

Annika Bünz

*Upplevelser av förhistorier – Analyser av svenska arkeologiska museiutställningar*

Series B. Gothenburg, Archaeological theses No 66

Gothenburg: Department of Historical Studies. University of Gothenburg 2015

ISBN 978-91-85245-62-3

Digitally available at <http://hdl.handle.net/2077/38474>

Review by Fredrik Svanberg

The main result of a new archaeological thesis by Annika Bünz of Gothenburg University, *Experiences of prehistories – Analyses of Swedish archaeological museum exhibitions*, is summarized as follows.

The decisive categorization for a subject position in the [exhibition] narratives is gender which, on the one hand, results in two well-defined opposites, man/woman. On the other hand, variations on the scale between the opposites are excluded and, thereby, made invisible. Other norms that are created are adult, fair-haired, fair-eyed, fair-skinned, heterosexual, healthy, undamaged and Christian.

Bünz arrives at these clear-cut and – for museums and Swedish archaeology in general – unflattering results through extensive studies of the narratives conveyed in 36 Swedish archaeological exhibitions. These are, more or less, all the major archaeological exhibitions in the country. The thesis by Bünz, given its scope and its extensive and in-depth analysis of a wealth of material on a national level, must be regarded as a major work of current Swedish archaeology. It includes eight main chapters taking up 308 pages, plus references, an appendix listing the studied exhibitions, an English summary and 50 pages of colour images from the exhibitions.

In the first two chapters of the thesis, Bünz lays out the theoretical and methodological framework, covering about 50 pages. The aims of the work are threefold and in somewhat shortened form as follows: to conduct an intersectional analysis of narratives conveyed in Swedish archaeological museum exhibitions, (and in doing the previous) to develop a method for analysis that can be used as a tool to examine museum exhibits as material and performative spaces involved in creating meaning and, finally, to highlight the method of analysis and make it transparent for the reader throughout the thesis. The idea of the last aim is to further the usefulness of the methods as tools in the construction of new exhibitions. The first aim is broken down into six specific questions (my translation): do exhibition stories create norms and (in) justices, and if so, what are they? Are norms and (in)justices challenged and negotiated, and if so, which ones? Do the stories create perspectives on contemporary identities, social groups, borders and hierarchies? Are cultural encounters and influences from different cultures and regions narrated? Do the stories include complexity and alternative narratives? How do text, image, sound, light, visual arrangements, materiality, space and the physical presence and movement of the visitor interact in the making of meaning?

The theoretical basis for investigating these questions consists of narrative theory, social semiotics and architectural spatial analysis. Using concepts from these fields, the communication between museum and visitor can be regarded as a communication between author and reader, between interactive participants, between rhetor and interpreter and between architect and user, depending on how the context of communication has been set up and on the aspects of communication that are focused on. Social semiotic analyses are conducted with the help of a grammar of visual design and multimodal analysis. The analysis is to focus on the visual, the material, the spatial and the corporeal experiences involved in creating meaning in narratives.

The study by Bünz is the only major investigation of museum exhibitions in Sweden using an intersectional perspective in which a wide range of factors are included in the analysis of representation, master narratives and the (projected) visitor experience. Bünz takes her basic starting points from an interdisciplinary research background in international museology and (critical) heritage studies, using the above-mentioned perspectives from intersectional theory, semiotics and visual design to deepen the analysis. The study of 36 exhibitions made between 1978 and 2014 in 29 museums is presented in chapters 3 to 7, analysing the overall narratives (chapter 3), characters and types (4), visual communication (5), time, space and materiality (6) and “some excursions” (7).

The overall analysis is complex, wide-ranging and it will not be possible to do it justice here, where I will try to focus on some main aspects of it.

First Bünz highlights the main narrative structures of the exhibitions (chapter 3). This means the storylines made by the producers, their main “intrigues”. Chapter 3 results in the description of a limited range of typical narratives. Chapter 4 goes on to analyse what people are presented as main actors. Bünz asks what “characters” and types of characters are presented in the exhibitions, what these characters/types do, and do not do, and how they are categorized in different ways.

Concerning *gender*, Bünz demonstrates that prehistoric woman, but not man, is an obvious “type” and commonly stereotyped. Woman is first and foremost the *type* woman, regardless of her other roles. Man, on the other hand is the norm and consequently more often described in terms of his roles as “chieftain”, “craftsman” and so on, not primarily as “man”. The male norm is never broken; young men, for example, never work with textile crafts or hold a small baby. *Age*, furthermore, is another important categorization. “The child” and “the old person” are clearly recognizable types in the narratives. Neither is the norm and children are often connected to women. Other types in exhibition narratives are the categorizations “farmer”, “hunter”, “Stone Age person”, “Bronze Age person”, “Iron Age person”, “Viking”, “Viking woman”, “flint smith”, “smith”, “craftsman” and “trader”. Concerning *class*, all archaeological periods seem to exhibit specific traits, with the Stone Age often portrayed as a society without classes, and the Iron Age characterized by being highly stratified. The types “chieftain” and “aristocrat” belong to the stories of class in the exhibitions.

Bünz’s analytical category ethnicity/“race” is of specific interest in the study and she starts by demonstrating how prehistory is framed by categories of the 19th and 20th century such as modern borders, geographical categories and regional identities. All reconstructions of people (mannequins) in the exhibitions, without exception, have light-coloured skin, light-coloured hair and light-coloured eyes and this is, according to Bünz, an obvious norm. In images and drawings, slightly different colour-scales may occur, with slightly darker eyes and hair, but never with darker skin. Issues of sexual orientation and identities transcending physical sex are, in principle, non-existent questions in the exhibitions, while the heterosexual norm and the nuclear family consisting of man, woman and child is a much represented norm. Functional variations or disability is also an issue with very few representations in the exhibitions. Examples consist of less well thought-through presentations of skeletal material. The disabled person is a less frequent type in the investigation. Concerning religious orientation, Bünz demonstrates

how Christianity is an obvious religious norm. The very manifest and common evidence for Viking Age contacts between Scandinavians and the Islamic world, for example, never lead to further narrations about what these close contacts may actually have meant.

To sum up chapters 3 and 4, Bünz demonstrates that exhibition stories in archaeological exhibitions in Swedish museums are characterized by a limited number of overall story-lines and types of characters. There is, also, a manifest system of norms in which man is the norm in relation to woman and adults in relation to children and elderly people. When it comes to appearance, light-coloured hair, eyes and skin is an obvious norm. The heterosexual norm is more or less never questioned. Christianity, finally, is the religious norm. Bünz summarizes that the Swedish archaeological exhibition narratives “create norms and naturalize stereotyped views of identities, social groups, boundaries and hierarchies” (my translation).

Chapter 5 discusses visual representation in the exhibitions based on a theoretical framework of social-semiotic visual grammar. It gives further clues to how subject positions in exhibitions are created through the relations established between different elements. How high or low, distant or near, different objects are placed in relation to the viewer is of importance, as is the relation between human and animal characters in exhibitions, and so forth. This chapter is very interpretative and seeks to discuss attitudes, relations and agency based on visual arrangements. Chapter 6 analyses time, space and materiality. It seeks to discuss the logic of time and space in exhibitions. One common logic is, for example, that the visitor walks “through time” in the exhibition. The analysis demonstrates that different periods (Stone, Bronze, Iron) have different sorts of architectural features. Chapter 7 makes a few “excursions” into extra interesting contexts that Bünz has encountered, and chapter 8 summarizes and reflects on her findings.

To sum up, Bünz’s investigation and results give complex and in-depth answers to questions of what “stories about prehistory” in Swedish museums look like and who is represented in what ways in those stories. Her answers reveal that there are strong and stereotyped norms for stories and people. The investigation also shows the importance of a multidimensional perspective when trying to analyse exhibition narratives. A simple headcount of men and women in exhibitions, for example, may give some leads but would say very little about general issues of how gender is constructed in exhibitions since that obviously depends on a wealth of additional factors beyond sheer numbers. Norms in exhibition stories are created through several parallel processes of categorization regarding sex, class, ethnicity and so on,

as well as through the making of roles and positions through architecture and visual design.

Bünz's thesis does a great job in accomplishing a complex decoding of Swedish archaeological exhibitions. A point of discussion may be the semiotic focus of the work. The reading of exhibitions is, for the most part, "ideal", while we know from museum visitor studies that different visitors perceive the same exhibitions differently, creating different personal meanings. Bünz has also limited the analysis to "all elements that the museum visitor can see, hear, smell and feel when walking through the exhibitions". This means that brochures, web pages, computers in exhibition rooms and other kinds of additional materials were not analysed. Neither were any guided tours studied, and groups visiting exhibitions with a guide may doubtless be given other stories. Bünz's thesis certainly decodes exhibition norms, but like all studies it has its limitations. My critical point would be the lack of argumentation based on quantification. When Bünz insists, for example, that the "farmer" is a "type" of character, we do not get to know how many farmers there actually are in the exhibitions or which precise traits they have in common that justify the establishment of this category. Bünz's construction of evidence using quotations, describing general features and detailing specific cases makes up for some of the lack of quantitative data, but in some instances this lack exposes the results to the suspicion of being interpretations based on slight actual data.

Bünz's thesis is, in my opinion, an excellent work of true importance. Its wide and complex comparative scope and its pressingly relevant and completely new general description of what archaeological exhibitions in Sweden actually are, mean and say, will most probably exercise a lasting influence.