

This Belongs in a Museum

Reply to Comments

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When invited to produce a comparative review of the two recent Viking-age themed exhibitions in Copenhagen and Stockholm, I initially hesitated, knowing that I could only approach the subject from the perspective of an archaeological researcher. Other perspectives, including those of museology, contemporary culture or heritage studies, are essential for the matter at hand, and I am well aware of my limitations in this regards. I undertook the challenge in the hope that my observations might provide points of inspiration or contention, which might induce colleagues to contribute points and perspectives which I could not perceive or frame equally well. This hope is generously fulfilled, and I am grateful to the respondents for their perceptive and pertinent comments.

In his reply, Williams calls for more detailed evidence in support of points and propositions, which I offer rather as impressions. This is answered in part in the response by Owman and Svanberg, who are both grounded in the relevant aspects of museology, and by Toplak and Tuckley, from the points of view of practitioners engaged in the heritage sector. I find Owman's exposition on the tensions of museums and Toplak's comments on 'retrotopia' particularly stimulating. I also welcome Svanberg's observation on the position of the Swedish History Museum relative to the National Museum in Copenhagen. The point is well taken that the former has not

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seen the amount of economic pressure and budget cuts experienced by the latter. Not yet.

The broader frame of popular culture media and practice is certainly a pertinent issue in relation to the presentation of cultural heritage, as Williams highlights. The concerns with integrity, truthfulness and balance of content is one challenge which museums need to answer to, but obviously not the only one. I have no issue with the themes of cosplay, computer games, movies and science fiction, except to remind us not to conflate the fantasy worlds imagined in those activities with past reality. These pursuits are (hopefully happy) distractions from engagement with the real world, including the past and the museum-curated source materials, which enable us as humans to engage in rational discourse about it.

The focus of my review thus has rather little to do with what Glørstad calls ‘cultural production’. There remains a basic difference between museums and the presentation of the past in digital media, videogames, TV-series, movies, and so forth, in that the latter are not media in which basic evidence about the past is being curated and presented. For this reason, museums must be assessed in a different framework, and one where the perspective of the archaeologist is, I hope, more pertinent.

Glørstad’s reply raises the topic of elites, a word that I mention as the imagined opponent of populist politics. He sees in my comments a critique of museums for proverbially descending from ivory towers, and stresses that ‘there is no imperative that a popular exhibition has to be uncritical [...] An exhibition does not have to be populist for those reasons’ (Glørstad 2022:45). I agree to all intent, and have tried to highlight a similar distinction between popular appeal and populism as a political discourse. Without popular appeal, there can be no true engagement with the general public in a free society.

Glørstad’s critique somehow misses the mark, though, when he demands rhetorically: ‘One might reasonably ask whether a popularized exhibition in the National Museum in Copenhagen would be the right place to launch an alternative view, or if a revision should start in the workshops of research’ (Glørstad 2022:46). I do not believe that it is impossible to use museum exhibitions successfully to launch or debate alternative views. The Swedish History Museum’s international touring exhibition ‘We call them Vikings’ is one example which has managed to do so (Andersson 2016). The special exhibition at the Viking Ship Museum in Roskilde ‘The World in the Viking Age’ is another one (Sindbæk & Trakadas 2014). More to the point, it might well be strange if, for example, Harald Bluetooth did not feature in the narrative of an exhibition that includes prominent finds from monuments sponsored by his policies (Jelling, Trelleborg, Aggersborg). But to

step up from this to suggest a spurious relation with unrelated ‘treasure’ objects simply to frame a compelling narrative remains wrong.

The (populist) juxtapositions between (imagined) elites and the general public is not the issue here. Museums are different from visitor centres and experiences – and from digital media, videogames, TV-series, movies or documentaries for that matter. They are, at the most fundamental level, institutions which *curate* on behalf of people and societies. This is where the Swedish History Museum or the National Museum in Copenhagen part ways with visitor attractions such as Stockholm’s commercial ‘Vikingaliv’.

Museums are particular social institutions charged with the remit to preserve and present significant artefact evidence from the past on behalf of the present and the future. For museums to fulfil their role, they need to be curated with a focus on this fact, and in a way which justifies continuing public approval and support. That is not a call for elitism, but for responsibility. If society – or capitalism, populism, or New Public Management – forces museums to operate fundamentally as commercial visitor attractions, recent experience suggests that their other, more fundamental duties to society will risk being neglected.

The new galleries in Copenhagen and Stockholm have both arguably succeeded in producing a more inviting and compelling experience to wider groups of people than the previous ones. In so far, we can compliment their achievement, regardless of what does, to my judgement, stand out as some rather naïve slips in their perspective and presentation. People inhabiting the world in a hundred years from now can be excused being ignorant about how we chose to arrange and present displays in the 2020s. But they will be justified in damning critique if we fail to curate the things which provide the essential evidence for the past, and to engage critically and sustainably with the bodies of knowledge which they have enabled to grow.

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