the guest's own history. But the main point is that there are different ways of doing so and that the main difference lies between using hired personal or volunteers. The main difference between implementing these two groups is that hired

personal is educated in the subject, have a general knowledge of the period in question and know where to get more information. At the same time the hired personal is paid and expected to deliver a certain job, therefore it is possible to ask for certain tasks and a certain level of work.

A volunteer might have an interest in the period and does have some knowledge, but it is not expected. Therefore education of the volunteer is very important. One of the main concerns of employing volunteers is that they are there on their own terms - they are there of their own free will, many are often on vacation, and therefore it can be difficult to get them to interact with the guests. I have experienced people who thought they were on vacation and did not want to be part of the daily program or interact with the guest. Of course this can be managed by setting some rules and demanding that people participate, but it is difficult to check up on, and it is difficult to obtain the same level of standard during the entire season as the volunteers mainly come during weekends and holidays. It is not possible to make a work schedule and sometimes the place can be almost empty – as if the plague just hit. This is in no way profitable. The Medieval Centre, or other institutions implementing this form of living history, need to keep a certain standard. The visitors during the first part of the season should have just as lovely an experience as the visitors during summer. Therefore places like the Medieval Centre have to have some employees to keep up a certain standard. On the other hand, volunteers love what they do and only do it if they want to and they cannot be spared.

I am not saying that volunteers should not be used – they are an important part of many museums both in living history and elsewhere. But it is of the utmost importance that they are educated properly and that there are opportunities for them to get more knowledge if they wish. It is also very important that the volunteers feel welcome and that they feel their work is being taken seriously. After all they spend a lot of their own time doing living history and many even spend the winter period getting to know more or make their own clothes. Therefore they should be thanked and know that they are appreciated.

As I, myself, am a volunteer, it might seem strange that I critique the use of volunteers. It is not that I want the volunteers to disappear, they are, as said before, very important. However, I think that it is possible to provide them with a better education and help them develop into proper translators and ambassadors of the history. It is very important to remember that the museums are for the visitors and not for the people working there. We are there to give an experience and hopefully light a spark in some of the visitors, not to have fun ourselves. If we do have fun at the same time, and that is very possible, it is a bonus. That is a difficult concept to convey to volunteers.

I think it is important to keep a balance between hired staff and volunteers. Both groups bring

an element to the field that make a great mix. However, the balance is hard to find, and it might need more hired staff than volunteers to make sure a certain level of communication is obtained. The two museums in question implement living history in two different ways. They do a good job and in both museums visitors are returning year after year; visiting Mrs Justesen to see how she gets on and visiting the Medieval Centre to see if new things have happened. This is a sign of success and that living history is here to stay. It is therefore up to us to make it the best it can be, and every now and then look back and see if we can change something to the better so that more people become educated and interested in history.

Link(s)

The Medieval Centres policy on living history (Unfortunately only in Danish)
The Medieval Centres policy on volunteers
Information about Fjellerup Hovedgård (in Danish)

Keywords living history
ethics
open-air museum
archaeological open-air museum
presentation

Country Denmark

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Gallery Image

FIG 1. ME AS THE MAID ANE IN THE KITCHEN AT FJELLERUP (PHOTO BY ANKER JØRGENSEN, FRILANDSMUSEET)

FIG 2. TIME-TRAVELLERS VISITING THE MIDDLE AGES (PHOTO BY THIT BIRK PETERSEN)

FIG 3. VISITORS IN THE KITCHEN AT FJELLERUP (PHOTO BY CHRISTINE SONNE-JENSEN)