

How important is the concept of authenticity in the presentation of heritage?

Introduction

When thinking about how aspects of heritage are presented, it is important to reflect on how the concept of authenticity may play a large role in this presentation. Authentic heritage is a fluid concept that comes with many different meanings and interpretations which can entirely change from one person to the next; these ideals shall be discussed thoroughly in this essay. In order for us to gain a full understanding of authentic heritage. Firstly, by looking at Viking culture through the use of the Bygödy Viking Ship museum we will be able to see not only how heritage establishments intend to portray this history, but also it can be severely misrepresented. The National Roman Legion museum will also be showcased in this essay in relation to heritage and aspects of theatre and re-enactment, which also play large parts in the discussion of the presentation of heritage and how the perception of authenticity fits into this.

Authenticity, heritage and the Nara Document

In order to gain a full understanding of the importance of authenticity in the presentation of heritage, it is vital to define what exactly authenticity entails. It is undeniably true that the concept of authenticity is a difficult one to define, and this notion is often discussed between many scholars and academics. One scholar in their article *Maintaining Authenticity and Integrity at Cultural World Heritage Sites* noted that trying to evaluate authenticity can lead to problems, this is due to the fact that it involves a level of ambiguity and cultural assumptions (Alberts and Hazen 2010). The operation guidelines, which are related to the World Heritage Convention, define the term authenticity in broadly speaking terms but stress the importance of cultural values which should, in their belief, be truthfully and credibly visible to attributes that are essential to sustaining authenticity in relation to heritage structures and institutions (Alberts and Hazen 2010). Authenticity, Alberts and Hazen note, is something that should be judged based on its own culturally significant context, and should be looked at and examined in relation to its own local understanding (Alberts and Hazan 2010).

Both of these definitions, although somewhat different in their context, note the importance of authenticity when thinking about aspects of heritage. Indeed, it is important to note that there is no one true definition of what authenticity is; what one thinks is authentic can be vastly dissimilar from what another believes is authentic.

As well as defining the act of authenticity, it is also important to discuss the notion of what heritage is, and how this is directly linked to the concept of authenticity. The Open University notes what the Oxford English Dictionary states defines heritage as; property that may be inherited by younger generations, valued objects or things such as historic monuments and finally heritage relates to things either of historic significance or cultural significance that are deemed worthy of being preserved (OpenUniversity, n.d.). As well as discussing aspects of tangible heritage, they also note the importance of non-tangible heritage. The Open University note the significance of language when thinking about defining heritage, and further go on to state that oddities such as culture, song and literature add to the definition of heritage (OpenUniversity n.d.). It is indeed vital to not only discuss and analyse physical attributes of heritage, but also aspects of this non-tangible heritage. As well as discussing the definition of heritage, it is also important to

converse the types of heritage that the notion of authenticity may effect. Some of these examples include museum exhibition, re-enactment societies and festivals and landscape heritage. Once again, the notion of what exactly heritage is a challenging one to completely define, but for us to gain a sound idea of the types of things that encompass in order to fully understand the importance of authenticity in the application of presentation when thinking about heritage.

When discussing the notion of authenticity, the Nara conference and document is something that must be thoroughly discussed and analysed. The Nara conference, held in Japan in 1994, resulted in the release of the Nara document on authenticity, which outlined and defined the term 'authenticity', and also notes how this term should be understood (Alberts and Hazen 2010). Authenticity was defined in this historic document as being something which not only withstands itself, but also as having authority from itself (Alho et al 2000). This document was also noted to show the expansion of the list of attributes that the term authenticity should encompass, these attributes are related to both the dynamic and intangible qualities, including tradition and spirit (Cameron and Inaba 2015). The importance of cultural diversity was also acknowledged in the Nara document; it encouraged appropriate conservation approaches which are deemed appropriate to certain cultural contexts (Cameron and Inaba 2015). The whole process of the Nara conference commencing and then this subsequently leading to the creation of the Nara document are indeed undoubtedly vital to analyse when thinking about authenticity. Cameron and Inaba quote that 'the authenticity discussion opened up the possibility for the world as a whole to say you must judge conservation decision making in its cultural context' (Cameron and Inaba 2015:36). Indeed, the effects that the NARA conference on how professional view authenticity is an important one and has undoubtedly paved the way for the way conservation and heritage professionals and museums think about authenticity, opening a 'Pandora's box' which paved the way for international recognition of a large range of heritage sites and organizations as meeting the criteria for cultural heritage (Gfeller 2017). It is clear to see that aspects of authenticity and heritage go hand in hand and are one in the same, which is arguably why many academics are so thorough when thinking about how certain heritage institutions can showcase a true and authentic view of themselves.

Viking Heritage in relation to authenticity

When thinking about authenticity in a heritage context, museum institutions are often heavily inspected over whether their exhibitions and objects that they display to all members of the public are accurate and show a true authenticity of what is being presented. Although many people would perhaps not question how real or authentic the displays in museum are, it can be said that there are certainly times where museum personal have put something on display that it perhaps not historically accurate. This idea is discussed further by Deepack Chhabra in his article *positioning museums on an authenticity continuum* who suggest that up until the end of the 1970's, the main focus of a museum was not to look at authenticity, but to only focus on conservation, preservation and the care of their collections (Chhabra 2007). Although it is vitally important for museum to have a great focus on how to keep their collections preserved, the authentic value of an object and in what context it is presented in is arguably equally as important. If an object of display in a museum was not the original but a replica, would this be considered authentic? As noted previously, there is no one true definition of authenticity; authenticity can be seen as a

spectrum; one extreme where scholars and academics deem anything other than hard evidence not having any value in the presentation, and the opposite view in which authenticity is fluid, and is something that is different for every person.

Chhabra also connotes that some museums have altered records of the past in order to cater to the certain interests of a particular group or community and also suggests that objects can be altered by museums in order to 'adulterate' what tourist's see (Chhabra 2007:1). Sometimes in order to make a museum or a specific exhibit more enticing, some museums will either make changes in what history or culture they are presenting, this can be done by perhaps only showcasing specific events or objects that are seen as '*exciting*' and will attract people. However, for museum to decide to do this evidently can have an effect on the authentic value of the museum or specific exhibition.

By looking at the presentation of Viking heritage, we will be able to gain a full understanding of how authentic values can have an effect museums and museum visitors who are exposed to these exhibitions. To begin with, it can be argued that in some shape or form, Viking culture has almost always been present in any conventional museums not only those in Scandinavia, but also wider parts of the world also (Halewood 2001). There could perhaps be a multitude of reasons for this, but possibly one of them is the misrepresentation that many Scandinavians face when discuss their '*Viking*' ancestors. Halewood reiterates this idea, and suggests that the stereotypical presentation of Viking heritage is seen as 'sea-faring, sexist and blood thirsty men' which is commonly seen in major film and television adaptations (Halewood 2001:566). This is indeed accurate, and for some museums to showcase this perhaps highly inaccurate portrayal could be considered not an authentic representation of this culture. This poses issues, especially when thinking about the susceptibility of an audience who are not educated on this culture who may gain the wrong impression. Another reason which is directly related to this could be the notion that some tourists will look at the individuality and ingenuity of an object or museum exhibition when thinking about the authentic value of said objects (Halewood 2001). Perhaps this means that the more interesting an object is, the more some tourists will believe it is an accurate and genuine representation of the culture or period it is perhaps representing. Although to many academic scholars and archaeologist this would seem absurd and inaccurate, it is important to remember that 'authenticity is negotiable' (Halewood 2001:568). This notion is indeed correct, what is authentic for academics may not be on the same level as what is authentic for school children. Therefore the notion of what is authentic or not must be taken with a pinch of salt when discussing the importance of authenticity in relation to the presentation of heritage.

One notable museum that can be seen as the epitome of authentic Viking heritage is the Bygödy Viking Ship Museum, which is home to three notable ships. The Oseburg Viking ship, noted as being an exceptional example of woodwork, the Tune Viking Ship, noted as being the first ever Viking ship to be excavated and finally the most famous ship, the Gokstad Viking ship which is seen the world's best preserved ship (Museum of Cultural History, n.d.). Halewood connoted that this museum was specifically made for the housing of the impressive wooden Viking ships around the time of the 19th century. The Gokstad ship, as can be seen in figure 1, is said to have been constructed around 890 AD and was a highly appropriate vessel to have been sailed on harsh sea conditions (Museum of Cultural Heritage, 2016). It is noted that this museum does not provide typical captions for these ships; it is rather that the viewer is left to think of their own thoughts and feelings with minimal intervention (Halewood 2001). In other words, the three ships are left to be



Figure 1 showing Gokstad Viking Ship, after Museum of Cultural Heritage. n.d.

interpreted in whichever way the public view it. In terms of authenticity, it could be said that perhaps these ships are on the 'higher' end of the authenticity level, this idea is also noted by Halewood who believes that the Bygödy Viking ship museum is an 'icon of pure authenticity against other Viking heritage' (Halewood 2001:580).

When thinking about other aspects of Viking heritage, one example that could be used is the Jorvik Viking Centre, based in York. One particular aspect of the Jorvik Viking Centre is the so called 'Time Ride', which is noted on their official website as being a ride that will 'transport visitors through the war-like early Viking era and forward more than 100 years into the city of York'. (Jorvik Viking Centre, 2001). In terms of how authentic this unique way of showing the Viking heritage of York is, there are some scholars who perhaps do not believe that this is an authentic way of showing history. Once again, Halewood gives his interpretation and opinion of the Jorvik ride, and states that the ride, which was created by the York archaeological trust, was created to take visitors into an archaeologically accurate Viking town, accompanied with animatronics, sounds and smells which are supposedly historically accurate of the time (Halewood 2001). The level of authenticity can clearly be questioned in this instance; although archaeologists would be able to deduce what sounds would be heard 890 AD and what smells would have been present, there is clearly no set in stone evidence

for this. This could possibly have an impact of how visitors and experts perceive the authentic value of this historic reconstruction. Some archaeologists, Halewood notes, negate the concept that authenticity is negotiable (Halewood 2001). This view however can be perceived differently. It can be said that authenticity is not set in stone, and there are different levels in relation to different people as stated previously. It is important to ask who decides what is authentic or not? For children this would more than likely be an authentic experience which they would be able to gain new information from.

Heritage performance and it's relation to authenticity

In extension to ideas of museums and authenticity, the idea of performance heritage and how educational factors can have an effect on authenticity is an important one to discuss. The notion of heritage performance has often been described as the 'use of theatrical techniques as a means of knowledge and understanding in the context of museum education (Jackson and Leahy 2005 cited in Kidd 2010:22). It is a known fact that museums will traditionally rely on physical objects through which they are able to convey a historical and education narrative, however some museums would take this further and use aspects of museum theatre or heritage performances (Pickard 2011) in order to gain more interest in the museum and to allow visitors of all ages to engage fully with the history that is being represented. The most tradition of museum establishments will provide simple or complex labels which have the power to straight forwardly explain the basic information; what the certain objects is, where it came from and how it is significant. Alongside these labels there is potential room for audio-recorded information or even an official guide who would be able to explain the objects in display in detail (Pickard 2011). Museum theatre, or performance heritage as it can be referred to, is an act that looks at emotionally and intellectually connecting museums visitors, whether this be educations visitors for students or anyone of the public, in order to engage them with the history and the artefacts on display in a museum (Pickard 2011). These type of performance can most likely come in a lot of forms including historic storytelling through the use of performers wearing traditional costumes; re-enactment societies who most times 'live' through their historical cultural or characters they are portraying which can also sometimes be 'performed' at historical events or through the use of roleplay.

In 2005, a research project was conducted at the Imperial War museums and also at the People's History museum in conjunction with primary school children. One group were taken around a museum and experienced a theatre or re-enactment experience and the other experienced a 'normal' guided tour of the two museums. The group of children who encountered the theatre experience would have been subjected to performance actors playing a role of historical figures in order to create a re-telling of the past (Jackson and Anthony 2005). In most cases, theatrical heritage performances contain a 1st person historical interpretation, and in most cases clothed in historical attire, whilst following a scripted dialogue (Kidd 2010). A handful of scholars have out rightly disagreed with the idea of performance heritage as an authentic and reliable source of information; some have stated that performances within heritage have been seen as not only troubling but also as methods which fictionalise history (Kidd 2010). However, the results from the museum experience would suggest otherwise; they note that rather than hinder the children's experience and learning, this aspect of heritage performance offered a significant improvement of their learning in relation to understanding the stories which were related to the museums objects and artefacts (Jackson and Leahy 2005).

It is not only this study that showcased the importance of heritage performance and how this is related to ideas of authenticity. The National Roman Legion Museum also provides school children, specifically key stage 2, with the opportunity to have a 'real' Roman experience. They provide experiences such as costumed role-play which includes wearing replicas of Roman tunics which would have possibly resembled those in Roman times. The real experience include looking at Roman medicine, being 'apart' of the Roman army and also experiencing Roman schooling (National Roman Legion Museum, n.d.). When thinking about the authenticity value, although as stated before many believe that staged historic acts are not authentic in the slightest and do nothing for education value, this notion should be re-evaluated critically. There is no doubt that children of this age would not be able to learn from an immersive experience, and it is very likely that the information they would be learning from these staged re-enactments would be factual. This would more than likely be a very authentic experience by getting to 'live' as past Romans would have; although many academics do not see the authentic value that would come from performance heritage such as the Roman experiences and the experiment with two primary school classes visiting two museums.



Figure 2 showing Roman re-enactment, after Nation Roman Legion Museum, n.d.

Historic building and monuments

When thinking about the presentation of heritage in relation to authenticity, the notions of historic buildings and monuments is a central one. How people judge the authenticity of ancient structures can be seen as vastly different from that of the authentic value of museums and historic re-enactment, as discussed previously. Up until the last 20 years, not much had been written in terms of the authentic value of historic buildings and monuments, however this notion has dramatically improved with not only focusing on single, isolated buildings with historical value, but also the inclusion of *all* historical buildings and monuments that are valued on their significance to a certain period in history (Alho et al 2000).

The concept of authentic, historic monuments and buildings cannot be fully understood without first discussing the International charter for the conservation and restoration of monuments and sites, or as it is more commonly known as the Venice Charter. This document, created in 1964, looks at certain principles in relation to the conservation and restoration of monuments and historic sites and suggests that the guidelines given in this document be showcased in countries across the world. The main ideals of this documents are concerned with the differences between 'conservation' and 'restoration' (ICOMOS 1964); which both in their own right can cause division between academics and experts. The idea of conservation is seen in the Venice charter as being an indispensable aspect in relation to the care of historic buildings and monuments, and stresses that the layout should not be tampered with when performing conservation acts. Restoration, on the other hand, is focused on the preservation, and the primary aim of this idea is to showcase the historic value alongside having a great appreciation for the original building material (ICOMOS 1964). This document is noted and supported by many officials in many different fields of work, including Ahmed who suggests that this charter had a world-renowned impact and set a standard for conservation and preservation principles in relation to architectural heritage sites and buildings. Not only had it increased the interest of the concept of historic buildings and monuments, but also widened the application of modern technology to issues of conservation (Ahmad 2006). However, there are also those who are hesitant to support the Venice charter. One scholar notes that the charter was heavily criticised at the Nara conference due to the fact that the creators of the charter were accused of attaching general standards of the concept of authenticity to 'stone construction; (Starn 2002:5). Although some may not agree with the concepts that are presented within the Venice charter, it is perhaps an unchallengeable idea to suggest that the outcome of the document has done more good rather than bad in relation to authenticity and the presentation of heritage.

There are certain challenges that face those who are directly involved with the preservation of man-made structures including historic buildings and structures (Alberts and Hazen 2010). However, it is vitally imperative to discuss the different forms of preservation that can occur. Firstly, to preserve or conserve a building means to try and sustain it in its original condition to its greatest possibility. Restoration is the act of returning a heritage construction to what it originally would have looked like, reconstruction incorporates the building of an entirely new structure that is heavily based on, for the most part, a historic building or monument. Finally, the use of adaptation is altering an already built building in order to make it attuned with modern times (Alberts and Hazan 2010). All four techniques showcase the variety of different ways that historic buildings and structures can be preserved, and it could perhaps be said that all four are acceptable ways. It is indeed true that some scholars would say that some of these methods do not equate to authentic ways of preservation, this can perhaps be said more so for adaptation and reconstruction. It is unprecedented that heritage professionals are faced with a divide of those who believe that historic building should not be tampered with and should be left in their original close, or as close to their original state that is appropriate, and those who are under the impression that adapting the said building or monument is a sound thing to do if it is vitally needed (Alberts and Hazan 2010).

It is undoubtable true that the authentic value of historic buildings and monuments does not come without troubles. The concept of authenticity, Starn notes, is something that can

be targetted with ease (Starn 2002). There are certainly tensions between how experts present aspects of heritage in relation to the expectation that people have of its authenticity (Middleton 2006).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the concept of authenticity is an integral one in relation to how aspects of heritage are presented. All aspects of heritage, whether this be museums, historic buildings, cultural landscapes or historical re-enactment, are deeply embedded with authentic values which can some times be heavily criticised by academics and scholars for being inauthentic and not containing enough historical or archaeological background knowledge. However as stated many times in this essay, the idea of authenticity is vastly different for everyone; the primary school children who experienced a real 'roman' day at the National Roman Legion Museum, which more than likely has elements of real '*authentic*' roman history, undoubtedly would have learned and gained information in an exciting way that is appropriate for children of that age. Who is to say that this is not an authentic experience?

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