



Fig. 6 Iron Age family gathered around the fire just before dinner is served. ■

Interpretation based on experience

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● The author describes some of the advantages and disadvantages of the 'living history' method of communicating history to the public.

*What you read, you remember
What you see, you understand
What you do, you recognize/realize
(Chinese saying)*

In presentations of Lejre we often use the term **living history** for our activities. In Lejre you can experience, hear, feel, taste and try for yourself (fig. 1-5). To give our guests the best possible experience of the past we attempt to reduce the distance to past realities. We have even tried to eliminate it completely! The game works so remarkably well that our

guests comment on when employees or researchers who do **not** wear costumes. They are surprised, because they expect us to play the game of prehistory at all the time and on all locations.

Living history as a method of communication appeared in the 1960s. Nowadays it is possible to experience living history in very different ways and on very different

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locations. From small museums with a single forge to big theme parks with reconstructed historical environments and employees wearing reconstructed costumes acting “medieval housewife” roles, from which they are not allowed to step out of. Past relations and feelings are thus included in the interpretation to give the guests a total experience of the past.

Lejre is an experimental centre with some elements of living history and hands-on-activities. We find the dialog between employees and guests more important than the total experience of the past. We have a never ending discussion about the differences between archaeological experiments and living history. And we keep a constant focus on the advantages and disadvantages of living history.

Therefore let me start by revealing a secret to you:

The past is dead and gone and will never come back.

At Lejre we reveal this secret to our guests when we tell them that what they are going to experience here is our best qualified guess at re-creating the past.

Of course the guests know this. We all know this! But do the guest truly realise it? Do they know the consequences? May be they do, but rarely to the full extent.

So far we haven't made it easy for our guests to understand what it really means. Partly because we still play the “living history game”. We tell the guests to come and experience what it was like in the past!

But we are not consistent, we still play a game: come and experience what it was like! However, we are planning to change our approach and have our guests involved in a deliberation and reflection on the choices we have made while attempting to reconstruct the culture of our forebears.

Before I go deeper into why we have chosen to do so and how we will do this I would like to introduce some other problems.

Communication of experiences

Living history as a way of communication has a number of advantages, which make it worth using, but also disadvantages that should make us careful about the ways we use it.

Advantages

- it raises concrete questions on the daily life of our forefathers
- it challenges our guests' historical awareness
- the guests will remember more of what they see
- it gives the guests a good feeling of solidarity and mutual connection to our forebears

Disadvantages

- it leaves less to the guests own imagination
- it makes ours guests think that what they see is the truth about the past
- backgrounds, connections, contexts, social and political conditions, religion etc. are hidden behind the material appearances

Now please look at **picture 1**. An Iron Age housewife is cooking a meal for her husband and children. Being there, you might also think we are telling that life in an Iron Age house was one at constant risk of smoke poisoning. Some modern families despite living in such houses for a whole weeks, over several years, haven't yet learnt to make a proper fire without smoke. Wouldn't the people in the past have been better at it? The



Fig. 8 Householders from the 1850's on their way to work in garden and fields. ■



Fig. 3 The 19th century farmers cottages, in use at the Lejre Experimental Centre. ■



Fig. 4 Lavender field near the farmers cottages at the Lejre Experimental Centre. ■



Fig. 5 Iron Age warriors. ■



Fig. 2 Iron Age girl milking a goat. ■



Fig. 9 Iron Age warriors fighting – for fun?! ■



Fig. 1 Iron Age house wife cooking a meal. May be the husband is working outside? Just like in modern families, or? ■



Fig. 7 Ploughing with ard – the ancient plough ■

girls, who visited their grandparents in Pakistan are much more competent than the Danish families. You would also think that we tell a story about the Iron Age fire wood being cut with a chainsaw and piled in large heaps (15 square metres per family for a whole summer use – only for cooking. In reality, wouldn't the children have been sent to collect firewood in the forest instead?

To approach the problem as a whole, how much Iron Age history are we actually communicating by putting a modern family into an Iron Age house? (**Fig. 6**) We are convinced that we are in fact telling as much about the modern families as about the Iron Age. Maybe our guests have the same impulsive impression, as they ask very few questions about the Iron Age when they meet the ancient families. Most questions are about what it is like to live in such houses, wearing itchy clothes and why they choose to spend their summer holidays this way.

More technical questions about Iron Age technology, house building, weaving etc. are asked when our staff are working with the axes or sitting by the loom etc.

Now look at the **picture 2**. Here you may imagine ... stop. With the goat the past and present melts together. With milking, the situation in the past and present must be the same anyway! Preparing food, milking, chopping fire wood et cetera (**fig. 7**) brings modern man very close to the people of the past. I am tempted to say that the more basic and the more sensuous the activities are, the less distance there is between the past and present. During such activities you feel that the people of the past were just like us, even if they lived under different conditions.

It is exactly at this point that communicating the past becomes the most prob-

lematic. It is so easy to step from "they were people just like us" to "they probably lived and thought just like us". This is far from reality. We have to remember that, for example, their religion gave them a fundamentally different understanding of life. That the way things were done in the past was different from modern times. Even in the modern world it is possible to see differences caused by religion in both the functioning of various societies and the everyday life of members of these varied cultures.

Looking at **picture 8** you can imagine that we are telling story about the farmers' children wore beautiful dresses every day and were healthy, clean and well nourished. Looking at **picture 9** you could imagine that Iron Age warriors thought it was fun to go to war. Did they? Et cetera.

The living history communication method is accompanied by compromises and inevitable misunderstandings. Instead of hiding them, we have decided to highlight them!

Communication strategy

During the next few years we will work with information boards describing the different reconstructed areas, crop growing, animal breeding, hunting et cetera. Combined with this, we have decided to point out the problems of "the living past". Instead of extending our spectacle, we would like to place it in a spotlight so our guests will reflect on what they are experiencing, while making their tour through the research centre.

Our expectations for our guests are that

- They will know a little bit about the past when they arrive at Lejre;
- They will remember only a few concrete facts about the past when they leave us.

On the other hand we hope that

- They will be open minded to information and new reflections
- They will be able to see and understand the past in new ways

We would like to use this approach to challenge their historical conscience and their personal views of their own culture. The results of these reflections will be private and we will not see much of them, but hopefully through them our guests will become more resourceful when thinking about the past and, en route, about themselves and their part in the world. However, our hope is that we can work on a more nuanced understanding of concepts such as:

- Primitiveness
- Intelligence
- Development

From this viewpoint of history, we consider our communication to be up to date, topical and relevant.

Beside this, we would like to conceptualise our communication method so that our guests will hopefully leave the research

centre with three, relatively simple, but in our opinion important points:

- Ancient people were not stupid. They lived under different circumstances, but were no more stupid than you or me.
- Our view of the past is continuously changing. New knowledge and new points of view are added all the time and that is why each generation writes its own history (as example, take the history of the Egtved Girl).
- Archaeology through experiment and the “living past” communication method are tools with which to understand and express the legacy of the past. These methods have – like any other method – both advantages and disadvantages. Be critical of your understanding of history just as you are to the present.

Hans Ole Hansen, founder of Lejre Research Centre has recently come across the same problems – and over all with the same conclusions as I do – and that is why I want to close with his words by saying: *“If reflection emerge, it suffices!”*

Summary

Interpretation auf Grundlage von Erfahrungen

In Lejre wird „lebendige Geschichte“ als eine Methode der Geschichtsvermittlung für die Öffentlichkeit genutzt. Diese Methode weist eine Reihe von Vorteilen auf, sie besitzt aber auch Nachteile – sie erzeugt konkrete Fragen zum Alltagsleben und die Besucher erinnern sich vor allem an das, was sie sehen; auf der anderen Seite begrenzt sie aber die Vorstellungskraft der Besucher und lässt sie glauben, dass das was sie sehen, die historische „Wahrheit“ sei. Deshalb wird in Lejre geplant, neue Informationstafeln aufzustellen, die die diversen ausgestellten Bereiche und Themen erläutern und die Probleme der „lebendigen Geschichte“ herausstellen – vor allem auch in Hinblick auf die Tatsache, dass unser Bild von der Vergangenheit kontinuierlich durch neue Informationen und neue Betrachtungsweisen ergänzt und verändert wird.

Histoire vivante

Histoire vivante, c'est une méthode qui est utilisée à Lejre afin de faire connaître l'histoire au public. Cette méthode implique plusieurs avantages et inconvénients - d'une part, elle suggère des idées concrètes concernant la vie quotidienne, les visiteurs retiennent ce qu'ils ont vu, d'autre part, elle limite leur imagination et porte à croire que ce qu'ils voient, c'est la vérité historique. De ce fait on envisage d'introduire, à Lejre, des panneaux d'information qui décrivent différentes activités et qui se réfèrent aux problèmes de l'histoire vivante - c.-à-d. que notre vue du passé ne cesse pas dévoluer à mesure qu'on découvre des réalités et approches nouvelles.