

PhD thesis

Tilde Strandbygaard Jessen (2021). *Fortid i og for nutid: Levendegørelser som formidlings- og oplevelsesform gennem 100 år* [The past in and for the present: Communicating and experiencing living history practices across a hundred years]. Department of Communication and Arts, Roskilde University.

Abstract

In this dissertation, I investigate selected living history practices in Danish museums and museum-like institutions between the end of the nineteenth century and ca. 1980, where contemporary understandings of living history begin to emerge. A key issue of the study is to explore how theoretical insights from more recent studies can foster new insights into museums' and museum-like institutions' thoughts about visitors in past living history practices – a perspective seldom discussed explicitly in historical studies on museums and museum communication. The ambition is to nuance existing research by producing a study that does not center on institutions, persons, or science as such.

The dissertation is composed of five chapters. The first chapter elaborates on the theoretical point of departure just outlined and presents the method-logy used for the dissertation. An important aspect of past living history practices is that they are always about pasts (a point less obvious in the Danish word 'levendegørelse'). While research on recent living history and reenactment recognize the critical role of past-present relations in living history, very little attention has been paid to the specific past being reenacted. In the dissertation, I argue that just that is important in understandings and uses of living history in the period I investigate. To analyze this, I present selected research on didactics of history concerned with uses of pasts. Chapter one also presents the source material used in the study: archival material from selected museums and museum-like institutions as well as historical newspapers. This collection of sources reflects three aspects: 1) Living history practices have not been deemed very important by the museums and the museum-like institutions in terms of documentation. 2) The wider public has found them interesting, or at least the editorial offices of the Danish newspapers have thought so. 3) My interest in the 'demand' side of living history practices.

The remaining part proceeds as follows: Chapter two analyses a public de-bate on open air museums in 1897, also touching on living history, which seems seminal to understandings of living history as something which was in opposition to the museum. The third chapter is concerned with selected living history practices at two open air museums, the Open Air Museum Hjerl Hede, founded in 1930, and The Funen Village, which opened in 1946. A key argument of this chapter is that experiences with and collective memory of rural life as well as a general understanding of these undergoing changes are important for uses and understandings of living history practices in Denmark in mid- 20th century. The chapter closes with a public debate from 1963 underlining the changes identified at the two institutions.

Where the living history practices outlined in chapter three positioned visitors as spectators, chapter four analyses more participant forms of living history practices at Historisk-Arkæologisk Forsøgscenter, an archaeological open-air museum founded in 1964. To put it brief, participating was possible as no one had any experience with or memory of the prehistoric pasts in question. The fifth and final chapter picks up on some of the ways living history practices have been understood to be in opposition and how these understandings might be explained in terms of different understandings of authenticity and uses of pasts. One objective of this analysis is to investigate and explain continuities and changes in understandings and uses of living history practices.

Overall, the dissertation shows how museums and museum-like institutions continuously have considered how visitors understood and used pasts in different ways throughout the period in question. The dissertation further shows how these considerations affected the museums' and the museum-like institutions' practices and thus how visitors – or to be more precise the institutions' perceptions of visitors – have affected and changed how museums and museum-like institutions communicate.