EXARC JOURNAL 2019/2
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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Conference Review: Hands on History ReConference, 2-4 November 2018

Persistent Identifier: https://exarc.net/ark:/88735/10413

EXARC Journal Issue 2019/2 | **Publication Date:** 2019-05-21

Author(s): Helen Bowstead Stallybrass [1] ✉

[1] Waffle and Wood, 96 Main Road, Morton, Derbyshire, United Kingdom.

Copenhagen 2 November, and a warm welcome received at the National Museum in Copenhagen. What better way to start a conference than with colouring flags and glitter? Well, it certainly was a great icebreaker for an international conference on re-enactment, for people from all over the globe speaking several different languages. Being asked to write a review, I wondered how best to approach this. I haven't provided a synthesis of what was said, as this conference was broadcast live and is also available to download on YouTube, so

there seems little point in regurgitating what can be seen first person. Instead I have given an overview of some of the key themes and what I feel can be learnt from them.

> One of the highlights of the ReConference was the interview with Jon Iver Helgaker, the director of the hit Netflix series “Norsemen”. This gave a great insight into how Norsemen was conceived, but also the role that re-enactors had in helping to ensure that the series had an authentic feel to it, more so than other series set in the same timeframe.

The ReConference was organised by a group of enthusiastic re-enactors from a variety of backgrounds. Hands on History are a group from Norway who want to make history real. Much of their work is through immersion in an environment, using Viking equipment as their point of reference. Ulfhednir is a re-enactment group based primarily in Denmark focusing on combat. Ratobor is a Russian re-enactment group that deals with many different periods of history. Together, the organisers' wide range of experiences created a good balance of different aspects of re-enactment to explore throughout the conference. This was all done in the beautiful setting of the National Museum in Copenhagen.

The conference aim was to examine and develop the re-enactment scene through two main topics of re-enactment and living history; seeing where re-enactment is in 2018 and to try and define it. Is this possible? I’m not sure, but it was certainly interesting to see what people around the world think. Friday afternoon started off with trying to define: "re-enactment and or Living History?" Are they the same thing or are they different, and where on earth does experimental archaeology fit in with all of this? Do we need new terms that can define what we are, or aren’t, as a movement? This conference was very Viking-centric, in part because of the organisers' main interests. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but to my mind it did give a biased view of where re-enactment is in the 21st century. It also meant that what can be shared between different periods in terms of advancing re-enactment further was lost, due to the few participants from other periods. However, there was still plenty to be learnt from the combined experience of those there.

To understand re-enactment and its purpose, there is a need to understand people's motivations for re-enacting. For each individual the motivation is different, and it was an ongoing theme throughout the conference whether there is a need to define this or not. Whilst some speakers had clear views and specific definitions of living history, re-enactment, historical interpretation, experimental archaeology and LARPing, others had different views and definitions. Too many got caught up in the need to have specific definitions to be able to move on to the agenda of the future of re-enactment and living history. Linguistic barriers also meant that definitions lost clarity or were understood differently by others.

The first evening enabled participants to let off steam about various traits that annoyed them in re-enactment. The clearest underlying frustrations were about authenticity. What is

authenticity? What does it mean? Does it mean living like a Viking? Does it mean recreating your costume as accurately as possible? Does it mean atmosphere?

The conference looked at a number of case studies to try and explain different aspects of living history and re-enactment and to explore the different routes that they are taking in exploring our past. One of the amazing things about re-enactment is the varied ways in which it occurs across the globe, from the typical "Viking market" in mainland Europe to extreme living in the wilderness, short historical interpretations and museum interpretations.

Gvido Libmanis talked about his experience of trekking, both in Viking and in 18th century contexts. The concept of trekking signifies a submersion in the time frame in a wilderness environment, and surviving using the tools of that at period. In some ways this is possibly the closest that re-enactment and living history get to experimental archaeology. Through immersion in a time period, one gains an understanding of the way of life in that time frame and the way that tools can be used. It differs from experimental archaeology in so far as there isn't a hypothesis being tested and tried out, with the ultimate goal of proving or disproving that hypothesis.

Another case study was that of Luciana Scanapieco looking at the growth of medieval living history in Brazil. The development has grown out of a competition within "Battle of the Nations", with Brazil sending a team to the event. It is interesting to understand the motivation of interpreting a culture that you have no historical link with. It also raises the question: can you fully understand a culture that you are not immersed in? Perhaps it gives an advantage though, of leaving embedded cultural misconceptions at the door and thus enabling a richer understanding of history.

Ingo R. Glucker looked at how historical interpretations at museums and sites can add to the visitor experience, and tried to define the difference between historical interpretation and re-enactment, showing the crossover in a very literal sense with a number of Venn diagrams. Whilst trying to define the differences and similarities, the underlying point was that public interaction drives them both. This was almost in conflict with the presentation on Nordic LARP by Martin Neilsen, which questioned whether an audience is necessary for re-enactment.

Tom Jersø and Hilde Thunem looked at how to reconstruct a costume. The key was research, research, research. Tom focused on constructing an interpretation of a Hedeby man, whilst Hilde focused on her work on reconstructing hangerocks. Both gave excellent insight into their research and showed the great need for research to understand the past and to be able to interpret it, whether as a re-enactor, a historical interpreter or a museum researcher.

Perhaps one of the highlights of the ReConference was the interview with Jon Iver Helgaker, the director of the hit Netflix series "Norsemen". This gave a great insight into how Norsemen

was conceived, but also the role that re-enactors had in helping to ensure that the series had an authentic feel to it, more so than other series set in the same timeframe. By providing extras and props, re-enactors gave the set a much stronger feel. The sense of teamwork that came across from Jon Iver Helgaker was incredible, and this sense of team spirit across all "shareholders" of the project, from actors to researchers, re-enactors and production crew, was an experience that can be carried across many disciplines and that re-enactors should think about in their interactions with clients and public.

The last big thread that passes through the conference was the relationship between re-enactors and academia. It seems that in many cases there is currently little association, but there is a desire for stronger links to be developed. One of the big issues that needs addressing is the financial aspect. Should those who are doing re-enactment as a hobby get paid for providing a service to a museum, or pay for the privilege of using the resources of the museum? When museums can learn as much from the re-enactor as the re-enactor can learn from the museum, there is definitely a relationship that can be developed and can build on the overall understanding of a period.

Did the ReConference achieve what it set out to achieve? The aim to examine and develop the re-enactment scene was certainly explored. Examination was achieved by the bucketload, but development is a harder criterion to critique. Time will tell, but this ReConference enabled the development of relationships across disciplines and professions within the world of historical and archaeological interpretation, and certainly enabled the sharing of ideas and best practices to facilitate this development. As re-enactors we all have a lot that we can learn and share with other similar disciplines, and this was the start of that long journey. Well done to the ReConference team for giving re-enactment a bigger place on the map, to enable those relationships and ideas to develop.

Keywords conference
living history
review

Country Denmark

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Corresponding Author

Helen Bowstead Stallybrass
Waffle and Wood

96 Main Road
Morton, Derbyshire
United Kingdom
E-mail Contact