

Critical Analysis of the depiction of Race and the Early Medieval period on the website of the Jorvik Viking Centre; an interactive heritage attraction.

The Jorvik Viking Centre is an interactive heritage attraction, in the area of one of the largest archaeological excavations in British History. It aims to tell the story of Viking York, using an animatronic ride through a reconstructed city replete with talking 'residents', smells, sights and sounds. The aim of this discussion is to focus on how Jorvik represents the ethnographical make-up of the city and how this representation of 'Viking' heritage faces several issues within contemporary society and academic thought. The central focus of the discussion will be the website used to greet potential visitors; how this represents the citizenry of Jorvik; what educational material is offered; and what challenges this presents to heritage. Issues of colonialism, pseudoarchaeology, and representation will be addressed within the following discussion with the hope of understanding how scholarship and the public can work together to improve the understanding and depiction of the heritage and identity of a 'Viking' city.

In order to address the challenges of the Jorvik Viking centre a few definitions need to be understood. Regarding Colonialism, to paraphrase Harrison and Hughes, it is the method by which one state asserts control over another state's territory, setting up either satellite territories or administrative control between it and the central state government.¹ Pseudoarchaeology is understood to be the 'misrepresentation of the past, misusing the material evidence of that past.'² Finally, representation in this context refers to how the people and places located in Jorvik are shown to visitors, and what this may mean in terms of a visitors' connection to the site.

The website for the Jorvik Viking Centre is first and foremost aimed at attracting visitors. This is highlighted by the landing page where the main page draws visitors to 'book now' immediately below the centre's tag line 'The Original Viking Encounter'.³ However, as the website and the attraction are based on the archaeological work carried out by York Archaeological Trust, an educational charity, there is an implied educational aim within the attraction.⁴ The website presents several interesting challenges regarding representation, race, educational authenticity, and accessibility which this discussion hopes to elucidate.

¹ Rodney Harrison and Lotte Hughes 'Heritage, Colonialism and Postcolonialism', in *Understanding The Politics Of Heritage.*, ed. by Rodney Harrison (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp 234-270. (p. 235)

² Colin Renfrew 'Foreword' in *Archaeological Fantasies* ed. By Garrett G. Fagan (Abingdon: Routledge), pp. xii-xvii, (p xii).

³ York Archaeological Trust, *Jorvik Viking Centre*, (2012-2022)

https://www.jorvikvikingcentre.co.uk/?gclid=CjwKCAjwiuuRBhBvEiwAFXKaNACeTKN727MrYSy6kE9x9GnI2l2TD_eoAlzCiMadUSIeQeR6jUmzjKBoCb9EQAvD_BwE#G0Xvw27pjmFK6owR.97 [accessed 23 March 2022].

⁴ York Archaeological Trust, *York Archaeology*, (2022) <https://www.yorkarchaeology.co.uk/> [accessed 23 March 2022].

The background video playing on the website landing page presents snippets of re-enactors dressed in 'Viking' clothes and carrying out day-to-day activities. All the re-enactors featured on the landing page are white, however, the 'Viking' world was a melting-pot of different regional groups, peoples and cultures. For example, the wife of King Hjør, Ljufvina, was of Mongolian descent having lived in Siberia.⁵ Jorvik itself features archaeological evidence for multicultural populations, a facet that is not presented on the website landing page.

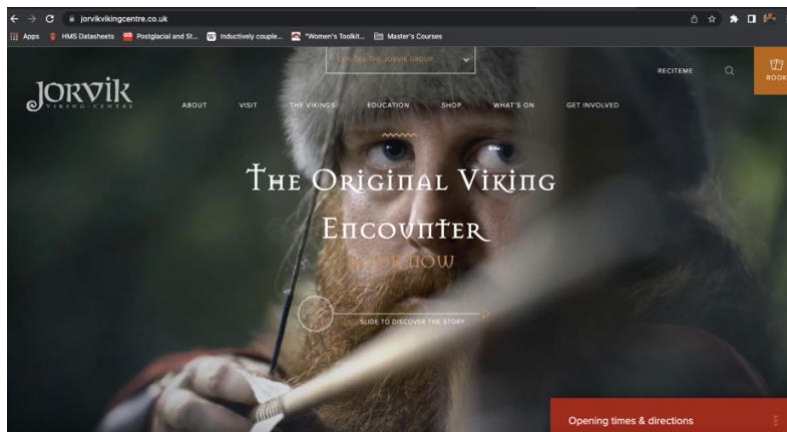


Figure 1 - Jorvik Viking Centre landing page Copyright of The Jorvik Group 2022

This suggests that when design decisions were made on how 'Viking' York should be presented a choice was made, either consciously or unconsciously to not represent the multicultural make-up of the city. As part of the research for this discussion the Jorvik Group were approached for comments on who oversaw the website creation, how were decisions reached to depict the citizens of 'Viking' York, were current academic discussions around the issues with the use of 'Viking' and 'Anglo-Saxon' depictions by white supremacists considered, and were any conscious decisions made to include 'The Arab' in promotional material. Unfortunately, despite these questions being passed to management at Jorvik no one was able to answer at the current moment.⁶

To further elaborate on this challenge, 'The Arab' must be examined both as to his origin in the archaeological record and how he has been presented to the public, as this has significant meaning for Jorvik's role in presenting knowledge and interpretation of heritage. Skeleton 3379 was recorded during the Coppergate investigation carried out by York Archaeological Trust (YAT) ahead of development work in the 1980s. This individual has undergone a few name changes as his presentation has been adapted. In the archaeological report produced following the excavation he is known as skeleton 3379, he has subsequently been labelled as 'The African of St Benet's,' 'The Arab' by the Jorvik Centre and during a review of visitors carried out following the centre's re-opening, the 'Black Viking'.⁷ All of these

⁵ Avaldsnes, *Avaldsnes Norway's Oldest Royal Seat* (n.d) <https://avaldsnes.info/en/informasjon/hjor/> [accessed 04/04/2022].

⁶ JORVIK Group, email to Andrew Ward, 23 March 2022.

⁷ Paul Edward Montgomery Ramirez, 'Colonial Representations Of Race In Alternative Museums: The 'African' Of St Benet's, The 'Arab' Of Jorvik, And The 'Black Viking',

name changes have developed even though isotopic analysis carried out by YAT after the centre's commissioning has shown that 'The Arab' was in fact local to York.⁸

Museums can often be felt to be exclusionary in nature, especially by those communities who are excluded from representation. This perception of museums as exclusionary institutions will continue unless museum people begin to plan and act otherwise.⁹ By not portraying the multicultural make-up of Jorvik in the face of archaeological evidence, the Jorvik Centre, has missed the opportunity to include those who are excluded from normal narratives surrounding the Early Medieval world. This exclusion is further highlighted in the social media posts from both the Jorvik Viking Centre and its' visitors. For example, the only post showcasing 'The Arab' was dated from February 2019 and highlighted how you can meet him on the ride experience at the centre.¹⁰



Figure 2 - The Arab at Jorvik Viking Photo credit @JorvikViking

However, the language used in the post shown in figure 2 could arguably present a false dichotomy to visitors to the centre's social media site. The text included in their twitter post highlights how:

Arab scholars such as Ibn-Fadlan recount 10th century Norse Trading Expeditions to Baghdad, a major centre of the Islamic World. You can meet our Arab Trader on the ride experience at JORVIK Viking Centre.¹¹

International Journal of Heritage Studies, 27:9 (2021), 937-952 (p. 938), <DOI: 10.1080/13527258.2021.1883715>.

⁸ Montgomery Ramírez, 'Colonial Representations Of Race', p. 944

⁹ Kevin Coffee, 'Cultural Inclusion, Exclusion, And The Formative Role Of Museums', *Museum Management And Curatorship*, 23:3 (2008), 261-279 (p. 271).

¹⁰ Jorvik Viking Centre (@JorvikViking, 10 February 2019) 'Arab scholars such as Ibn-Fadlan recount 10th century Norse trading expeditions to Baghdad, a major centre of the Islamic world. You can meet our Arab Trader on the ride experience at JORVIK Viking Centre. Ow.ly/jFUT30nB86C. (tweet)' https://twitter.com/JorvikViking/status/1094561649053392897?t=YfGRgaP0f3x5pU7dto_CLw&s=19 [accessed 23 March 2022].

¹¹ Jorvik Viking Centre, *Arab Scholars* 2019. (tweet).

This could suggest to visitors that the 'Arab' is a trader visiting Jorvik from Baghdad rather than being a local resident. This further promotes the idea, much loved by white supremacists, that Early Medieval England was a bastion of 'whiteness' with any interaction by or with 'foreign' people being marked by 'stereotypical views of exoticism, sexualisation, otherness and objectification.'¹² It has also been argued that while heritage can celebrate multiculturalism, it often does so while presenting it as a 'modern' phenomenon, implying that the past was a time of more simple nationality.¹³ The depictions on the Jorvik website of exclusively white European people does very little to disprove this notion.

Visitors to the Jorvik Centre's website being presented by a purely white-European image is one issue with Jorvik's representation of heritage, but how is this issue reflected by social media posts both from the centre's team and from visitors? The Jorvik Viking Centre offers several educational methods aimed at teaching children about the Early Medieval 'Viking' period. These methods include school visits, teaching boxes, workshops, and virtual learning sessions.¹⁴ While the intention behind these programs is to pass on knowledge of the 'Viking' and 'Anglo-Saxon' period to young children there are a few, albeit reversible, challenges present in how the programmes are presented to children and their teachers as well as the terminology and themes used by the centre.

In academic circles, the use of the term 'Anglo-Saxon' has come under increasing scrutiny with academics arguing both for and against its use.¹⁵ The term is often used by ethnonationalists to harken back to a 'purer' past, one where being white equated to being in power. This idea of a pure white, English past runs in the face of archaeological evidence that proves the Early Medieval period had far reaching cultural connection and migrations. The role of educational centres such as Jorvik should be to demonstrate to younger generations that the past is a much more complex, and interconnected world than certain elements of society would present it as. By not representing this interconnected Jorvik, the centre unintentionally, leaves the door open for false narratives to enter the minds of young generations. To paraphrase James M. Harland, it is dangerous to oversimplify representations of the 'Anglo-Saxon' past, allowing the smallest pieces of evidence and vague symbols to be all too frequently used in creating elaborate and totally unprovable narratives.¹⁶ Furthermore, as has been discussed above, ideas of an all-white past can lead to dangerous conspiracy theories such as the 'Dark Enlightenment' conspiracy which

¹² Montgomery Ramírez, 'Colonial Representations Of Race' p. 942

¹³ Littler, J. (2005). British heritage and the legacies of 'race'. In: Naidoo, R. and Littler, J. (Eds.), *The Politics of Heritage: the legacies of 'race'*. (pp. 1-20). London: Routledge. ISBN 9780415322119 <<https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/6033/1/>> [accessed 22 March 2022].

¹⁴ York Archaeological Trust, *Education*, (2012-2022) <https://www.jorvikvikingcentre.co.uk/education/> [accessed 28/03/2022].

¹⁵ Howard Williams, *The Fight For 'Anglo-Saxon'*, (2020) <https://aeon.co/essays/why-we-should-keep-the-term-anglo-saxon-in-archaeology> [accessed 30/03/2022].

¹⁶ James M. Harland, "Race" In *The Trenches: Anglo-Saxons, Ethnicity, And The Misuse Of The Medieval Past*, (2017) <https://www.publicmedievalist.com/race-in-the-trenches/> [accessed 30/03/2022].

seeks to blame the end of the Medieval period for the problems found in the modern world. This often includes white-supremacist ideas, misogyny and anti-Semitism.¹⁷

Looking at the social media posts surrounding Jorvik over the last three years, 2022 to 2019, every one of the 'Viking' guides running school sessions are white with most of the school children shown in the photos also being white. The below two screenshots from Twitter, figure 3 and figure 4 both demonstrate this issue well.



Figure 3 - Tweet courtesy of Laxton Junior School 2022

There are a small number of Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority (BAME) children shown in these school posts, however, with those educating them on the 'Viking' world not reflecting them it could be argued that these children may feel isolated from the past being taught to them. Museums, which include alternative formats such as that of Jorvik, are inherently 'institutions of recognition and identity'.¹⁸ The selection processes used by these institutions, including the selection of digital representation supports some identities while omitting others.¹⁹ These 'others' are usually those of BAME backgrounds, differing sexualities and genders. All of which were present in the historical past and continue to be present today.

¹⁷ Amy S. Kaufman, *A Brief History of a Terrible Idea: The "Dark Enlightenment"*, <https://www.publicmedievalist.com/dark-enlightenment/> [accessed 30/03/2022].

¹⁸ Shanon Macdonald, *A Companion To Museum Studies*, (John Wiley & Sons: New Jersey, 2011), p. 4

¹⁹ Macdonald, *A companion*, 2020. p. 4



Figure 4 - Tweet courtesy of Collingwood Primary 2022.

The increasing popularisation of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ archaeology with displays such as that of Sutton Hoo, the Staffordshire Hoard and the Pritttlewell Princely Burial has bolstered the varied and interconnected world of the Early Medieval, ‘Anglo-Saxon’ people.²⁰ In this way, by celebrating and popularising the wide-reaching world of the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ and ‘Viking’ period children visiting Jorvik could be placed at the forefront of the fight against pseudoarchaeological and ethnonationalist narratives about the past.

Websites are an important aspect of a museums capability to entice new visitors as well as pass knowledge on to future generations. For websites to do this effectively the structure and design of the website should aim to highlight key aspects of the collection, how visitors can engage with those collections and, critically, the website should allow visitors to feel connected to the aspects of their shared past represented by the objects and stories. The Jorvik centre attempts to convey a ‘Viking’ past focused on the city of York, however, in its attempts at retelling the story of a multi-cultural, multi-storied past, the Jorvik centre through its website and social media platforms has missed an opportunity to convey how varied the Early Medieval period was. The failure to depict residents of Jorvik from all nations, building on the archaeological evidence found at Coppergate, suggests that those designing the Jorvik website as well as the centre were unable to break away from colonial representations. This can have the unintended effect of alienating visitors, especially given the multicultural make-up of the United Kingdom today.

²⁰ Williams, (2020).

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