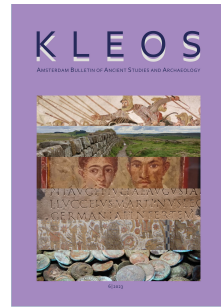




KLEOS

AMSTERDAM BULLETIN OF ANCIENT STUDIES AND ARCHAEOLOGY



Issue 6, 2023

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www.kleos-bulletin.nl

INFORMATION ON PUBLICATION

Full Title: Part 1: Digging King Alfred. Representations of Archaeological Artefacts in Alfredian Fanfiction/Part 2: Digging King Alfred: A Response/Part 3: Response "Digging King Alfred"

Author: Martine Mussies & Mar Guerrero-Pico

Published: Kleos - Amsterdam Bulletin of Ancient Studies and Archaeology/Issue 6/September 2023

Pages: 103-140

ISSN: 2468-1555

Link to these articles: www.Kleos-bulletin.nl

RECOMMENDED CITATION:

Part 1: Mussies, M., 2023: Digging King Alfred. Representations of Archaeological Artefacts in Alfredian Fanfiction, *Kleos - Amsterdam Bulletin of Ancient Studies and Archaeology* 6, 103-126/Part 2: Guerrero-Pico, M., 2023: Digging King Alfred: A Response, *Kleos - Amsterdam Bulletin of Ancient Studies and Archaeology* 6, 127-132/Part 3: Mussies, M., 2023, Response "Digging King Alfred", *Kleos - Amsterdam Bulletin of Ancient Studies and Archaeology* 6, 132-140.

KLEOS - AMSTERDAM BULLETIN OF ANCIENT STUDIES AND ARCHAEOLOGY

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Digging King Alfred

Representations of archaeological artefacts in Alfredian fanfiction

Martine Mussies

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the overlooked field regarding representations of archaeological artefacts in modern fanfiction by analysing two exemplary case studies: *The Heredity and Magnanimity of King Alfred* by Freikugels, published in 2020, and *Obietnica* (The Promise) by Obszarska, published in 2021. These two fanfictions feature the early English King Alfred of Wessex (848/849-899 AD) and fit in the traditions of storytelling known as 'Alfredism'. Both stories include descriptions of famous artefacts from the Anglo-Saxon period, such as rings and jewels, that the authors have used to ground their stories in a Neo-Medieval storyworld.¹ The writers' possible sources of inspiration for these stories are examined by building on the frameworks of both medieval and fan studies. This analysis will show how the authors have been inspired by other traditions of storytelling than fanfiction and by online descriptions of archaeological finds. Special focus is put on the descriptions of the presented historical objects. Inspired by existing new scholarship on digital games, I use fanfiction as a lens to look at these objects to gain a new view on a certain period in history. Consequently, these analyses will be used to explore how archaeological narratives are constructed outside academia and what the consequences are in types of historical inaccuracy and narrative manipulation for both scholars and the public. This will also make clear how important it is for archaeologists and historians to keep a critical approach towards the information on historical artefacts that is freely available online.

INTRODUCTION

Modern multimedia has given a new impetus to historical fiction, a

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► [Profile page](#)

¹ In this paper, I use the term 'storyworld' to describe the background, characters, objects, events, citations and actions of one or more narratives within a storytelling that takes place in more than one single form of media.

field in which the histories of Medieval England and Iceland remain a great source of inspiration. This is the case with depictions of King Alfred in popular media, such as the Netflix series 'The Last Kingdom', and the fans re-writing stories to address themes on their personal and political agendas, for example by having the King approve acts of bisexuality.² This paper intends to address this phenomenon through an academic lens by examining two archaeological objects in two fanfictions about King Alfred (848/49-899 AD): an Anglo-Saxon runic ring and the famous Alfred Jewel.

Alfred was king of Wessex and king of the Anglo-Saxons from 871 to 899. He is known for his defence of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Southern England against the Danes, which earned him the epithet "the Great". Alfred was the first king of Wessex to call himself the "King of the Anglo-Saxons". According to his Welsh biographer, Bishop Asser and various other historical sources, Alfred was an educated man, who —with his many translations— encouraged education and —with his *Dōmbōc* of c. 893 AD— improved the legal system and the military structure of his kingdom.³ Due to his piety, he is considered a saint in some Catholic traditions, but was never officially canonised.⁴ Ever since the very first writings about him —such as Asser's 893 AD hagiography *Vita Ælfredi regis Angul Saxonum*— Alfred the Great has been used to inspire people as a mirror of the *Zeitgeist* —the defining spirit or mood of the particular period, during which the authors of these publications lived.⁵ This is no different at the beginning of the 21st century, when Alfred the Great is used in fanfiction, which consists of the fictional writings by fans of, and featuring characters from, particular media. This is a circular development since existing perceptions about Alfred have co-created his image in popular media. Whereas in most traditional text traditions the distinction between authors and readers is crucial, fanfiction blurs these boundaries as various fans often work together on one work of fiction, rewriting each other's work and, thus, acting as ghost-writers for each other.⁶ This dynamic makes the relations of the authors to the text, of the text to the readers and of the authors to the readers more complex. Although published and cited, a text will remain potentially unfinished, so there is no final version, as everyone can add their own

² Mussies 2019.

³ King 2018.

⁴ Taaffe 1907.

⁵ Parker 2007.

⁶ See for example ► <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-promise-and-potential-of-fan-fiction>

associations. In this way, a new web of meanings emerges.⁷ I argue that the scholars and historians of the Victorian era simply invoked King Alfred to be able to pursue their own polemical and political agendas and that this use of the historical name “King Alfred” as a blank canvas for one's own ideas takes on a whole new dimension in online fanfiction. As such, this use and reuse of a narrative built on a manipulation of the main character (in this case, King Alfred) for political/personal purposes has been brought even further in modern times via online fanfiction, greatly modifying the persona of the King and his history.

As this article will show, not only is the history of King Alfred manipulated from a narratological perspective, but also the ‘biography’ of the archaeological finds is rewritten and modified to fit the fictional contexts. Examining the depiction, (re)imagination, (re)creation, historical evocation and reception of the history of this king and the artefacts associated with him is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can shed new light on the time during which the text was written, and on the other it informs us about the contemporary treatment of history. This includes historical artefacts from the Anglo-Saxon period, such as an Anglo-Saxon runic ring and the famous Alfred Jewel, that authors of fanfiction use in relation to King Alfred to ground themselves more firmly in the historical context. By referencing these objects or describing them in detail, the authors of fanfiction thus add new layers to the existing storytelling around these objects. By exploring the historical objects surrounding their main characters, authors and readers of fanfiction can learn about history. In this article, I intend to surpass the accuracy/authenticity mire by presenting fanfiction as a lens to look through for gaining a new view on a certain period in history. As far as I know, no research has been done regarding the treatment of archaeological artefacts in fanfiction. To explore how historical heritage is dealt with in modern media, I have drawn inspiration for my methodology and perspective from game studies.⁸

After discussing background information about the historical writing on King Alfred as well as the scholarly research into fanfiction, I will start with a close reading of *The Heredity and Magnanimity of King Alfred* by Freikugels (2020) and its usage of what appears to be an Anglo-Saxon ring. The second close reading will be of *Obietnica (The Promise)* by Obszarska (2021) and the way this work features Anglo-Saxon artefacts related to the famous Alfred Jewel. These analyses will be nuanced and discussed through the lens of the ‘authenticity/accuracy mire’,

⁷ See for example Mussyies 2021b.

⁸ Houghton 2018.

inspired by similar scholarship in the realm of Neo-Medieval video games.⁹ With this paper, I hope to provide some insights into how archaeological narratives are constructed outside academia and what the consequences are for both scholars and the public.

ALFRED THE GREAT

Throughout time, King Alfred has been described as the ideal king in the spirit of the time, during which the description was constructed.¹⁰ This kind of storytelling is so remarkable that a new word has been invented for it: B. Yorke has coined the term 'Alfredism' to describe the reputation and public image of King Alfred from the Post-Conquest period, through the Victorian era to the present.¹¹ During and immediately after his lifetime, King Alfred is depicted as brave and loyal or steadfast, learned and wise, selfless, generous, and humble. As such, these descriptions meet all the criteria of Mazee's model of the Anglo-Saxon warrior saint.¹² Historians agree that these depictions are characterised by Alfred's recognition as a national icon and a plethora of literary manifestations describing his great accomplishments.¹³ During the Victorian period, King Alfred was loved by a significant proportion of the British population and many Victorian authors credited him with the foundation of just about everything: from the English nation to trial-by-jury.¹⁴ Notably, Victorian authors described King Alfred as a man of admirable piety, a scholar, and a warrior.¹⁵ The majority of these descriptions are based on the most popular biographies of King Alfred, such as the *Vita Alfredi*, which was compiled by Bishop Asser during Alfred's own lifetime. On the whole, King Alfred has been credited to have staged successful military campaigns against the Vikings, to have instituted legal and institutional reforms in the military, to be frequently involved in judicial hearings and also to be a benevolent ruler.¹⁶ Put succinctly, King Alfred portrayed the perfect or ideal Christian king.

Scholars, such as Yorke, state that these depictions of King Alfred and the appellation conferred to him as 'Great' are hinged on the principles and institutions that the Victorians were deeply concerned with.¹⁷ King Alfred was hailed and famed for his

9 For example Houghton 2018.

10 Bartie et al. 2019; King 2018; Parker 2007; Yorke 2003.

11 Yorke 2017.

12 Mazee 2016.

13 Parker 2007.

14 King 2018.

15 Abels 2013.

16 Horspool 2006.

17 Yorke 2003.

scholarly diligence, benevolence, military valour, piety and exemplary military leadership, all highly placed Victorian values. Arguably, the development of the cult of King Alfred was based on his supposed embodiment of the aforementioned values, which were deeply embedded in the English past and were integral to English character.¹⁸ The jury is still out on the origins of the cultic reception of him during the Victorian era. However, many scholars contend that the king embodied popular Victorian values. As this paper will show, the 21st century case studies present a very different idealisation of King Alfred of Wessex, but what remains is that they use the idea of him as a blank canvas, on which to project their own ideal image.

AUTHENTICITY AND ACCURACY IN FANFICTION¹⁹

In his paper *The Viking World in Digital Games: Different Layers of Authenticities*, archaeologist T. Schade remarked how often people approached him, asking “how authentic” the Vikings are presented in various examples of modern media, such as the computer game *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* or the TV series *Vikings*. “Somehow there seems to be a need to compare the pop cultural representation with the archaeological record, especially in the context of the longing for authenticity”.²⁰ Schade explained how both these questions are commonly framed in a narrative about historical accuracy, originality or “realness”, but that this perceived authenticity is often more about expectations, experiences and emotions.²¹ This is the case in both the academic world and the public one, as can be noted in fanfiction. The authors and readers of fanfiction often engage in their hobby to virtually wander around in a world that is not their everyday reality. In that sense, their representations of archaeological findings are merely tools to make their virtual worlds more convincing, even more so because the authors are also adapting their work to the readers’ demand. In the two case studies in this paper, the authors have deliberately connected to the world building of the storyworlds of *The Last Kingdom*, a Netflix series based on Bernard Cornwell's book series *Saxon Stories*, that offers an historical interpretation of England in the 9th and 10th centuries AD. As such, the fans do not connect to a reconstruction of their own but rely on a representation of Anglo-Saxon times through the lens of a television series.

¹⁸ Keynes 1999.

¹⁹ The following paragraph is partly based on the chapter “Playing (with) Gisla” (Mussies 2022).

²⁰ As presented at the virtual International Medieval Congress 2021, paper 521-a. Tuesday 6 July 2021: 09.00-10.30.

²¹ Ibid.

Although the research into medievalist fanfiction is still in its infancy, there is a long and ongoing scholarly debate about the authenticity and accuracy of films, series and games that take place against the backdrop of a historical environment.²² Terms such as authenticity and accuracy are sometimes used simultaneously in these debates. The definition of accuracy I am using here can be referred to as the scholarly consensus on historical facts and how these turn up in a game or movie, whereas authenticity is defined as “reliable, accurate representation”, but used more in the context of the look and feel of the setting in its *Zeitgeist*.²³ As the author of fanfiction, by designing and writing a story taking place during the Middle Ages, these two aspects are problematic as you will soon encounter a lack of data, especially when compared to other settings such as games set against the backdrop of the Second World War. Moreover, as explained above, when researching the historical context of King Alfred, much of the data that can be acquired is disputed. In Alfredian fanfiction, historical inaccuracy is inevitable and perhaps even necessary, as there are so many gaps in Early English history, while the fanfiction also has to be balanced and convincing. Authors of fanfiction have to fill in the gaps, so that, when the writing starts, the ‘officially agreed upon history’ ends, which creates opportunities for alternative storylines, including altered meanings and usages of historical artefacts.

As very little about the past is set in stone, my approach is akin to that of R. Houghton who is considering the potential of games to act as “a medium of historical debate”.²⁴ Instead of looking at the authenticity and/or accuracy, I therefore suggest to focus on representation, which is about how convincing a culture is portrayed, which has more to do with contemporary clichés than with historical evidence. As J. Cook explained, as with all games, and, indeed, all screen media—including fan art such as fanfiction—it is hard to balance authenticity to the medium and the genre against authenticity to the period.²⁵ In the words of Houghton, “through the interactive quality of the medium tied to a historically critical approach, players could become not only observers of an output, but participants in the process of historical debate”.²⁶ One of the reflections in this context is the idea that one might attempt an attitude of authenticity towards a historical past, but also towards inherited traditions—even when it is

22 French/Gardner 2020.

23 Varga/Guignon 2020.

24 Houghton 2018, 11.

25 In his talk at the online conference “Kingdom Come: Deliverance and the Aesthetics of Authenticity” on 23th of April 2021, Ludo2021.

26 Houghton 2018, 11.

understood that that tradition is in no way “authentic” to the actual past. In that sense, modern medievalist media offers a playable model of the Medieval, in which creators, audience and scholars can try out new ideas.

TWO EXAMPLES OF HISTORICAL ARTEFACTS IN FANFICTION

As case studies for this article, I have selected two pieces of King Alfred fanfiction that (re)present archaeological objects with contested narratives, meaning different interpretations as to what the objects’ function originally was: an Anglo-Saxon runic ring and the famous Alfred Jewel. The choice of these two as illustrative examples as the basis for a (large corpus of texts considered) fanfic is fourfold. Firstly, these two examples are representative of the online remix culture which encourages derivative works by combining or editing existing materials to produce new creative works. Therefore, these two cases are recognisable examples of the way, in which authors of fanfiction blur the lines between historical evidence (the archaeological objects), historiography (the study of the writing of history), historical fiction (a fictional narrative in a setting related to past events), and historical fantasy (which incorporates fantastic elements such as magic and/or imaginary creatures).²⁷ Secondly, both stories are about objects that might be rather well known from TV documentaries and the like but are not often on display. There is therefore a good chance that the authors have never seen these objects in real life but based their descriptions on pictures on the Internet and representations in other modern media. Thirdly, they are exemplary of the on-going tradition of storytelling around King Alfred, in which he is used as a lens or a pair of spectacles that allows for a new look at that time in a new way. Lastly, I deliberately looked for stories that live a little less on the surface, so not the most popular ones from the biggest websites.

Websites like the Archive of Our Own (a non-profit open-source repository for fanfiction often referred to as AO3) show that the most popular works of fanfiction are generally written in English. Perhaps this is so because English is also the dominant language in ‘canon’, official works, such as the TV series, on which these fanfictions are based on.²⁸ But there are many works in other languages as well. I chose to broaden (‘de-Anglicise’) my research by deliberately adding a case study written in a language other than English (in this case Polish). By doing so, I want to show that this phenomenon is not limited to English-speaking fans. My choice to include a case study in Polish is not entirely coincidental.

²⁷ See also Fulton 2017.

²⁸ Drewniak 2019.

I think that my analysis would benefit from me being able to read the source text myself, and not being dependent on a translation by a third party, as I consider every translation to be an interpretation. After all, a translator always makes choices from various alternatives that are most in line with the translator's perception, so that you read the original through the translator's eyes.

Just like with all fanfictions, the literary quality of the writings on King Alfred greatly varies. In *Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon argues that various versions of a story can exist side by side without hierarchical relationships. The adaptations are derived from, or themselves ripped from, or based on or inspired by an earlier work. But that does not make them less interesting in the sense of "derivative or second-rate".²⁹ This is in line with J. Derrida's ideas of texts being archives.³⁰ Following fan studies scholar A. Derecho, fanfiction texts are often described as archontic, as "archives are monuments to the way in which power is reconfigured".³¹ As such, the archontic is opposed to derivative or subordinate.³² As P. Güldenpfennig explains, when viewing fanfiction as archives, one can "see the text as an entry to an open archive with the original artefact as the basis for this same archive".³³ My focus here is on King Alfred fanfiction, sprouted from the Netflix series *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom*, which adds a new layer to the transmedia storytelling of archaeological narratives.

It is no surprise that most scholars working on fan fiction use examples from Archive of Our Own (AO3), as it is not only the largest and most well-known archive of this kind of writings, but also very easy to browse through.³⁴ However, it is important to realise that the open access fanfiction of AO3 is like the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the entirety of such stories. There is much fanfiction published on less obvious sites (for example on other social media, like Tumblr and Facebook) and on more locally oriented equivalents, like LiveJournal.³⁵ More private works can be found on forums dedicated to specific fandoms, and in diaries and letters shared in private forms of correspondence such as email groups. These less popular fanfics are often to be found through networks of minority groups, such as autism, queer, and/or non-binary support communities existing within larger social media

29 Hutcheon 2012, 169.

30 Derrida/Prenowitz 1995.

31 Vosloo 2005, 383.

32 Derecho 2006.

33 Güldenpfennig 2011.

34 For further details see ►<<https://archiveofourown.org/>>.

35 See ►<<https://livejournal.com/>>.

websites such as Facebook.

THE HEREDITY AND MAGNANIMITY OF KING ALFRED BY FREIKUGELS (2020)

The first case study for this article is the 2020 story *The Heredity and Magnanimity of King Alfred* by a writer under the username of *Freikugels*, that circulated in various online fan groups dedicated to either *The Last Kingdom* or *The Lord of the Rings*.³⁶ *Freikugels'* text consists of a so-called 'mash-up', a term used to indicate a narrative that combines two different storyworlds.³⁷ In this case, *Freikugels* merges King Alfred from *The Last Kingdom* with Aragorn, a fictional character from *The Lord of the Rings*. In her fanfiction featuring Aragorn as King Alfred of Wessex, *Freikugels* writes about "a handsome man", who "wore a chain around his neck, dangling a ring inscribed with the words 'I am Ring'."³⁸ The whole story consists of only one scene, in which an ideal king in disguise sits in the corner of an old Inn, thinking, pondering, singing softly. The king had come to the inn because his beloved works there and he wanted to speak to her. As the title already indicates, at the end of the story passers-by confirm that this ideal king is King Alfred of Wessex, whose heredity and magnanimity are historically recognised or at least attributed to him. But throughout the story, via his thoughts and the short conversation with the female main character —called Merewenna— it becomes clear that many of the indications of his heredity and magnanimity are expressed by means of identity markers and citations of Aragorn, the loyal and introverted ranger, who is destined for the kingship. The parallels are even so explicit that *Freikugels* literally quotes the original Aragorn from *The Lord of the Rings*³⁹. This confirms current research agendas, as the parallelism between Aragorn and King Alfred has rather recently been picked up again by scholars such as A. Gautier and T. Porck.⁴⁰ As such, both fanfiction and scholarly research support the hypothesis that J. R. R. Tolkien (the author of the *Lord of the Rings*) was inspired by King Alfred, when creating the character of Aragorn.⁴¹ Now, it has also found its way to the general public, like for *Freikugels*, the image of the ideal king is Aragorn.⁴²

The archaeological artefact central in this story is "a ring

36 Because fan works mostly circulate in unstable online places, the author authorised the publication of her work at ►<http://martinemussies.nl/web/aragorn-alfred/>.

37 Ganz-Blättler 2012.

38 ►<http://martinemussies.nl/web/aragorn-alfred/>

39 Mussies 2021.

40 The latter on his academic weblog ►<https://thijsporck.com/2016/04/01/aragorn/> .

41 Clausen 1974; Egan 1983; Gautier 2015.

42 Mussies 2021.

inscribed with the words 'I am Ring'" that the King wears around his neck. Freikugels describes the ring as "a plain broad silver ring", so no gems, the only decorative element is the inscription.⁴³ This ring is both a reference to *The Lord of the Rings* and a wink to the Anglo-Saxon finger-rings. Freikugels' work is just one example of the many pieces of Tolkien fanfiction that use an Anglo-Saxon ring as an example of the One Ring. As also noted upon by Arvidsson, Tolkien served as a Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon (1925-1945), and therefore he must have been very familiar with these rings.⁴⁴ Thus, Freikugels' description of the ring can be regarded as a small addition of *interpretatio mediaevalia*, an expression that can be explained as "the explanation and exploration of Tolkien's work with the help of mediaeval studies".⁴⁵ The author locates her story in the imaginary Middle Ages. At the same time, she offers us a new way of looking at this ring. Moreover, she encourages other fanfiction enthusiasts to virtually search for images of this archaeological artefact to study and compare with the author's description.

The available literature on Anglo-Saxon rings is still scarce and fragmented. As also noted by E. Okasha "[s]ome of these [Anglo-Saxon] rings have had more scholarly attention than others. This may well be because some are more aesthetically pleasing than others, or because some of them have been on display for many years in well-visited museums."⁴⁶ It may be that the same consideration can be applied to the non-academics —such as the teenage fans engaging with fanfiction— or that the academic research has somehow "guided" the choice of the non-academics in deciding, which object to use for their narrative. Objects that are more famous may be chosen more often for both stories and academic research. When an author wants to choose an object to describe, it is helpful if information about the object is already available through other literary or media sources (for example museum websites).

The idea of wearing a special ring as evidence of one's descent resonates with Aragorn's Ring of Barahir. From Freikugels' description, however, it appears that the author was inspired by one of the less-researched rings, the so-called "Wheatley Hill ring", belonging to the chronologically later Anglo-Saxon finger-rings. The Wheatley Hill ring is a gilded silver finger-ring inscribed with runes, that was found in 1993 in Wheatley Hill in county Durham. The Wheatley Hill ring has three circular gem settings on

43 ►<http://martinemussies.nl/web/aragorn-alfred/>

44 Arvidsson 2002.

45 Honegger 2005, 45.

46 Okasha 2003, 31.

the exterior, only one now filled with red glass, that is most probably a later addition. As this item is engraved with the same inscription we find on the ring in the analysed story, it is safe to assume that it likely served as a model.⁴⁷ In Freikugels' story, she imagines the ring without the bling in the context of King Alfred, which fits archaeological research into this ring's history, dating it to the late 8th century AD based on material grounds. Thus, as the Wheatley Hill ring is dated to the 8th century AD and by referring to a similar ring, the author inserted an archaeological element, which would fit with the chronology, while at the same time alluding to Aragorn's Ring of Barahir.

The idea of a ring, that is so powerful that it is best to not wear it on one's finger, is also at the centre of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (LOTR). Just like in LOTR, in the narrative by Freikugels the heredity and magnanimity of the king are symbolised in this special piece of jewellery that the traveller wears. The concept of a special —sometimes even magic— ring has captivated people from vastly different parts of the world for centuries. An example that resonates with Freikugels' description is Plato's story about the Ring of Gyges, because whoever owned the ring could become invisible whenever he wants.⁴⁸ It also resonates with the narrative in Norse mythology about the mythical ring Andvaranaut from the hoard of the dragon Fafnir, that could help with finding sources of gold.⁴⁹ Again, we witness how mythology and history blur into each other, which is a main focus of this paper (fanfiction being the mythology, the artefact being the historical object). Similar processes are at work in Medieval Arthurian romance, which bears many parallels with the intertextual storytelling around King Alfred, including Freikugels' story. In *The Knight of the Lion* (a 12th century AD Arthurian romance by Chrétien de Troyes), Sir Yvain is given a magic ring, just like Geraint ab Erbin got in the Mabinogion.⁵⁰ Moreover, rings are commonly observed in Anglo-Saxon literature as royal gifts.⁵¹ For instance in *Beowulf*, the well-known kenning "ring-giver" is usually utilised in regard to a king or overlord. However, it is assumed that the rings mentioned are likely a *béag*, a warrior's arm-ring.⁵² I have not been able to find any evidence of such bracelets or armllets being worn in this context and, therefore, wonder if this is not more of a literary custom from the tradition of heroic tales —one of the many *topoi* that found its way into

47 Preserved in the British Museum under number 1995,0902.1.

48 Shell 1989.

49 Byock 2012.

50 Cooke 1989.

51 Okasha 2003.

52 Mesney 2017.



Figure 1.

Reconstruction sketch of the ring used in the fanfiction by Freikugels: "He wore a chain around his neck, dangling a plain broad silver ring inscribed with the words 'I am Ring'." Drawing by the author.

present-day fanfiction. Freikugels' description of a ring worn on "a chain around his neck" might be closer to the historical evidence. Freikugels' writing adds new layers to the traditions mentioned above, that can be valuable to scholars and non-specialists alike. As explained by L. Elleström, "there are clearly no definite borders between narratives formed by dissimilar media types."⁵³ The description of this ring as a finger-ring engraved with an inscription but without any stones is unlike the present state of the ring. In her story, Freikugels paints a picture of the Wheatley Hill Ring, as it might have looked before the gems were added. To show the differences between the archaeological object and its representation in the fanfiction by Freikugels and to visualise the described item, I made a drawing based on this description alone (Figure 1). Most of the surviving rings are engraved with a personal name, but the Wheatley Hill ring is not (figure 2). I have not found any scholarly research about the meaning of the text "I am [named] ring". It might be a riddle, a joke, or a thought experiment. Freikugels' text offers another possibility: she suggests that it is a wink and that the 'ring' is actually a pendant on a chain, instead of worn on a finger, as a ring traditionally should. The story does not tell why, perhaps because of its magical powers —analogous to the folkloristic traditions that culminated in Tolkien's ring— or because King Alfred wanted to remain

⁵³ Elleström 2019, 4.



Figure 2.

The Wheatley Hill ring, image courtesy of the British Museum (https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1995-0902-1).

anonymous and similar to Aragorn's ring, this ring could give away one's identity. In addition to this idea of the ring as a sign of kingship, it can be even interpreted as a symbol of Divine kingship, because in the Bible there is more frequent mentions of a ring as such a symbol, for example in Esther (8:2): "And the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman."⁵⁴ This places the reimagining of King Alfred in the tradition of Alfred as a saint, the successor in the line of David and Jesus. Because of all the narratives that resonate with this work of fan fiction, the story gains depth. Conversely, by presenting this ring on a chain as a marker of kingship, with this story Freikugels adds a new layer of meaning to the intertextual storytelling traditions surrounding the objects we refer to with the word 'ring'.

OBIEŃNICA [THE PROMISE] BY OBSZARSKA (2021)

The second case study presented in this article is the 2021 story "The Promise" by a Polish author under the pseudonym of Obszarska.⁵⁵ This love story between King Alfred and a girl called Elfvige takes place mainly in a library, where Elfvige is learning about the importance of understanding Viking culture and customs for the future of England. As in most romances featuring the King Alfred, his wife Ealhswith is nowhere to be seen —she is not included in the story at all. In this story, the king must say goodbye to his girlfriend, but promises "I will come back for you, I will take you to my castle and you will be queen".⁵⁶ As a sign of his promise he gives her a gift, a large jewel wrapped in a handkerchief. It "took her breath away" as it was the Stone of Alexander the Great. Moreover, King Alfred promises to give her

⁵⁴ English Standard Version Bible, 2016.

⁵⁵ Because fan works mostly circulate in unstable online places, the author has authorised the republication of her work along with rudimentary translation at ►<http://martinemussies.nl/web/the-promise-2021-by-obszarska/>

⁵⁶ Obszarska 2021.

another, similar jewel, upon his return, and that, together, they will look for yet another one, that is decorated with a pattern of spirals of gold wire and blue and red enamel pieces.

A total of three historical artefacts are mentioned in this story: "It was said that whoever had all three jewels enjoyed God's favour and won all battles".⁵⁷ All three are referred to as "jewels" and, as this word is of course ambiguous, it might have a hidden meaning, as this is often the case in romances featuring the King Alfred, for all his "jewels" are per definition "crown jewels" and as such a term to indicate male genitalia.⁵⁸ If so, it might mean that the king and the girl had intercourse before his departure—as in other examples of fanfiction—but this is not necessarily the case.⁵⁹ The number three might have not been a coincidence, as it is essential in many Western storytelling traditions. Biblically, it represents 'divine wholeness', completeness, and perfection, like the three bodies of God in the Hebrew Bible.⁶⁰ But there is also the example of Jesus' three nails to the cross, and the evil trinity of the Devil, the Antichrist, and the False prophet (Revelations 12-13). It is omnipresent in various folktales as well—for example, in elements like the three wishes, three little pigs, three challenges for the hero, three princesses, three rings, etc that are often used as the structure of the story.⁶¹

The first artefact is described as *Kamień Aleksandra Wielkiego*, the Stone/Rock/Gem of Alexander the Great. In my translation: "The stone was beautiful. She turned it in her hand and noticed an indistinct figure carved into it; The Stone of Alexander the Great...—she whispered." From this description of the gift, it becomes clear that it concerns the Alfred Jewel, a well-known 9th century AD Anglo-Saxon artefact that was probably used as the handle of a pointer (figure 3). The jewel consists of a teardrop-shaped enamel insert depicting a man—probably Jesus Christ—and a gold frame that has the appearance of a snout of a fantastic animal, which is generally typical of the so-called 'Barbaric Art'; the influence of the Vikings can be traced here. On the reverse side of the gold lining is an engraved floral ornament, combining Anglo-Saxon and Carolingian styles. The image of Christ is a typically Anglo-Saxon characteristic of the illustrated manuscripts of that period. The objects held by Christ are like plants with long stems, this may be an allegorical depiction of sight as one of the sense organs, as in Fuller's brooch from the same period. It was generally accepted that the figure on this jewel must represent

57 ► <http://martinemussies.nl/web/the-promise-2021-by-obszarska/>

58 The expression is a slang that circulates on social media. See for example ► <http://onlineslangdictionary.com/meaning-definition-of/crown-jewels>

59 Mussies 2021c.

60 Smith 2016.

61 Lüthi 1976.



Figure 3.
The Alfred Jewel,
photograph by *The British*
*Library.*⁶⁷

Christ —for example, as *Maiestas Domini*.⁶² But in 2014, J. Boardman wrote he agrees with a thought by D. Talbot Rice, that the figure on the Alfred Jewel could well be Alexander the Great.⁶³ A connection between these two “Great” men can be found in the so-called *Alexander Romance* that Boardman refers to, which experienced a remarkable popularity in medieval England (as evidenced by the fact that there is even a reference to it in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*).⁶⁴ The scene depicted on the jewel would then be a reference to the idea of knowledge coming through sight, which would be fitting for a pointer. But of course, it is also possible that the interpretation of the artefact depicting Alexander dismisses a link with King Alfred and that the artefact happens to date from his reign, just like the similar Fuller Brooch. However, that seems unlikely, it is logical to link these jewels to royalty, as they must have been extremely expensive.

The second artefact is described as *zielonego Wyrma*, which means “with a green Wyrm”. The term *wyrm* is used to describe a fantastic creature. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines a *wyrm* as a dragon without legs or wings.⁶⁵ More popular online sources define the *wyrm* as a large snake.⁶⁶ The authority of sources like Wikipedia is still not quite established but might give us an indication of the understanding of a term or concept in the

62 Christ in Majesty or Christ in Glory represents the glorious risen Christ, who returns at the end of time, in a cloud of light. See for more information Schiller 1972.

63 Gosden et al. 2014.

64 Boardman 2014.

65 ▶<https://www.oed.com/>; <https://www.wordsense.eu/wyrm/>

66 See for example ▶<https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/wyrm>

67 ▶<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/alfred-jewel>

vox populi. The general consensus is that the term refers to the earthworm and similar creatures in Medieval English folklore, such as dragons and snakes. Nonetheless, it can be argued that there is no standard definition for the term in fantasy genres. Most Western narratives and myths depict wyrms as long bloodied fire drakes that are flightless.⁶⁸ Two milestones in Anglo-Saxon literature, on which many later works are based, are the Old English Bible and the Old English epic poem *Beowulf*. First, it appears in Psalm 22: "But I am a worm, and not a man: a shame of men, and the contempt of the people".⁶⁹ Within the biblical text Genesis 3:14, in the retelling of the sin, the word 'wurm' makes an unlikely appearance again, as it is implied that this creature (indicated in Hebrew as '*nachash*', and '*leviathan*') had arms and legs that were taken away: "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all cattle, and above all wild animals; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life".⁷⁰ In these two Biblical attestations, the idea of a wurm is used to describe the well-known serpent, who tempts Eve to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As such, the serpent has also become a spiritual sign of betrayal and deception. This might be a hint towards the lovemaking of King Alfred and Elfvege. In *Beowulf*, the term wurm is used to indicate a dragon.⁷¹ This is also a topos in fanfiction and might be symbolic of the dangers that the king has to combat in this story.

The third artefact is described as the golden jewel, being decorated with spirals of gold wire:

"And the one with spirals of gold wire?', she asked, fascinated by the legend of the jewels more than by the desire for wealth. 'And the golden one we will find together', said the king, kissed her tenderly and went out into the darkness of the night."⁷²

In these short descriptions, there are no elements apart from the decoration, which might be indicative. However, based on the little information the author offers and the knowledge that the other two jewels were based on online descriptions of archaeological artefacts, it is plausible that this description of the third jewel is inspired by the Borg Aestel (figure 4).⁷³ This artefact is indeed decorated with a pattern of spirals of gold wire and was probably used as the handler of a pointer, the same type as the Alfred jewel. The item was found among the ruins of a Viking Era

68 Flanagan 2017.

69 *Ic eam wyrme gelicra ðonne men, for þam ic eom worden mannum to leahrunge and to forsewennesse, and ic eom ut aworpen fram him of heora gesomnunga swa þer wurm.* Geneva Bible.

70 Revised Standard Version Bible.

71 Wanner 1999.

72 Obszarska 2021.

73 The author would like to thank Marion Fjelde Larsen, Hege Anita Eilertsen and Madelen Berg Hansen from Museum Nord for sharing this picture as well as their knowledge of this artefact.



Figure 4.
The Borg Aestel
(photographed by Kjell Ove Storvik).

Chieftain Hall at Borg (Norway) and it was most likely Viking loot.⁷⁴

However, in the context of this paper, it might be worth noting that there is a scholarly connection between this artefact and King Alfred. A powerful trader called Ottar, who was native to the Lofoten Islands (on which Borg is located), has been known to visit King Alfred. Therefore, various scholars have suggested that Ottar got the Borg Aestel from Alfred, in some way or another.⁷⁵

DISCUSSION

The two case studies discussed in this paper create a new story on previous instances from the ongoing intermedial storytelling around King Alfred. Through their mash-ups and other collage techniques, they mix elements from history books and

⁷⁴ Webster 2021.

⁷⁵ Yorke 2008.

encyclopaedias with ideas from contemporary fantasy, such as the books by J.R.R. Tolkien and the TV series *The Last Kingdom*. They do this in order to create an emotionally compelling story, set in a recognisable universe, that meets the expectations of their fellow fans and connects with their previous experiences in the storyworld. As such, the authors of fanfiction are storytellers, who can fill the gaps in history. With their medievalisms and 'evocations' they are 'rewriting' the stories, in which the character of King Alfred keeps getting manipulated over time, even in new media. Consequently, their works are located in the overlapping spaces of evidence, history, historical fiction and historical fantasy. This has implications for their treatment of historical artefacts. The first case study is exceptionally layered in its description of the artefact and the symbolic meanings it might have had. *The Heredity and Magnanimity of King Alfred* of Freikugels describes a ring that the king wears around his neck. This ring resonates with folklore about magic rings and with Tolkien's idea of The One Ring to Rule Them All. There is also a clear reference to Anglo-Saxon rings from archaeological excavations, in particular the Wheatley Hill ring. In her fanfiction, the author describes an earlier state of being of this historical artefact. The second case study —*Obietnica* [The Promise] by Obszarska— is more straightforward. All descriptions of the artefacts in this piece of fanfiction are easily traced to the descriptions of the Alfred Jewel on Wikipedia, including the inscription "aelfred mec heht gewyrca", meaning "Alfred ordered me made".⁷⁶ Thus, by copying well-known online sources, the story by Obszarska offers a fairly well-researched description of the historical artefacts in question.

The findings from these analyses of the two case studies have a number of implications, of which I would like to highlight two. My main point is that the scholarship of Alfredian fanfiction provides us with an extra layer to 'Alfredism', the intertextual storytelling around King Alfred. Through the link with fanfiction, a better and deeper understanding emerges of how the old narrative created around King Alfred has indirectly influenced the development of the modern narrative. This manipulation of history takes great liberty in creating a new plot for this character, but at the same time tries to establish a 'historical' ground by inserting archaeological artefacts. This gives new angles for fandom research, which will have to show, whether these trends also apply in other (non-Alfredian) fanfiction, and for archaeological research, which can explore the alternative uses and developments of the artefacts offered by the authors of fanfiction. As such, fanfiction can be analysed to add a new look to current

⁷⁶ For further details see ►<<https://en.wikipedia.org>>.

academic research. Where research stops because no more proof can be found, creative thinking can help bring research regarding a specific object in a certain new direction, and thus offer a new impulse.

In addition, the analysis of fanfiction might teach academics something about the dissemination of cultural knowledge in non-academic contexts, namely through the Internet and especially through websites such as Wikipedia. There are repercussions in terms of the preservation of accurate knowledge, because the literal descriptions (including any sloppiness and inaccuracy) of an article on Wikipedia thus easily find their way into fanfiction, which is taken for granted by readers. The lack of authenticity is indeed part of this fictional world, but it is the literal sentences uttered by the characters that are at issue, not descriptions of historical artefacts.⁷⁷

CONCLUSION

Fanfiction is an ever-thriving genre and offers us a number of diverse literary works, often praised by the public and sometimes frowned upon by scholars.⁷⁸ These historical fantasies, however, might offer possibilities for collaborations. Where research stops because no more proof can be found, creative thinking can help to bring the research to a specific object in a certain new direction, thus giving it a new impulse. Fanfictions emerge from and are circulated within reading communities that are passionately involved with their source texts, which can flourish under a new light through the influx of such works. In spite of its many controversial faces, fanfiction opens a new path we can utilise in our herculean effort to comprehend the life and lifetime of King Alfred.

Through these postmodern historical evocations, we can open up new possibilities in research. Akin to historical video games, the fanfiction written in the context of King Alfred is therefore not just a representation of selected (pseudo) historical data and analysis, but can instead be used as a toolbox to explore and interrogate the information and arguments presented, an addition to the fields of archaeology and, in this case, medieval studies.⁷⁹ In line with the argument of Houghton about video games, fanfiction also offers its writers and readers a playable model of the Middle Ages, as well as a creative way of offering heritage to new audiences, while giving scholars new perspectives on known and lesser-known archaeological artefacts. As such, the existing

⁷⁷ Dalby 2009.

⁷⁸ Although I would not suggest putting every scholar in the same corner here, just like scholars should not put every writer of fanfiction in the corner of a spreader of false information.

⁷⁹ A game scholar with a similar approach is Espen Aarseth.

dialogues between scientific research and fan fiction about archaeological finds can not only generate more attention for the objects themselves (which in turn may lead to more funding and more research), but also contribute to scholarly research. Fanfiction can provide new data to academic research by exploring alternative uses and raising new questions. The case studies discussed here are exemplary of the continuing 'fanfiction tradition' of narratives around King Alfred, in which the king is used as a mirror of the *Zeitgeist*, during which the authors lived. By analysing these two case studies, I have shown how traces of archaeological research find their way into online fanfiction about King Alfred. Follow-up research will have to show whether this is also the case for other rulers with other artefacts that are featured in other fanfiction.

As a temporary conclusion of this research project, I would like to cite a line from French theorist M. de Certeau: "Far from being writers – founders of their own place, heirs of the peasants of earlier ages now working on the soil of language, diggers of wells and builders of houses – readers are travellers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write".⁸⁰ This allusion, enriched in H. Jenkins' 1992 *Textual Poachers*, puts a particular emphasis on the "poachers", marauding readers, and, more broadly, fanfiction writers, who satisfy their thirst not with gold, but with words and ideas.⁸¹

80 Certeau 2011, 174.

81 Jenkins 2012

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Digging King Alfred: A Response

Dr. Mar Guerrero-Pico

In her article, M. Mussies examines the depiction, reimagination and reception of historical figures and objects in fanfiction. By fittingly using the figure of Alfred, King of Wessex and the Anglo-Saxons in the 9th century as case study—or may I say a ‘prompt’ to stick to fanfiction vernacular? — and applying a close textual analysis on two Alfredian fics, the author contributes to a growing body of research on fanfiction in general, but still limited when it comes to fan representations of historical personalities, facts, or artefacts.¹ In this sense, Mussies’ contribution is a stimulating endeavour that paves the way for more scholarly work on a practice that, as I explain in this response, has critical implications for both historical literacy and cultural representation.

In a seasoned and ever-participatory landscape of transmedia convergence, where stories circulate beyond media and genre constraints and anyone can produce, remix, and share their own messages, fanfiction based on historical figures does not certainly come off as an outlandish occurrence.² In fact, if we look at the ‘Historical RPF’ tag on ArchiveOfOurOwn.com, the fanfic archive from which Mussies has unearthed the Alfredian stories reviewed in her essay, more than 12,600 *historical real-person fanfics* populate the tag.³ Again, not a shock given the loyal following that the RPF subgenre—featuring celebrities or public figures as characters in the stories—has among fans worldwide. Therefore, if Jimin from the band BTS or Taylor Swift, both transmedia brands with narrative universes of their own, can be reappropriated as

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► [Profile page](#)

1 *Fic* and *fanfic* are alternative abbreviated forms to refer to fanfiction, especially, when addressing specific texts of the genre.

2 Jenkins defines convergence as a triple-faceted process that entails “the flow of contents across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multimedia industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want” (2006, 2). Specifically, the term transmedia is related to the expansion of contents through different media platforms by both the authors or owners of an intellectual property, and their consumers (Jenkins et al., 2013, 161-178).

3 The initials RPF stand for Real Person Fiction. For further details see ► <https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Historical%20RPF/works>.

muses for fan fiction writing, why can it not be the case for medieval rulers or leaders? If anything, these antique protagonists pose a greater challenge to fan writers, who want to keep it as canon as possible.

HISTORICAL FORENSIC FANDOM

As remarked by Mussies, the concepts of accuracy and authenticity are central to historical research, as historians and archaeologists strive to meticulously reconstruct past events, individuals, and artifacts. Similarly, in fan communities or fandoms, the idea of a 'canon' is an important concept, as fans seek to maintain a sense of 'fidelity' to the narrative universe or source material they are passionate about. While the worlds of historical research and fandom may seem disparate, there are meaningful similarities between the ways, in which accuracy and authenticity are evaluated in historical research, and the ways, in which fans consider canon. In fan communities, the idea of canon refers to the 'official' or authoritative version of the story as established by the original creators—or celebrities for RPF. For fans, maintaining the integrity of canon is important because it helps to maintain a sense of continuity and consistency within the storyworld, or in relation to the characters' defining identity traits.⁴ So, just as historical researchers strive for accuracy and authenticity in their representations of the past, fans also seek these standards in the way that their favourite stories and characters are portrayed, regardless of whether they are positioning the characters in a more or less canonical alternate universe or not, as I have shown elsewhere.⁵

However, what is often synchronous research, with the *history/canon* of the famous person developing in real time and within click's reach, becomes asynchronous when it comes to digging into the distant historical past, often resorting to increasingly scattered, unreliable secondary sources as we push back in time. Whatever the starting point is, historians, archaeologists and fan writers go about their business as if they were investigators trying to fill the gaps. In this sense, the concept of 'forensic fandom' coined by J. Mittell cannot be more adequate to illustrate my point. In his work about contemporary television culture, he presents this idea as the phenomenon of fans closely and collectively analysing and dissecting the details of their favourite television shows in online communities.⁶ An inquisitive and collaborative approach to the subject matter, and a reconstructive

4 Guerrero-Pico 2015.

5 Guerrero-Pico 2016.

6 Mittell 2015.

aim, prevail for both historians and fan writers.

Mittell argues that this type of fan engagement offers important insights into the way audiences understand and make meaning from complex narratives. Considering Mussies's work, such semiotic process could also extend to historical events, objects and characters, elements of another kind of complex narrative that has experimented comparable interpretations through time. This lasting impression of some historical interpretations on the social imaginary is visible in King Alfred's set of virtues being transferred from the Middle Ages to the Victorian era to promote the predominant national values at the time. An analogous commentary can be made about the figure of Queen Isabella of Castile (1451-1501), whose papal byname, the Catholic, aligns with historical biographical notes describing a hardworking, wise, collected, and devout character. Such qualities were highly regarded as a model of femininity by the national-catholic propaganda of General Franco's dictatorship in Spain between 1939 and 1975, but somewhat still accompany contemporary approaches on the figure of the monarch. In the last few years, the Spanish television industry, especially public service broadcasters, has ventured into the country's past seeking inspiration for its fiction programming. In this context, TV series such as RTVE's *Isabel*, *Carlos, rey emperador* and *El Ministerio del Tiempo* serve as entry points to specific takes on the past.⁷ For instance, *Isabel*'s first season heavily draws on Castilian fifteenth-century chronicles and documents to contest the hagiographical perspectives on the sovereign, portraying a headstrong and independent leader, chiefly in her early years on the throne.⁸

TRANSMEDIA 'FANON' AS HYPOTEXT AND HISTORICAL GATEKEEPING

Drawing on G. Genette's narrative theory, we can argue that same way Freikugels and Obszarska have based their productions on *The Last Kingdom* and *Vikings*, *Isabel* fan creators have expanded plots and developed new situations drawing on such televisual hypertext from the historical hypotext or source text.⁹ In other words, their canon is not built on historical archives, or formal education, but already speculative, derivative work that tries to reimagine what has been lost in the course of time. As shown by recent studies on video games and TV series, learning about the past has turned inevitably mediatised.¹⁰ Therefore, and mirroring

7 Translated into English as *Isabella*. Translated into English as *Charles, Emperor King*. Translated into English as *The Ministry of Time*.

8 Queen Isabella of Castile's reign spanned a total of thirty years, from 1474 until her death in 1504.

9 Establés/Guerrero-Pico 2016; Genette 1997.

10 Burgess/Jones 2022; Gambarato/Heuman 2022, Venegas 2022.

other media productions set in the past (e.g., the *Assassin's Creed* video game series featuring both historical and fictional elements), historical fan fiction establishes at best *contextualised alternative universes*, typically retaining elements of the original source text, but transforming specific aspects, such as the background, character relationships, or settings in order to explore issues close to the author's personal life and outlook.¹¹ The changes made to the original are grounded in the existing context and are often motivated by a desire to explore a particular aspect in greater depth. And when one of these fan reinterpretations and rewritings—not necessarily rooted in canon—is sanctioned by the community and repeated pervasively through other fan-made texts, then, it becomes the *fanon*, or hypotext, that powers a shared universe or intertextual tradition in a fan community.¹² For example, Freikugels' diegetic transposition resulting in the characters' crossover between *The Lord of the Rings'* Aragorn and the King Alfred featured in *The Last Kingdom* could supply other fans with replicable prompts to play and speculate on.¹³

As Mussies suggests, the author detected common identity markers (e.g., heredity, magnanimity and, I would add, humility) between Aragorn and King Alfred that facilitated their narrative merge. In this vein, Paolo Bertetti's extensive research on the identity variations of transmedia characters is an excellent framework to explore how the Anglo-Saxon-inspired ring featured in the fanfic plays a central role in the 'figurative identity' of both characters (i.e., the appearance and names that set them apart) and how this translates to their 'thematic identity', that is, to the role they play as kings in the story.¹⁴

From what transpires from Mussies's analysis on Obszarska's fanfic, we can agree that historical fanfiction writers engage in an archival quest to enrich and add detail to the background they aim to describe, most notably when specific artefacts intervene in the narrative being told. When this is done well, it implies a set of skills to select, verify, summarise and effectively apply historical sources to their transformative works.¹⁵ And the same abilities also come in handy when the purpose is verification. Going back to

11 Guerrero-Pico 2016, 82.

12 Kirby 2002; Busse/Hellekson 2006.

13 Transformation that impacts the diegesis ("the world wherein the story occurs") presented by a hypotext; therefore, basic aspects of the story may change, such as its original "spatiotemporal framework" and character's nationalities, genders or sociocultural background. At the same time, these kinds of diegetic conversions can also modify the action that occurs in the hypotext (Genette, 1997, 294–296).

14 Bertetti 2014.

15 Coppa/Tushnet 2017.

Isabel, and moving away from fanfiction for a moment, *isabelinos*—as the fans of the series are known— produce GIFs with scenes subbed in English to broaden their reach and peak international fans’ interest in this part of Spanish history. Likewise, these fan translators would translate peace treaties and personal correspondence and juxtapose them with remixed images from the series. The reason for this practice is fact-checking the series events that do not adhere to historical documentary sources. In addition, fans would also create timelines including landmark events, and dates of birth and death of the historical characters.¹⁶ Parallel to transformative fan approaches to history, such as fanfiction, a case should also be made for fan-driven historical gatekeeping with an educational goal.

FOSTERING HISTORICAL LITERACY THROUGH FAN FICTION

This brief remark on the latent skills that fans exert when writing fanfiction based on historical figures, events and artefacts makes me wonder about the implications of this practice for the improvement of historical literacy and cultural representation, especially among the youth, which I believe supplements the two points provided by Mussies in her discussion. Let me conclude this response by shedding some light on reasons why fanfiction is a valuable tool to foster education on history in both, formal and informal learning environments.¹⁷ First, as suggested above, creating fiction about the past requires a certain level of competence, which includes knowledge of the historical context and culture of the period, during which the elements of the narrative are set. This can improve familiarity with the subject matter and help writers to understand the complexities and nuances of the historical era they are depicting.

Furthermore, the process of writing historical fanfiction requires extensive research. Engaging in research can lead fan writers to develop critical thinking skills, as they learn to distinguish between credible sources and mis/disinformation. Additionally, research can assist authors to better comprehend the *Zeitgeist* they are writing about as well as the motivations, actions, and experiences of the historical figures, not only allowing authors to more accurate and authentically portray historical characters in their fanfics, but to do so in a more ethical manner.

Besides historical knowledge and research skills, writing this kind of fanfiction can also help authors to develop creative writing skills, such as characterisation, dialogue, and plot development. This also applies for experimentation with different writing styles,

¹⁶ Establés/Guerrero-Pico 2016, 66.

¹⁷ Black 2008; Scolari et al. 2018; Rouse 2021.

techniques, and structures, which enables fans to explore the creative possibilities of writing about the past and projecting possible worlds onto it.¹⁸ The aim here is to develop a greater appreciation for the source material, and to reflect on its cultural and historical significance.

Finally, writing historical fan fiction requires an awareness of the way, in which historical figures and events are represented and interpreted in different contexts and time periods. Thus, fan writers may equip themselves with a critical lens through which they can evaluate historical representation and consider how different perspectives and interpretations shape our understanding of history.

¹⁸ Eco 1979.

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Response “Digging King Alfred”

Martine Mussies

In the dialogue paper of the previous issue of *Kleos* (issue 5), A. S. Poulsen posits that although the use of video games as a means of conveying archaeological knowledge may not be an immediately apparent strategy, in recent times, an increasing number of scholars and cultural institutions have come to acknowledge the benefits that video games can provide in terms of depicting historical contexts. By utilising video games as an innovative and interactive medium for learning, archaeological information can be presented in a dynamic and engaging manner, which can help foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of the past.¹ Poulsen illustrates their point by the creation of some unique maps within the program *Minecraft Education Edition*. In their response to this paper in the same issue 5, Dr. C. E. Ariese explains that there exists a substantial body of research that delves into the advantages and disadvantages of utilising video games as a tool for learning and formal education. Due to the extensive scope of this research, it is difficult to summarise its findings in a concise manner. Nonetheless, such investigations have provided valuable insights into the potential benefits of video games as an educational medium, as well as the potential challenges that may arise in their use. By exploring these issues, researchers and educators can gain a more nuanced understanding of how to most effectively leverage video games in the service of learning and pedagogy.² In the dialogue paper of the current issue of *Kleos*, a surprisingly similar subject is discussed but concerning a different kind of means to engage with the audience. In my initial argument, I addressed the representations of archaeological artefacts in fanfiction concerning King Alfred of Wessex. As I explained, my approach is akin to that of R. Houghton who considers the potential of games to act as “[...] a medium of historical debate”.³ A thought-provoking response to it was

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► [Profile page](#)

¹ Poulsen 2022, 75.

² Poulsen 2022, 93.

³ Houghton 2018, 11.

written by Dr. Guerrero Pico. This short paper will reflect on her response.

Dr. Guerrero Pico highlights the concept of 'forensic fandom', a term coined by J. Mittell in 2015, to explain how the investigation into the history of famous individuals can differ depending on the examined era.⁴ When delving into the distant past, such studies can become asynchronous due to the scarcity of primary sources, resulting in a greater reliance on secondary sources that may be scattered and unreliable. This can create challenges for researchers seeking to build an accurate understanding of historical events and figures, requiring careful consideration of the available evidence and its potential biases. I could not agree more and would like to add two thoughts. Firstly, when considering historical reimaginings as a lens through which to view a particular period in history, I hope to surpass the accuracy/authenticity mire by shifting my focus to representation. Rather than striving for a technically precise recreation of the past, I believe that it is important to prioritise the portrayal of cultures in a convincing manner. By emphasising representation, I aim to present a fresh perspective on history that is respectful of the historical sources yet acknowledges the interpretive nature of any attempt to recreate the past. This approach recognises that historical reimaginings are inherently subjective and that they cannot be a perfect reflection of the past. Therefore, my goal is to offer a nuanced and engaging depiction of history that highlights the cultural richness and lived experience of the period being depicted. By adopting this approach, I hope to demonstrate that historical reimaginings like fanfiction can provide a compelling and thought-provoking way of engaging with the past. By embracing the potential for creative interpretation and imaginative exploration, fanfiction offers a new and compelling way of understanding the history of different cultures and societies. My second point concerning the searchable, outdated research in fan communities serve as a compelling reminder of the need for archaeologists and historians to maintain a critical approach towards the historical information that is available online. I believe that a good example of a step in this direction is the 2019 Wikipedia workshop that was held at the International Medieval Congress in Leeds.⁵ This workshop provided an excellent illustration of the importance of ensuring that online information about history is accurate, well-researched, and up to date. By facilitating the contribution of scholars' knowledge and expertise

⁴ Mittell 2015.

⁵ '#MedievalWiki: Editing Women in Wikipedia' was organised by Dr. Victoria Leonard and Sukanya Rai-Sharma and delivered by Dr. Kate Cook.

to Wikipedia, the workshop serves as a powerful platform for promoting a critical approach towards historical artefacts and their representation online. I should note, however, that it is also important to recognise the labour involved in editing Wikipedia entries. While the platform offers a valuable means of disseminating information to a broad audience, the work of editing and updating articles is significant and demands a considerable investment of time and effort. As such, any attempts to promote critical engagement with historical artefacts online must also take into account the labour issues involved in these efforts and strive to distribute the labour fairly.

Dr. Guerrero Pico draws a very interesting parallel between the 'Alfredism' I discussed and the multimedial *Nachlebens* of Queen Isabella of Castile (1451-1501 AD). She mentions the GIF sets created by the 'isabelinos', who sometimes act as historical gatekeepers. GIF sets are collections of animated images, typically created using a series of still images or short video clips.⁶ These GIFs can be used to create visual narratives or to highlight specific aspects of a particular theme, such as a TV show or movie. Dr. Guerrero Pico makes a compelling case for this fan-driven historical gatekeeping with an educational goal. Further research will reveal to which extent this is also applicable to the realms of Alfredian fan communities, for example on sites that allow for GIF set sharing, such as Tumblr. Fans of King Alfred, an Anglo-Saxon historical figure, often create and use GIF sets to express their interest and enthusiasm for Anglo-Saxon England. These GIFs might include scenes from historical dramas or depictions of artefacts and objects, such as illuminated manuscripts or Anglo-Saxon jewellery. By creating and sharing these animated images, fans can engage with the history of King Alfred and his time in a visual and dynamic way as well as with a broader community of enthusiasts. Furthermore, GIF sets can help to bring the past to life and create a more immersive experience for those interested in the period, providing a window into the sights, sounds, and culture of Anglo-Saxon England.

Adding to the comparison between Aragorn, the main character in *The Lord of the Rings*, and the many representations of King Alfred, Dr. Guerrero Pico suggests a third common identity marker (next to heredity and magnanimity) shared by both: humility. This offers a very interesting angle because it is precisely King Alfred's modesty and humility that is a non-constant factor in his representations online. Indeed, likely influenced by the book series *The Saxon Stories* and the Netflix series *The Last Kingdom*, which was based on these book series, King Alfred is alternately

6 ► <https://historiasenlacorte.tumblr.com/post/109976479518/moradometalizado-isabel-2x04>

portrayed in this respect. Sometimes he is shown as the devout and thereby humble Christian king, in line with ideas about biblical kingship that we also see in the intertextual storytelling around King David and around the "King of the Jew", Jesus himself.⁷ Other times, he is stubborn and haughty pedantic. Time will tell which of these two seemingly contradictory portrayals of King Alfred will ultimately be most endorsed by the fan community and end up in the "fanon", defined by Dr. Guerrero Pico as the "hypotext, that powers a shared universe or intertextual tradition in a fan community".⁸ Moreover, Dr. Guerrero Pico suggests an excellent framework for identity variations, by P. Bertetti.⁹ Although these ideas were initially formed to analyse the "fictional hero", they might well help explain how the 'figurative identity' of King Alfred translates into his 'thematic identity'.

The importance of fanfiction for non-academic purposes can be exemplified by a personal narrative that depicts a 15-year-old French girl's experience with depression and how writing fanfiction has helped her cope with her mental health struggles.¹⁰ The narrative highlights the subjective experience of depression in adolescence, including feelings of sadness, hopelessness and a loss of interest in activities. Furthermore, the author's reluctance to discuss her depression with friends and family highlights the stigma surrounding mental health issues in adolescence. The narrative suggests that writing fanfiction can be a protective coping mechanism for depression. It enables the author to escape the real world and create a world of her own, which can help regulate negative emotions and enhance feelings of control. The author's self-expression through writing fanfiction aligns with previous research, which has shown that expressive writing can be an effective way to cope with stressful experiences. Additionally, the narrative emphasises the importance of social support in mental health coping. The author mentions connecting with other fans, who enjoy the same TV shows and books, which has provided her with a sense of community and belonging. Social support has been shown to be an important factor in promoting mental health and buffering against the negative effects of stress. Overall, this personal narrative provides insight into the potential of creative expression and social support as coping mechanisms for depression in adolescence. Further research could investigate the effectiveness of this coping mechanism. For example, a study

7 Mussies 2023.

8 Busse/Hellekson 2006; Guerrero Pico 2023, p.3; Kirby 2022.

9 Bertetti 2014.

10 Republished with the author's permission at my website: <http://martinmussies.nl/web/writing-fanfiction-to-cope-with-mental-health-issues/>.

could investigate the impact of positive mental health representation in historical fanfiction and other forms of media on individuals, who are struggling with mental health issues, and/or compare the mental health outcomes of adolescents, who write historical fanfiction, to those who engage in other forms of creative expression, such as drawing or playing music.

To conclude, Dr. Guerrero Pico adds some valuable points regarding how writing fanfiction about historical events can be helpful for learning about history. When individuals engage in the writing of fanfiction that involves historical events or figures, it is essential for them to conduct some form of research of the time period in question. Through this process of inquiry, fanfiction writers can gain a more nuanced understanding of the cultural, political, and social context, in which their chosen subject lived and operated. This, in turn, can lend greater credibility and authenticity to their creative work, potentially making it more engaging and enjoyable for readers. Historical fanfiction can help readers and writers think critically about different sources of information and learn to tell what is true and what is not. Writing fanfiction can also help people practise their creative writing skills, like making interesting characters and stories. It can also help them think about how different people might see history in different ways. As such, writing historical fanfiction can be a fun way to learn about history, practice writing skills and think about different perspectives on historical events.

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