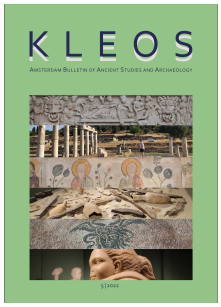
KLEOS
AMSTERDAM BULLETIN OF ANCIENT STUDIES AND ARCHAEOLOGY



Issue 5, 2022
CONTACT
bulletin.kleos@gmail.com
www.kleos-bulletin.nl

INFORMATION ON PUBLICATION
Full Title: Why archaeologists should tell stories.Looking back at the NASTA 2021 Conference
Author: Iris Korver, Sam Miske, and Morgan Schelvis
Published: Kleos - Amsterdam Bulletin of Ancient Studies and Archaeology/ Issue 05/ September 2022
Pages: 10-18
ISSN: 2468-1555
Link to these articles: www.Kleos-bulletin.nl

RECOMMENDED CITATION:
Korver, I./S. Miske/M. Schelvis, 2022: Why archaeologists should tell stories. Looking back at the NASTA 2021 Conference, *Kleos - Amsterdam Bulletin of Ancient Studies and Archaeology* 5, 10-18.

KLEOS - AMSTERDAM BULLETIN OF ANCIENT STUDIES AND ARCHAEOLOGY
is a peer-reviewed, open access academic online journal, launched in 2014, which publishes current research and review articles by graduate and PhD students, as well as starting independent researchers, from the fields of archaeology and ancient studies (i.e. classics and ancient History). Kleos also provides reviews of recent books, conferences and exhibitions. The journal mainly aspires to serve as a platform for starting academic careers, and help students and starting researchers to share their research, gain experience in publishing, and improve their scientific skills. At the same time the journal aims to provide an overview of the research being conducted within the fields of archaeology, ancient history and classics, and support the interdisciplinary dialogue between these adjacent academic disciplines.

SUBMISSIONS
The editors invite submissions of original research on any topic related to ancient history, classics and archaeology. Information on the editorial policy, the submission process, as well as guidelines for authors and other matters that concern potential contributors, is to be found on our website. For further information, authors and readers are referred to:
www.kleos-bulletin.nl
vu-nl.academia.edu/KLEOSBulletin

Why archaeologists should tell stories. Looking back at the NASTA 2021 Conference

Iris Korver, Sam Miske, and Morgan Schelvis

Introduction

Humans have an intrinsic need for storytelling.[1] Through the stories we tell each other about ourselves we can define our origin, identity, and future.[2] It could be argued that archaeologists already participate in "storytelling" because we share our findings through verbal presentations, or by writing academic articles. However, in this paper "storytelling" is considered as a creative or artistic practice (a term that can include sharing fictitious interpretations or creations with factious foundations) which aims to entice and interest the listener or the reader.[3] U. Hasson states that sharing stories is "one of the most effective ways to communicate", deeply connecting people, indicated by similar brain activity in people who are listening to similar stories.[4] Whereas most archaeological publications authored by academic and professional archaeologists cannot be considered creative or artistic: it is not akin to sharing a story to make people feel connected. Yet, archaeological remains feature prominently in the stories told by mass media, novelists, and ideologues alike.[5] Archaeologists themselves, however, have often refused to partake in storytelling such as this because of concerns about scientific impartiality or academic formality.[6] But are these concerns valid or is there value to be gained by archaeologists from telling stories?

Storytelling in archaeology was introduced by A. and M.

Iris Korver obtained her MA in Heritage, Memory, and Archaeology from the University of Amsterdam in 2021 and specialises in Mediterranean (pre-) historic archaeology. She is currently working as a Dutch archaeologist at a commercial company.
Profile page

Sam Miske obtained his MA degree in Heritage, Memory, and Archaeology from the University of Amsterdam in 2022. He is currently pursuing a PhD at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam on the topic of land dispossession under the Dutch East India Company in the early modern period.
Profile page

Morgan Schelvis obtained her MA in Heritage, Memory, and Archaeology from the University of Amsterdam in 2021 and specialises in Dutch historical archaeology. She is currently working as an assistant programme coordinator for Bèta-gamma at the UvA.
Profile page

1 Suzuki et al. 2018, 9468–9469.

2 Pruitt 2011; Given 2009.

3 Cornelius Holtorf describes a story as: "[A]n account of one or more characters acting out plots in a sequence of events that contain a distinctive beginning, middle and end." Holtorf 2010, 381.

4 Suzuki et al. 2018, 9468–9469

5 Pruitt 2011; Given 2009.

6 Deetz 1998; Praetzellis 1998; McKee/Galle 2000.

Praetzellis in the '90s and remained popular until the '00s.[7] M. Praetzellis organised a session on "Archaeologists as Storytellers" at the 1997 Society for Historical Archaeology conference on Historical and Underwater Archaeology, which was attended and spoken at by the likes of J. Deetz and M. Beaudry, while A. Praetzellis organised the conference proceedings.[8] This session inspired the attendees to see storytelling as a powerful tool for communication and analysis, and to become more creative in both exploits.[9] The event showcased that storytelling does not negate science. It instead allowed to reclaim some excitement and inject some liveliness into 'dry' academic presentations by proposing wild theories and thoughts about what a site *could possibly* present.[10] Deetz was asked to write a discussion piece for the conference proceedings, in which he asked: "[w]hat is it that we do, and why do we do it? Simply put, archaeologists are storytellers. It is our responsibility to communicate to as wide an audience as possible the results and significance of our findings."[11]

The subject was addressed again during the first edition of the Narrative and Storytelling in Archaeology (NASTA) conference on the 29th of April 2021.[12] At the online conference, the speakers addressed why and how archaeologists should tell stories. NASTA 2021 focused more on storytelling than narrative as we, the organising committee, experienced a lack of it in contemporary archaeological scholarship.[13] Storytelling in archaeology is not taught at Dutch universities despite its potential. We (archaeologists) are often too focused on academic output, which as Deetz puts it often "translates in turgid, verbose, and dull prose".[14] Creative writing and storytelling do not have to equal fiction: we can also adjust our style of writing and communication, basing it on scientific data. Stories have power: they are political and evocative, just like archaeology, and it's our responsibility

7 Praetzellis 1998. Together, A. and M. Praetzellis edited and participated in the conference proceedings, published in the Historical Archaeology journal in 1998, with A. Praetzelli authoring the introductory paper, which is referenced here.

8 Praetzellis 1998.

9 Deetz 1998, 94.

10 McKee/Galle 2000, 14.

11 Deetz 1998, 94.

12 The conference was organised on the initiative of rMA students of the UvA in collaboration with Prof. James Symonds (UvA) and Dr. Aris Politopoulos (LU), while funded by Archon (Dutch research school of archaeology).

13 Since the organising committee is mostly from Europe, experience is based on that premise. However, due to involvement of scholars all over the world (e.g., Australia, India, the United States), it is safe to say that the lack of storytelling is felt in a wider area.

14 Deetz 1998, 94.

as archaeologists to learn how to engage (with) the general public, outside our academic circles.[15] The key difference between the current narrative and storytelling movement, and the first movement in the '90s and '00s, however, is that, as G. Lucas put it in his keynote talk, "in the '90s, narrative was emerging as kind of an antidote or counterpoint to science [...] whereas today, narrative is being embraced as part of the science of storytelling or the storytelling of science."[16]

The discussion at the Narrative and Storytelling in Archaeology (NASTA) conference focused on how archaeologists can think about our knowledge, how we can communicate this to our audiences, and how we can tell stories. How are we, as academics, able to tell stories that entice the public we regularly deal with? How can we interest them in what drives us? We could write popular science books, create video games, publish children's books, and so on. We can and should tell stories.

Structure of the conference

The NASTA conference focused on four different ways stories can influence us: the stories we share, play, feel and think. Each way channels a unique momentum of conveying information to other people. It also encompasses the essence of what drives us to tell stories and how the storyline can impact and interest us.

Share

The stories we share as archaeologists are the stories that reach the public through various media, including museum exhibits, books, and site tours. However, not all stories are conveyed as effectively as they could be. What is the most effective way to tell a story and why is it that some stories entice the public to great lengths while others do not?

The way a story is told is of great importance. T. Pruitt introduced us to the idea that knowledge and skills in how to convey your story can increase success of a museum exhibition or be the downfall of it, if the story is not thought out well.[17] Although there are multiple ways to convey a story, the success of it all hinges on the structure: the beginning, middle and end. Pruitt states that "most people include a strong opening or a thesis and a conclusion, but [...] lump together everything else in the middle."[18] However, she continues, "a middle should be a point of interest

15 Holtorf 2010; Lucas 2019.

16 Lucas 2021.

17 Pruitt 2021. The museum exhibition discussed in Pruitt's presentation served as a case study to illustrate the implications of how a story is told.

18 Pruitt 2021.

that is as important as the beginning or the end, it needs to be a focal point. [...] Storytellers often design their plots around the midpoint as the key moment where everything changes. [...] Think about your written communication: how often do you draft your paper or your display around a midpoint as the key moment of your communication?".[19]

Good storytelling is not just useful in the 'traditional way' of conveying archaeology.[20] The sharing of archaeological stories via social media is becoming highly influential, as it is easily accessible in the sense that it is free and often, fun! The concept of edutainment is making its way through academia and it is also something to be dealt with and taken into account.[21] Some archaeologists have amassed large numbers of followers, such as on the YouTube channel 'Dig it with Raven' and the Instagram account of Dr. Gino Caspari.[22] It is possible to connect to the public while introducing archaeology as a fun, easily accessible topic. However, as some have pointed out, this free sharing is not without controversy.[23]

'False' information regarding archaeology can be spread as easily through seemingly legitimate social media accounts as the information found at the legitimate channels mentioned above, and the line between 'real' and 'fiction' is not always clear to non-professionals.[24] 'Fake' does not have to equal 'bad'. It is entirely possible to use the information at your disposal to write historical fiction, to create a feeling of belonging.[25] However, some of it, such as carelessness with the publication of *aDNA* analysis, which has a tendency to headline into the newspapers and fuel conspiracy theories and (white) nationalism, has given the public interpretation of certain ideas a bad taste.[26] Academia has been debating how to convey the information in a manner that is as accurate as possible, which is why we need to step up our game when it comes to telling stories. We need to use an effective delivery method: a good story.[27]

19 Pruitt 2021. Emphasis by authors.

20 Traditional is here seen as museums, archaeological books, and site tours.

21 Edutainment: video games, television programmes, or other material, intended to be both educational and enjoyable.

22 Dig it with Raven is accessible on ▶https://www.youtube.com; Dr. Gino Caspari's account is accessible on▶ https://www.instagram.com.

23 E.g., Furholt 2018.

24 Pruitt 2011; Pruitt 2021

25 E.g., Pruitt 2011.

26 Wolinsky 2019; Lidz 2021; Akpan 2017. Here, aDNA stands for "ancient DNA", the DNA that is retracted from skeletons to identify the genomes.

27 Statement by the authors and NASTA conference organisers.

The amount of people 'liking' (pseudo-)archaeological content shows that people are interested in the stories we share. Archaeology has an undeniable allure for people, but archaeologists must learn to harness this allure in their own storytelling.[28]

Play

Another popular medium through which to experience the past is video games, many of which take place in historical settings (which have been fictionalised to various extents). There are also many initiatives from game corporations to incorporate archaeological and/or historical insights into the games to make them somewhat accurate, for example in the widely popular Assassin's Creed series. Here the creators attempted to recreate the past 'authentically' by trying to make the game locations look the way they would have during the time the game takes place.[29] The players of these types of games, for example, are 'transported' to a specific place and time in the past (e.g., in Assassin's Creed), get to learn about the Greek gods (e.g., in the game Hades), reimagine Medieval Europe through grand strategies (e.g., Crusader Kings and Civilization), or build cities in different eras (e.g., Anno and Civilization). It is an entertaining way to immerse people into the past and entice them to do their own research.

But despite the novelty of the medium, the old questions of scientific accuracy remain.[30] If the choice is between accuracy on the one hand, and engaging storylines and gameplay on the other, most game developers will choose the latter. The game industry, after all, worships not Athena the wise but Hermes the merchant.

Feel

Stories that make us feel are stories that have an impact. Feelings help us remember: the stories etch themselves into the brain due the invoked feeling.[31] Invoking feelings like empathy also helps to personalise the past. One of the most famous examples is Ötzi: Thirty years after his discovery, the mummy is known by its name and (reconstructed) face. The story of how he lived and died has

28 Idem.

29 For a thorough examination of the Assassins' Creed series, see for instance the discussion on Assassins' Creed by Politopoulos et al. 2019.

30 For discussions of historical accuracy in the Assassin's Creed games, see Malik 2020; Cheeda 2020.

31 For example: Hamilakis spoke of "sensorial assemblages", how the senses invoke feelings and memory and help deepen experiences, and that this counts for assemblages (such as archaeological objects) as well; Hamilakis 2017, 170.

been told and retold, even making its way into schoolbooks as a personification of 'his age'.[32] Relating stories in such a way that invokes feelings is bound to have a response, good or bad. This becomes most apparent in the archaeology of the recent past: the stories of slavery, the horrors of the World Wars or the aftermath, such as the Indonesian War of Independence.[33] If anything, the emotional connection might be the most important reason for people to engage with the past. How did people, our ancestors, live then, and why did they do so? It remains one of the hardest questions to answer.

The stories that make us feel like we belong, like we are important, maybe even a legacy of the past, are the stories that give us a sense of being. Giving a narrative to the people of the past helps us to connect, and helps us to understand the past in a different way than obscure facts and objects could do.[34]

Think

Stories on controversial topics allow us to think. To coordinate ourselves in a changing world, but also to position ourselves in relation to our own opinions. The stories that make us think have another way of impacting us than the stories we play or feel do. These stories allow us to critically assess how we make our own history and why it is relevant. However, as Lucas notices: there is an astute distinction between the professional and the other. Both make a distinct claim to knowledge and authority. However, one is considered more authoritative than the other. Stories that do not fit into the grand narrative that we as archaeologists support are treated as 'other', which in general is a mixed bag: the creational stories of Native Americans, but also, wholly unrelated, the idea that aliens have created the pyramids.[35] This meta-story of archaeology, as C. Holtorf called it, frames our interpretations, and thus frames our stories.[36] It contributes the background to the story, but at the same time excludes the stories that do not seem to fit.[37]

32 Pinkowski 2021.

33 Van Helden/Witcher 2019, 24–25.

34 This refers back to what was discussed in the introduction of this paper: Suzuki et al. 2018, 9468–9469; Pruitt 2011; Given 2009.

35 Lucas 2019, 5–6.

36 Holtorf calls the "underlying stories that frame any archaeology we conduct and make it significant to contemporary society" the "meta-stories of archaeology", which according to Holtorf, "make archaeological practices, objects and research results meaningful in an existential, social and political context in the present."; Holtorf 2010, 383.

37 Holtorf 2010; Holtorf 2021.

The meta-story of archaeology can also be interpreted as thinking about which stories we tell. How do we create a story from the archaeological 'rubbish' we find? Which choices do we make and why do we make them? Is the framework the narrative that leads us or do we create a new narrative every time we implement new information?

Conclusions

All in all, the authors have increasingly come to the conclusion that archaeology is storytelling. Stories can be found in the interpretations that lead us to our understanding of the past, the way we think about puzzling all these pieces of information together, and in the humanisation of material remains in order to invoke the feelings of the public when we share our ideas. Archaeology would not be where it is today without our need—and talent—for storytelling. And so, the story continues.

Due to a well-received conference, a second conference was held on the 20th of May 2022. Furthermore, we predict the continuation of NASTA for many years to come. The realisation of the impact that stories can have, and especially the influence archaeologists can have on narratives, should be taught, thought about, and treasured by all.

Bibliography

Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus: *Definition of storytelling*. Cambridge University Press.

Deetz, J., 1998: Discussion. Archaeologists as Storytellers, *Historical Archaeology* 32 (1), 94–96.

Furholt, M., 2018: Massive migrations? The Impact of Recent aDNA Studies on our View of Third Millenium Europe, *European Journal of Archaeology* 21 (2), 159–191.

Helden, D. van/R. Witcher, 2019: *Researching the Archaeological Past through Imagined Narratives. A Necessary Fiction*, London.

Holtorf, C., 2010: Meta-stories of archaeology, *World archaeology* 42 (3), 381–393.

Holtorf, C., 2021: *Meta-stories of archaeology revisited* (lecture, NASTA lecture series, online, 26/08/2021).

Given, M., 2009: Archaeology and Storytelling: Encounters with the Past in Scotland and Cyprus, *Historic Argyll*, 33–41.

Lucas, G., 2019: *Writing the Past. Knowledge and Literary Production in Archaeology*, London.

Lucas, G., 2021: *Narrative in Archaeology. Some Reflections* (keynote lecture, NASTA conference, online, 29/04/2021).

McKee, L./J. Galle, 2000: Scientific Creativity and Creative Science: Looking at the Future of Archaeological Storytelling, *Historical Archaeology* 34 (2), 14–16.

Politopoulos, A./A. A. Mol/K. H. Boom/C. Ariese, 2019: "History Is Our Playground": Action and Authenticity in Assassin's Creed: Odyssey. Advances in Archaeological Practice, *A Journal of the Society of American Archaeology* 7 (3), 317–323.

Praetzellis, A., 1998: Why Every Archaeologist Should Tell Stories Once in a While, *Historical Archaeology* 32 (1), 1–3.

Pruitt, T., 2011: *Authority and the Production of Knowledge in Archaeology* (PhD-thesis University of Cambridge).

Pruitt, T., 2021: *Examining Archaeological Stories: Understanding the Science and Impact of Storytelling* (lecture, NASTA conference, online, 29/04/2021).

Suzuki, W. A./M. I. Feliú-Mójer/U. Hasson/R. Yehuda/J. M. Zarate, 2018: Dialogues: The Science and Power of Storytelling, *The Journal of Neuroscience* 38 (44), 9468–9470.

Wolinsky, H., 2019: Ancient DNA and contemporary politics. The analysis of ancient DNA challenges long-held beliefs about identity and history with potential for political abuse, *EMBO reports* 20 (12), e49507.

Online sources

Akpan, N., 2017: How white supremacists respond when their DNA says they're not 'white', PBS News Hour (20 August). ▸https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/white-supremacists-respond-

genetics-say-theyre-not-white, accessed on 24/02/2022.
Cheeda, S., 2020: Assassin's Creed: 10 Times the Franchise Just Stopped Caring About Historical Accuracy, TheGamer (31 October). ▸ https://www.thegamer.com/assassins-creed-historical-accuracy-failures/, accessed on 24/02/2022.
Dig it with Raven. Youtube channel, ▸ https://www.youtube.com/c/digitwithraven, accessed on 05/04/2022.
Dr. Gino Caspari. Instagram page, ▸https://www.instagram.com/ginocaspari/?hl=en, accessed on 05/04/2022.
Lidz, F., 2021: 3,000 Years Ago, Britain Got Half Its DNA From France, DNA Study Suggests, New York Times (22 December). ▸ https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/22/science/archaeology-britain-migration-dna-reich.html, accessed on 24/02/2022.
Malik, R., 2020: Assassin's Creed: The 10 Most Historically Accurate Games in the Franchise, Ranked, GameRant (21 June). ▸ https://gamerant.com/assassins-creed-ubisoft-games-historically-accurate-ranked/, accessed on 24/02/2022.
Pinkowski, J., 2021: Ötzi the Iceman: What we know 30 years after his discovery, National Geographic (15 September). ▸ https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/tzi-the-iceman-what-we-know-30-years-after-his-discovery, accessed on 24/02/2022.