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Excavation to Storytelling: Perspectives from Archaeological Heritagescapes in Sweden

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Abstract

Recent research has revealed that interdisciplinary work combining archaeological and heritage practice continues to be limited by enduring assumptions separating the two fields. Traditional structures and institutional barriers make it difficult to break away from what is expected in order to explore what is possible in what archaeologists and heritage practitioners ‘do’. Though archaeologists play an integral role in the discovery and interpretation of the past—providing the foundation for the heritage-making process, there is often a gap between the scientific dissemination of archaeological findings and the interpretation and communication of these findings as heritage. We therefore position storytelling as a key to bridging the divide between archaeological and heritage practice. Offering perspectives from archaeological and heritage practices in Sweden, we argue that a renewed focus on storytelling creates more dynamic and collaborative pathways to interpret, communicate and experience archaeological heritagescapes.

Introduction

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, a rise in storytelling and other creative representations and performances of archaeological findings challenged the inward-looking and inaccessible 'old ways' of archaeology (Deetz 1998; Little 2002; Pluciennik 1999; Praetzellis 1998). Archaeologists were criticised for being “thingy” people (Kennedy 2002: xiii)—possessing all the complex skills of excavation, analysis and publication, yet lacking the ability to highlight the contemporary significance of their findings in a compelling way (Fagan 2002; Silberman 2008). As archaeology occupies the space between a humanistic and ‘hard’ science approach, however, straying too far from traditional pathways of producing archaeological knowledge can strip archaeology of its perceived rigour and credibility (Perry 2018). Therefore, innovative narrative production and performative approaches to access and enliven the past continue to take place predominantly in the heritage field (Burlingame 2020; Katifori et al. 2020; Moscardo 2017, 2020; Paardekooper 2019; Servidio and Ruffolo 2016). This means that while archaeology remains a key resource in developing narratives of the past, new pathways to interpret, communicate and encounter these findings typically emerge beyond the scope of the archaeological process (Perry 2018).

This division is further exacerbated by enduring preservationist narratives and performativity-laden assumptions of what archaeologists ‘do’ (Perry 2019; Petersson et al. 2020), as well as a lack of knowledge-sharing and interdisciplinary approaches that highlight the role archaeologists play in uncovering, interpreting and communicating their findings more broadly as heritage (Carman and Sørensen 2009; Perry 2018). Archaeological and heritage work must therefore break away from the perception that they are mutually exclusive (i.e., when archaeological work ends, heritage work begins) to highlight the vital and recurring role both fields play in piecing together and communicating the story of a landscape that is constantly renegotiated and reinterpreted over time.

To promote a more interdisciplinary perspective, we position storytelling as a vital steppingstone connecting archaeological and heritage-making

practices. Reviewing recent applications and interrogations of storytelling as a method of interpretation as well as a tool for participatory research, we reflect on our own experiences in the archaeology and heritage fields in Sweden and propose three possible collaborative pathways to help bridge the Archaeology-Heritage Divide:

1. Highlighting the potential impacts of the archaeological process in a contemporary context;
2. Ensuring a more nuanced representation of the landscape's history and shifting values over time; and
3. Fostering more affective and emotional visitor experiences.

Defining Storytelling

Recent research has revealed that storytelling helps to reach out to the public, explore more nuanced characteristics of past societies and engage with landscapes of the past and present in ways that might otherwise be overlooked through conventional methods of analysis (Abd el-Gawad and Stevenson 2021; Burlingame 2019; Van Dyke and Bernbeck 2015). However, Bogdanova and Soneryd (2021) argue that the term 'storytelling' is ambiguous and leads to a lack of understanding of its different uses, thus contributing to the gaps between archaeology, heritage and the public. We therefore begin our discussion by defining storytelling through two applications: as a method of interpretation and as a tool for participatory research. While these strategies often overlap or are applied in tandem, it is important to distinguish them from one another to identify the barriers that emerge through different approaches and how they might help to bridge the gap between archaeological and heritage work.

Storytelling as a Method of Interpretation

Though recent collaborative projects have highlighted the need to involve archaeologists more in heritage-making practices (Kajda et al. 2018; Perry 2018, 2019; Petersson et al. 2020), the gap between archaeology and the public is typically filled by "interpretation specialists" (Lipe 2002: 25) in the

heritage field. As Perry has noted, within archaeology, heritage interpretation is often sidelined because archaeologists tend to lack the necessary skills, it is placed at the end of the linear archaeological workflow and there is a general lack of appreciation for the values and benefits that emerge from including it earlier in the archaeological process (2018). Storytelling is therefore seen as the work of interpretation specialists to develop a coherent and concise story out of a fragmented past in more persuasive and effective ways. In this sense, interpretive storytelling is a form of imaginative history—a “complex cultural narrative about how a place or particular type of landscape is perceived and pictured” (Maitland 2012: 65). Yet, when developing immersive or re-enactment experiences that rely heavily on imagining past realities, stories that delve too far into the ‘imaginative’ realm can also be perceived as trivial and unserious (Polleta et al. 2011). For example, they can “obscure rather than illuminate past realities” (Lewis 2000: 8), causing “confusion over where the primary source ends and the archaeologist’s imagination begins” (McKee and Galle 2000: 14). Particularly in heritage sites that remain largely unexcavated, stories built from fragmented pasts also run the risk of having a dominant—yet incomplete—narrative obscure the true depth of a landscape’s history (Lowenthal 1985). Effective interpretation therefore requires a more careful, critical approach that recognises the manipulable nature of stories (Burlingame 2020; Daugbjerg 2017; Modlin et al. 2011; Konzack 2017) while aiming to support learning, change attitudes and foster deeper connections to the past and present landscape (Moscardo 2008). It is therefore vital that archaeologists play a more active role in the interpretation and experience of archaeological landscapes through which storytelling becomes a method of interpreting the past as well as a pathway to more collaborative work in communicating archaeological results as heritage.

Storytelling as a Tool for Participatory Research

Interpreting and communicating the history and value of a landscape in a contemporary context has traditionally emerged from expert opinion—or what Smith has called the ‘Authorised Heritage Discourse’ (2006). However, recent research has emphasised the need to engage with a wider range of voices through different methods of participatory storytelling (Abd el-Gawad and

Stevenson 2021; Bulkens et al. 2015; Kamali 2013; Sesma 2021). Through this approach, the public is invited to express opinions, concerns and attitudes—highlighting local knowledge and the lived experiences and contemporary values of local communities and others connected to the landscape. A large survey conducted through the NEARCH project on public perceptions of archaeology and heritage across Europe, highlights the public's desire to be more involved in the archaeological process, particularly through meeting archaeologists at local excavations, participating in excavations and contributing to archaeological decision-making (Kajda et al. 2018). However, the study concludes that not enough is being done to increase public participation, specifically identifying the need to engage more with younger generations and people in lower socio-economic categories (Kajda et al. 2018).

Archaeologists are therefore increasingly encouraged to consider their own role in engaging with these dimensions and communicating their work more effectively (Kajda et al. 2018). However, these efforts often remain limited in scope and participation as public or 'local' knowledge does not always imply a profound connection to the landscape or heritage in question and can lead to the perpetuation of exclusionary hegemonic narratives (Bogdanova and Soneryd 2021; Tolia-Kelly 2007; Waterton 2005). In an archaeological context, participatory approaches are also particularly difficult to pursue due to limited resources and the fragile nature of archaeological work. Moreover, predominantly in non-Western contexts, there is a tendency to connect and cooperate with local communities through discourses of sustainable economic development rather than through collaborative projects of heritage co-creation and stewardship (Bewley and Maer 2014; Gould 2014). Therefore, while employing storytelling through participatory work can be an effective strategy to encourage collaborative efforts between archaeologists, heritage practitioners, local communities and other relevant stakeholders, such initiatives require more careful and critical layers of analysis to highlight strengths and recognise limitations.

Storytelling in Swedish Archaeological and Heritage-Making Practice

Swedish archaeology has previously been characterised by narrow perspectives and factual presentations laden with academic jargon, primarily circulated within a small internal community of professional archaeologists (Ersgård 2006). However, an increased consideration of cultural heritage management perspectives has emphasised public outreach, dissemination of knowledge relevant to present society and the use of storytelling within participatory planning practices (Gill 2008; RAÄ 2008). Since most excavations are in some way publicly financed and thereby connected to a national heritage discourse, all citizens are encouraged to take part in, and benefit from, what archaeology produces (SOU 2005).

In response to criticisms that previous models of cultural heritage assessment did not properly engage the public, several local county governments initiated a project called *Kalejdoskop* to evaluate local community engagement and heritage co-creation. This effort resulted in several key publications that emphasise the use of storytelling in heritage-making practice (Kamali 2013; Länsstyrelsen 2012, 2014). However, several recent studies have pointed to the limitations of these approaches and that they continue to be predominantly expert-led (Agnidakis et al. 2018; Bogdanova and Soneryd 2021; Kajda et al. 2018; Weijmer 2019).

Considering this assessment and based on our own experiences working in the archaeology and heritage fields in Sweden, we aim to show how different layers of storytelling often develop in more informal encounters that may be difficult to capture through top-down approaches. Our reflections are drawn from two archaeological sites in Sweden: the UNESCO World Heritage site of Birka on the island of Björkö outside of Stockholm, which served as a significant trading settlement between the eighth and eleventh centuries CE and the Iron Age ringfort of Sandby borg, dating back to the Migration Period (c. 400–550 CE) on the southeastern island of Öland. For Birka, empirical data specifically focused on storytelling was gathered between 2016–2019 for a doctoral research project (Burlingame 2020) and for Sandby borg, reflections emerged from participation in archaeological excavations

between 2011–2018. We present our analysis through three main pathways that developed from more collaborative efforts between archaeologists, heritage practitioners and the public: highlighting the potential impacts of the archaeological process in a contemporary context, ensuring a more nuanced representation of the landscape’s history and shifting values over time, and fostering more affective and emotional visitor experiences.

Analysing Collaborative Pathways of Storytelling

Case Studies

In 2010, initial investigations at Sandby borg (see Fig.1) revealed deposits of exquisite fifth century CE jewellery tucked away in the remains of five different buildings. Led by the nearby Kalmar County Museum, further excavations starting in 2011 uncovered the reason why these treasures were abandoned some 1500 years ago. Every trench that was opened contained human remains, pointing to a brutal massacre that left the dead and their valuables exactly where they fell (Alfsdotter et al. 2018). Though the findings attracted international attention, due to a lack of funding there have been no further excavations since 2018. The only formal touristic component within the landscape today is an information kiosk, and there is a small exhibition at the Kalmar County Museum on the mainland 35 kilometres away.

Similarly, the last large-scale excavations in Birka, which uncovered only a fraction of the original town, occurred in the early 1990s and were only possible because of a large grant from Tetra Pak, a privately owned company. Several small university-led excavations for exploratory and educational purposes have occurred since then, but there are currently no plans for further large-scale excavations due to a lack of funding and disagreements between stakeholders over disturbing the archaeological landscape. Due to its proximity to Stockholm, however, Birka continues to be a popular international tourist destination during the summer months and includes a museum, a reconstructed village with re-enactors during certain weeks and guided tours around the archaeological landscape (see Fig.2).

1. Highlighting the Potential Impacts of the Archaeological Process in a Contemporary Context

Recent research has highlighted the contemporary benefits of public engagement in archaeological practices and communication of findings, including learning more about ourselves and others, establishing a sense of belonging and exploring how we got here and where we might be going (Holtorf 2010; Kajda et al. 2018). Beyond simply going to heritage sites to learn something, visitors go to *feel* something (Perry 2019; Smith 2014) as well as to encounter the past through more hands-on, interactive experiences (Burlingame 2020, 2022; Jakobsen and Barrow 2015; Petersson and Holtorf 2017). While heritage work is often performed for the benefit of undefined future generations (Harrison et al. 2020), storytelling in heritage studies involves communicating different narratives of the past while evoking broader thoughts on what it means to be alive in the present. Additional research has therefore identified the possibilities of contemporary heritage conservation in addressing a wide range of present-day challenges such as diversity and inclusion, sustainability and sustainable development and human well-being (Peters et al. 2020). However, connecting to these deeper layers of meaning during the archaeological process can be a difficult task. For example, some have criticised archaeological narratives for only looking to the past and not recognising the possibility to influence “our ethics towards, and care for, the human and more-than-human world” (Fredengren 2016: 483) or prepare the public for the “unfathomable and environmentally challenged futures to come” (Fredengren 2018: 51).

In Sweden, public dissemination in connection to excavations typically involves offering scheduled tours of the site during fieldwork where archaeologists share recent discoveries. The goal is to present factual knowledge of past societies as illuminated by archaeology rather than emphasising the possible values that emerge from sharing this information. Other efforts, however, have highlighted the need to engage with broader audiences in a variety of contexts (Arnberg and Gruber 2013)—for example, through activities at local schools (Angelin Holmén 2013; Berger 2013; Dutra Leivas 2020). Through these additional outlets of dissemination, archaeology is often used as a tool to explore contemporary issues and to enchant and engender the historical

imagination (Högberg 2006; Holtorf 2007; Pappmehl-Dufay 2010).

In Sandby borg, public involvement during excavations has highlighted the positive impacts that emerge through visitors' active participation in the archaeological process. Open tours during excavations, for example, attract visitors eager to meet the archaeological team and learn about the latest discoveries. Often bringing their own theories of what happened and why, visitors show a clear interest in the storytelling process. On one occasion, visitors were invited to bring their own shovels and wheelbarrows to help backfill the soil into the trenches, and the archaeologists were completely overwhelmed by the interest to participate. This reveals that people are not only drawn to Sandby borg for its dramatic story or the adventurous possibility of witnessing a sensational discovery, but also because of the ability to actively participate, witness an excavation behind the scenes and work alongside the team responsible for uncovering the site's hidden mysteries. Prompted by support and interest from local communities, several crowdfunding campaigns were initiated for the excavation in 2015 (Pappmehl-Dufay and Söderström 2017) and for the restoration of the road leading to the site in 2017. The latter initiative resulted in the formation of the NGO *Sandby borgs vänner* (Friends of Sandby borg), which now includes more than 500 members. The association organises activities such as excursions and open lectures, instilling a sense of shared heritage and encouraging active involvement and discussion in both the interpretive and participatory pathways of storytelling.

In many excavation settings, however, archaeologists do not have the time or resources to reach out to the public in a meaningful way. This is especially true when the excavation takes place in an established heritage site where archaeologists have little influence over how the site is encountered or communicated as heritage. For example, though excavations in the 'Garrison' area of Birka in the early 2000s were financed by the company responsible for Birka's tourism, visitors were not given in-depth guided tours of the dig by the hired guides on-site. Instead, the tourism organisers positioned the excavation as an activity to be observed from a distance, with significant findings informing the storytelling process at a later stage. In 2006, however, a group of carpenters, archaeologists and students were invited to build several reconstructed houses

to add a more ‘living’ component to the landscape outside of the protected archaeological area. This effort gave archaeologists a more active role in the heritage-making process and the possibility to closely interact with visitors.

These experiences highlight several positive outcomes that are often overlooked in the dissemination process. While the factual archaeological results from the excavations do inspire interest and are an important component in outlining the landscape’s history, the relevance for people outside of the archaeological scientific community predominantly lies in the ability to emotionally connect with events from the distant past and to actively participate in the process of uncovering them. Archaeologists should therefore be considered valuable interpretation specialists both during excavations and as heritage sites develop for tourism purposes.

2. Ensuring a More Nuanced Representation of the Landscape’s History and Shifting Values Over Time

Without any intrinsic values of their own, places of heritage are only made interesting through the constantly renegotiated stories and collective meanings and values attached to them over time (Smith 2006). Stories can also provide new perspectives on human-environment-object relations and interactions over time (Abd el-Gawad and Stevenson 2021), helping to decipher the interwoven layers of meaning and memory embedded in a landscape’s shifting material, symbolic and affective dimensions (Burlingame 2020). Yet, in the realm of interpretation, we attempt to fill in the gaps of the past to create a more coherent story, and with great storytelling comes great responsibility.

Similar to Birka, only 10% of Sandby borg has been excavated, leaving much of the story unwritten. The richness of initial findings in combination with the uncontested evidence of brutal violence and death, however, drew the eyes of the world to Sandby borg. Particularly in 2018, Sandby borg’s story went viral and was covered by most of the world’s leading news agencies (see Daley 2018; Kennedy 2018; St. Fleur 2018). An episode of the TV series *Ancient Mysteries* (Puttock 2019) on the *Smithsonian Channel* also featured a sensationalised retelling of the massacre, replete with re-enactors in heavy

make-up, dramatic music, impassioned voice-overs and the occasional interjection by one of the archaeologists offering more fact-based interpretations and representations of findings. Artistic installations and interpretations have also emerged as the story of the site unfolds (Gill 2015; Gill et al. 2021; Magnusson 2018). Glittering jewellery and brutal death have therefore inspired a wide range of storytelling beyond the work of the archaeological research team. However, visitors to the site can be left disappointed by the reality of the contemporary landscape in comparison to these dramatic retellings and interpretations.

While in many archaeological landscapes the possibilities for excavation remain limited by various factors including a lack of funding or resistance from different stakeholders, the visitor experience is often updated based on findings that occur outside of ongoing excavations—particularly through more advanced analysis and imaging techniques. For example, a recent DNA study on a Viking warrior from a burial in Birka first discovered in 1889 revealed that the remains were actually those of a woman. The finding of the “first confirmed female high-ranking Viking warrior” (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. 2017: 857) created a flurry of attention for Birka, which has now planned to create a museum exhibition dedicated to the warrior and the archaeological process that spanned 128 years. The ability of archaeology to continue to inform the storytelling process outside of excavations should therefore not be underestimated.

At the same time, significant findings or reconstructed environments can also overshadow other aspects of the archaeological landscape and make it difficult to create a more holistic visitor experience focusing on the many layers of the landscape’s history (Burlingame 2020). Advances in technology, for example, have allowed for more detailed and informative visualisations of past landscapes to aid in archaeological investigation and enhance museum experiences (Buckland et al. 2018; Demetrescu et al. 2020; Gunnarsson 2018, 2022; Gunnarsson et al. 2018; Sullivan 2016). Within the archaeological landscape, however, some have questioned whether visitors benefit from high-tech over ‘high-touch’ encounters (Burlingame 2020; Petersson et al. 2020), which evoke a wide range of emotions and foster a sense of ‘time travel’ (Burlingame

2020, 2022; Petersson and Holtorf 2017). That being said, time travel experiences can also mislead visitors about what the past was actually like and disconnect them from the contemporary archaeological landscape (Holtorf 2017). Involving archaeologists more in the heritage-making process can therefore help to balance the different layers of the archaeological landscape experience ranging from informative historical components to immersive, interactive and imaginative activities.

3. Fostering More Affective and Emotional Visitor Experiences

As the deeply emotive value of heritage has often been overlooked in archaeological work (Perry 2019; Tarlow 2012; Supernant et al. 2020), employing a storytelling approach can help to awaken affective and emotional dimensions of archaeological landscapes (Burlingame 2020, 2022). In both Sandby borg and Birka, the lack of significant excavation instils an element of mystery and wonder at what lies just below the surface, but there is a challenge in imparting these emotions to visitors. In most cases, archaeological landscapes do not speak for themselves, and it can be difficult for visitors to envision what was once there. Even older residents living near Sandby borg, for example, described the place as always simply being ‘there’, and it was only through the excavations and accompanying media attention that they began to engage on a more emotional, and sometimes ancestral, level (Wollentz 2017). In Birka, visitors expressed a lack of emotional engagement with the history of the landscape, describing it as “a countryside littered with animal poop and a lot of burial mounds” and “empty fields” (in Burlingame 2020: 154).

To bring more life to the ‘dead’ landscape (Burlingame 2020), guides and re-enactors are therefore challenged to convey the history in more compelling ways. As one visitor to Birka noted, “Seeing the burial grounds while [the tour guide] explained the historical stories surrounding them was quite the experience!” (in Burlingame 2020: 154). The importance of storytelling was also noted by craftspersons who sell their products at markets, noting that they need to have a captivating story and connection to archaeological findings attached to their products to be perceived as authentic and thereby more valued by visitors. The presence of educated and experienced re-enactors and

guides in tandem with more participatory activities can therefore help foster “a human connection to the past that provides a gateway for feelings of collective identity and belonging” (Burlingame 2020: 82) and “provide historical insights non-derivable from traditional, academic historical or archaeological studies” (Daugbjerg 2017: 166).

While highlighting emotional and affective experiences is not often part of the archaeological process, more attention must be paid to the wide range of emotions that emerge from public support and participation in excavations and through compelling storytelling within and beyond the archaeological landscape. This was exemplified at Sandby borg, for example, through the development of a demo VR experience aimed at initiating a dialogue with the public and eliciting emotional connections with the past (Gunnarsson et al. 2018). Given that top-down approaches to storytelling continue to occlude and hinder these dimensions (fuelled by the enduring divide between archaeological and heritage work), the challenge at hand is to encourage more collaborative work that identifies alternative methods and sources of storytelling during excavations and beyond.

The Future of Collaborative Storytelling

Archaeology continues to be meaningful and relevant in contemporary society, evoking different ways of thinking about the nature of being human, the quest for belonging and exploring other lifeworlds—not only considering what life was like, but also envisioning what it can be (Holtorf 2010). In Sweden, however, despite an awareness of the societal value of archaeology and cultural heritage and an increased public desire to take part in heritage-making practices, enduring barriers have hindered progress (Kajda et al. 2018). In particular, traditional structures, institutional barriers, a lack of knowledge-sharing and interdisciplinary approaches and prevailing assumptions about what is expected of archaeological and heritage work make it difficult to explore what is possible.

Based on our own experiences and reflections from working in the archaeology and heritage fields in Sweden, we explored storytelling as a meth-

od of interpretation and as a tool for participatory research. We then proposed three possible pathways of collaborative storytelling that can help bridge the Archaeology-Heritage Divide: highlighting the potential impacts of the archaeological process in a contemporary context, ensuring a more nuanced representation of the landscape's history and shifting values over time, and fostering more affective and emotional visitor experiences.

These different pathways encourage active dialogue between archaeologists, heritage practitioners and local communities during excavations, the dissemination of findings and the development and management of the archaeological landscape experience, and they reveal how participatory opportunities for the public such as taking part in excavations, meeting archaeologists 'in the trenches' and forming local community groups result in more informal layers of storytelling that highlight the emotive value of heritage. Future collaborative storytelling efforts must therefore continue to emphasise and strengthen the intrinsic bond between archaeology and heritage, and we hope that more archaeologists will come out of the trenches and embrace their role as valuable storytellers of the past within the present.

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ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 1. Aerial view photo of the Iron Age ringfort of Sandby borg on the island of Öland, Sweden (reproduced with permission of Sebastian Jakobsson).



Fig. 2. Photo of the archaeological landscape of Birka on the island of Björkö, Sweden (photograph by Katherine Burlingame).