

# Encounters with the Past

## The significance of archaeological festivals in contemporary Poland

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This paper examines the way in which the past is presented, simulated, reenacted, relived and consumed at archaeological festivals in contemporary Poland. Taking as a starting point dominant trends of contemporary consumer and popular culture, it aims to analyse different ways of presenting the past to the general public. It is argued that archaeological festivals are arenas of coexistence of cultural trends of popular culture as consumerism, heritage-oriented tourism as well as ‘sensation-seeking’ and ‘experience-collecting’. Therefore, apart from their educational role, they serve mainly to meet and fulfil different expectations of visitors. The very hybridity of practices adopted by those presenting the past and the intersection of different attitudes and expectations of visitors can lead to pseudo-archaeological illusions of the past-as-wished-for. Yet, this process reveals the unfinished fate of the past in the present.

Consequently, the role of archaeology in this evolving process of popular cultural production will be assessed. This paper will seek to critically evaluate different ways of presenting and encountering the past by stressing their potentials and limits in order to make archaeology relevant to contemporary postmodern consumer society. Finally, it is hoped that it will create an inspirational arena for further discussion about the impact of professional archaeology outside the discipline, ways of communicating it to the general public and help to understand the fascination with the past in the present.

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### *Introduction*

The postmodern world in which we perform our lives is full of contradictions. A contradictory status can also be subsumed to present-day attitudes and approaches to the past that is a result of a dialectic between the scientific creation of a knowledge about the past and its public outreach. The past does not and has never existed in a vacuum. Since

the past is explained within the context of contemporary culture, it has been influenced by diverse factors relating to social policy, economics, religion, technology, communication and development (e.g. Kristiansen 1992). All these factors serve to influence how the past is interpreted, but more importantly how the knowledge about the past is presented to the public and absorbed by

them (Smith 2006:123). It seems reasonable then to approach and translate these contemporary phenomena through the lens of heuristic devices specific for a context in which they exist. Therefore, in a world dominated by mass production, replication, simulation and consumption there is a need to engage with philosophical issues concerning the relationship between past and present in practical terms (Russell 2006:1).

Taking as a starting point pre-eminent trends of contemporary postmodern culture, namely ludic tendencies, consumerism, the erosion of boundaries between the high and the low (e.g. culture and leisure), but also a new way of sensitivity (Jameson 1990; Featherstone 1991; Lash 1991; Bauman 1992, 2000), in the present paper I will focus my attention on the ways of presentation and consumption of the past by the general public during archaeological festivals. It is argued that in a postmodern era the past has become a commodity to be bought and sold in an attractive and spectacular way. However, I do not seek to provide a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of archaeological festivals but only to identify some visible trends present during such events. Also, I am mainly concerned with the average visitor's perception of the presented parts of the past, and not so much with the museum and academic authorities and/or festival organizers. I have deliberately chosen not to analyse educational aspects of archaeological festivals in broad, albeit I am aware that education is believed to be a core element of any archaeological festival; these aspects of presenting the past to the public have been discussed in detail elsewhere (e.g. Stone & Molyneux 1994; Stone & Planel 1999; Jameson 2004; Merriman 2004). What is rather of interest for me is the significance of archaeological festivals within the context of the fascination with the (distant) past in a postmodern consumer society.

### *Fascination with the (distant) past in a contemporary world*

The past has always fascinated people, yet reasons that lay behind people's interest in the past differ according to historical, political, social, cultural and/or personal factors. Postmodernity can be seen as 'restoring to the world what modernity, presumptuously, had taken away; *re-enchantment* of artifice that has been dismantled; the modern conceit of meaning – the world that modernity tried hard to *dis-enchant*' (Bauman 1992:x; emphasis in original). Reference to the past constitutes a significant part of the postmodern culture, albeit the very relationship between present and past is sometimes understood in opposing terms, serving different goals and taking different forms (e.g. Fowler 1992; Walsh 1992; Samuel 1994). On the one hand, the current obsession with the past can be traced in the rapid growth of a 'heritage industry' and efforts aiming at protection, conservation and popularization of a cultural (archaeological) heritage (e.g. Lowenthal 1986, 1996; Kobylński 2001; Fairclough *et al.* 2008), in the popularity of the past and archaeological themes in popular culture on the other (e.g. Holtorf 2005, 2007).

P. Kwiatkowski (2008:39–40) argues that the recent increase in people's interest in the past has been caused by three main factors. According to him, they include: 1) an emergence of the discourse about memory in the last decades (P. Nora); 2) the postmodernist privatization of the past (F. Ankersmit); 3) the growing people's conviction about the possibilities of gaining direct or unmediated access to the past through sensual experience. The last factor listed by Kwiatkowski refers to the circumstances in which sensuality gets the upper hand of intellectual and/or descriptive forms of the encounter with the past, and I will be referring to that issue in more detail later on.

Above-mentioned factors, however, do not constitute the complete list of possibilities. M. Laenen (1989, cited in Goulding 2000:837) argues that the main reason for the massive interest in heritage and the past can be located in the moral, social and identity crisis experienced over the past decades. The key factor here is a question of identity that is both vital, but also a problematic issue in postmodernity, that ‘splits the truth, the standards and the ideal into already deconstructed and about to be deconstructed’ (Bauman 1992:ix). Modernity used to guarantee stable moral and strictly defined categories with clearly defined borders which people could refer to in the process of constructing their identities. On the contrary, in postmodern times people are forced to construct their identities under conflicting trends, being deprived of a sense of truth, belonging, linearity or causality. It causes unavoidable tensions and disturbances of identity and the fragmentation of a ‘self’ (e.g. Caldas-Coulthard & Iedema 2008). We can refer here to a notion of ontological security as defined by A. Giddens (2001). According to Giddens, ontological security is a central concept in giving meaning to people’s lives. It is a stable mental state derived from a sense of order and continuity in regard to the events in a person’s life. It also involves having a positive view of self, the world and the future. If an event occurs that is not consistent with the meaning of an individual’s life, this will threaten that person’s ontological security (Giddens 2001:51ff). Liquid times (Bauman 2007) do not secure or guarantee the sense of ontological security for many who feel existential anxieties. Thus, being faced with the problem of contemporary crisis of identity, many people often turn to a past that appears to be well-defined, stable, constant and predictable. ‘One form of escape from the anxieties of contemporary life is the experience of the

past, packed and sold as authentic’ (Goulding 2000:837). Consequently, people long for a kind of a dreamland of time travels nostalgia, often in an idealized or mythologized form, even for a while. Central to this is a notion of departure and a contrast between what people routinely see and experience and what is extraordinary (Goulding 2000:837). Yet, in this sentimental yearning for the past a question of authenticity of the past is not an issue, as it is primarily imagination and the object of yearning (Lowenthal 1986:4ff). This ‘compensatory hypothesis’ might thus partly explain an escape from the everyday and the attractiveness of time travels, both on individual and group levels. It will be clearly evident in a case of the reenactment movement discussed below.

Apart from this somehow existential dimension of the significance of the past among contemporaries, there is also another reason for the current interest in the past that has been triggered by trends of postmodern popular and consumer culture. As already noted, in a consumer society the past has become a commodity, a commercially driven kind of goods and services, which can be obtained, used and consumed as wished-for. Popular images of archaeological pasts, fuelled by the popularity of Hollywood movies and/or such writers as E. von Däniken or G. Hancock, are shaped by the Indiana Jones syndrome, myths of lost treasures or the mystery of lost civilizations. Although these images are fiercely dismissed by professional archaeologists as fringe, fictional or pseudoscientific (see Fagan 2006), it is hard to deny that they possess a strong influence on people’s understanding of the past as created and/or discovered by archaeologists (e.g. Holtorf 2005, 2007).

The commodification of the past can be claimed to be a hallmark of our times. Moreover, in a postmodern consumer society

people constantly search for stimulation through events and images. Inhabitants of a postmodern world who have been described by Bauman (2000) as 'experience-seekers' and 'sensation-collectors', cannot stand stagnation as they love adventures and pleasures. They turn also to the past as it is a yet to be discovered territory where they can expect really new and challenging experiences (Kwiatkowski 2008:65). In this way cultural and archaeological heritage visits are becoming an alternative kind of entertainment, based on the search by work-weary vacationers for authentic experience (Silberman 2008:138). Furthermore, postmodernism has brought new aesthetic and new sensibility, defined by S. Lash as 'figural' postmodern sensibility, that 'operates through spectator's immersion, the relatively unmediated investment of his/her desire into the cultural object' (Lash 1991:175). Thus, the old-fashioned forms of presenting the past to the public in formal and mostly discursive ways or through static museum exhibitions have been changed as they were no longer sufficient for present-days requirements (e.g. Vergo 1989; Stone & Molyneaux 1994). These trends are closely connected with ludic tendencies (e.g. Grad & Mamzer 2004, 2005), attitudes directed to the search for pleasure, for the fulfilment in the shortest possible time, the need of entertainment. Moreover, they work in harmony with a constant need of present day people to actively participate in recreations of the past, an emphasis on 'hands-on' experiences as well as personal or less didactic, more appealing ways of acquiring knowledge about the past (Shanks 1992; Jasiewicz 2006).

Contemporary trends related to the existing fascination and popularity of experiencing the past have been recently revised by C. Holtorf (2007a). He focuses his attention on the phenomenon of time travelling to the past that is spreading fast in our age. Holtorf

notes that nowadays people of all ages are increasingly interested in getting to know the distant past by the first-hand experience. 'Time travel does not demand a particular intellectual attitude towards either past or present but instead a readiness for an embodied engagement with different realities, involving both body and soul. Time travel is about imagining other worlds from the perspective of somebody actually living in that world, involving all senses' (Holtorf 2007a:130). Examples of this approach include virtual realities, historical films, role play and/or 'living history'. What is of importance here is a particular experience in the present that accounts for the people's interest in the past, not the past itself (see also Holtorf 2007:4ff).

Although many professional archaeologists have been rather sceptical about these new and more and more popular ways of presenting the past to the public, it is hard to deny that they constitute an important element of an engagement with the distant past for many people today, both amateurs and professionals. These new 'encounters' with the past can be largely attested at archaeological festivals, to which I will turn now.

#### *Archaeological festivals*

P. Stone (2005:215) defines four approaches to the presentation of the past: 'academic or theoretical archaeology; indigenous views of the past; school history; and the past as presented to the general public in museums and 'historical sites'. All four approaches have their own priorities and agendas but, although they frequently draw on different sets of data, they have as their common the interpretation of past human activity'. Stone acknowledges that there is a confluence between them but he believes that a true integration of them has not been achieved fully.

Archaeological festivals can be located within the framework of the fourth approach listed by Stone. Thus, they should be seen as a specific kind of presenting scientific archaeological research and experiments to the general public. The history of archaeological festivals dates back to the emergence of experimental archaeology in the 1960s. Experimental archaeology can be described as the systematic approach that is used to test, evaluate and explicate methods, techniques and hypothesis at any level of archaeological research. It includes artefact technology and function experiments, the creation of above-ground structures, based on ground level or below archaeological features or the investigation of destruction processes of objects and structures (Coles 1979; also Hurcombe 2005:83ff). Experimental archaeology must not be confused with a ‘festival archaeology’<sup>1</sup> or reenactment activities, yet the research versus presentation dichotomy lies at the heart of current discussion over what constitutes experimental archaeology today. It is generally agreed that since experimental archaeology serves scientific goals, festival archaeology and reenactment activities are mainly concerned with the presentation of the knowledge about the past (for a detailed discussion see Nowaczyk 2007; Bogacki 2008).

With the advent of experimental archaeology we can observe taking the past out of museum cabinets to environmental exhibitions of heritage centres which try to recreate the air of the past, at the same transforming the passive gazing in museums into active participation in the past. Archaeological festivals are closely connected with new forms of popularization and consumption of the past and heritage, within the frameworks of museums that blend public outreach, reenactment, living history and experimentation (e.g. Elliot-Wright 2000; Merriman

2004; Forrest 2008). In the last decades the past has been efficiently and successfully presented, relived and staged in archaeological open-air museums across Europe, the most famous of which are Jorvik Viking Centre, York, UK, Lejre Historical-Archaeological Centre in Denmark, Butser Ancient Farm in Hampshire, UK and Archeon in The Netherlands<sup>2</sup>. These centres of living (pre)history serve for both scientific research and the presentation of archaeology to the public, offering many previously unknown ways of getting to know about the past. ‘The public, walking around visitor centres, are not doing experimental archaeology any more than is a visitor to a museum, but the centres are more likely to offer demonstrations or participation in some activities allowing the public to learn about the past by means of experience. Since active participation is a powerful educational tool, such centres offer good opportunities for promoting archaeology to individuals, educational groups and organizations’ (Hurcombe 2005:83–84).

While open-air museums, archaeological centres or theme parks in which the recreation of the past life is presented to visitors on a regular basis for the whole year, are not very common in Poland<sup>3</sup>, the proliferation of archaeological festivals can be seen as a hallmark of a contemporary heritage industry. Every year, there are several festivals that differ in scale, duration, number of visitors, thematic scope, the level of professionalization, popularity and/or degree of commercialization. Some of them have already been acclaimed as an absolutely ‘must-see’ not only for tourists from Poland but also for foreign visitors, as is the case of a remarkable archaeological festival in Biskupin (Kuryłło 2007). Other well-known festivals include ‘Żelazne Korzenie’ in Starachowice, ‘Yotvingian Festival’ in Szwajcaria near Su-

walki<sup>4</sup>, 'Slavs and Vikings Festival' on Wolin<sup>5</sup>, 'Dymarki Świętokrzyskie' in Nowa Słupia<sup>6</sup> and, 'The Slavs and Cistercians Festival' in Łąd nad Wartą.

Although in this paper I will be mainly referring to the annual archaeological festival in Biskupin, general tendencies observable at archaeological festivals are similar. The museum in Biskupin organized Poland's first archaeological *festival* in 1995, inviting reenactors from different time periods, archaeologists and other experts to demonstrate their experiments to the public. Since then, once a year, usually during the third week of September, over 70,000 of the 250,000 total yearly visitors, mostly school children, come to visit this largest and the most famous archaeological festival in Europe (Piotrowski 1996 [1997]; Piotrowski 2000:25–26; Zajączkowski 2001). The initial stimulus for their organization came from local museums as a consequence of a market economy and changing socio-political reality after the fall of Communism in Poland in

1989 (Piotrowska 1997–1998:277; Piotrowski 2000). The staging of archaeological festivals has been primarily devised to seduce and appeal to visitors different in terms of social and educational backgrounds and serves current visitors requirements. From their beginning they are believed to be a good way of popularization of archaeology, archaeological heritage and knowledge about the past among the public. It is easy to notice that such ways of denoting knowledge about the past differ from traditional museum visits where the past is usually exhibited in showcases in a static manner, described, ordered, organized and authorized by professionals. While visiting a museum 'visitors are not allowed to touch the finds, and both the glass case and the label create additional distance. In such a presentation the past is both commodified and fetishized, while at the same time it precludes any alternative discourse on the meaning of the objects' (Sommer 1999:166; also Shanks & Tilley 1987:68–99). On the



Figure 1. Biskupin. A reconstruction of a gate and a watchtower, 2005. Photo: Michał Pawleta.

contrary, the past as presented, recreated and relived during archaeological festivals allows non-professionals new opportunities and enables them to experience it in previously unimaginable ways. We can refer here to a neologism 'edutainment' that means, according to T. Edensor (2002:85), 'less didactic form of instruction, where affecting, sensual and mediatised stagings combine with a culture of instruction to produce a synthetic form'. Thus, edutainment as a form of entertainment that is designed to educate as well as amuse is specific for contemporary society and describes the model of gaining knowledge in an attractive way. In a similar vein, many archaeologists have argued that proper mixing of education and entertainment, 'hands-on' experience and direct engagement with the past through its reconstructions, reenacted activities, performances and presentations have a greater impact on people's understanding of prehistory than knowledge gleaned from books (Nowaczyk 2007; Wrzesiński 2008).

No less important than educational aspects of festivals (and 'archaeocentres' in general) are scientific goals since festivals create a suitable testing ground for techniques, ideas and hypotheses and conclusions about past processes that would otherwise moulder unverified in the stacks of university libraries (e.g. Forrest 2008). Finally, economic aspects have a role to play as festivals create a good fundraising opportunity for local museums, marketing of leisure activities and entertainment in a particular region of a country as well as stimulation of subsidiary economic activities and development of heritage tourism.

Although all these aspects are important and must be taken into account while assessing the significance of archaeological festivals, I will now focus my attention on the very manner of presenting and/or consuming of the past during such events.

### *The consumed past at archaeological festivals*

When trying to describe any archaeological festival in heuristic terms it seems profitable to look at them as arenas of coexistence of cultural trends of popular and consumer culture such as consumerism, heritage-oriented tourism, simulations as well as 'sensation-seeking' and 'experience-collecting'. It is interesting to note that very often we find during such events the mixing of the principles of the museum (the preservation and handing down of the past), of the theatre (the representation of the past), and of the shopping mall (the consumption of the past). Thus, archaeological festivals can be seen as places of cultural consumption of selected parts of a (pre)history. Although for many visitors to archaeological festivals it is an apparently passive process of consumption, similar to the variety of practices that take place at many tourist sites as walking, gazing, photographing, and so on, for other it is not a process that is received passively. Nevertheless, I have listed some generalized approaches, focusing mainly on the ways in which the past is presented to visitors and consumed by them. These aspects include: 1) the past for sale; 2) the past as simulacrum; 3) the past as a trick photo; 4) the past as a spectacle; 5) the past as an entertainment. However, they should not be approached as sanitized or separated but rather as mutually interwoven issues, consisting for a full experience. I shall now present a very brief and, of necessity, oversimplified characterization of these general trends.

#### 1. The past for sale

Many scholars argue that consumption is one of the central concepts of contemporary culture and society (Miller 1987, 1995; Ritzer 2001). In short, consumption refers to a dialectic relationship between production and consumption of particular products such as goods and services. J. Baudrillard

has focused on consumption as a symbolic and semiotic rather than strictly utilitarian activity. He has sought to extend consumption from goods not only to services, but to virtually everything else. In his view, in a consumer society 'anything can become a consumer object' (Baudrillard 1998:158). Therefore, consumption must not be restricted only to commodities and services, but should be extended to the consumption of signs and texts, more specifically signs and texts found in history and popular culture (e.g. Jameson 1990; Featherstone 1991).

It has been already argued that in a contemporary society the past has become a commodity. 'The commodification of the past is a part of trajectory on which more and more aspects of social life and localized resources become objects for consumption' (Baram & Rowan 2004:6). Thus, this cultural consumption of (archaeological) pasts is a part of a wider trend, that of cultural consumption of history in general, and is closely linked with heritage tourism (Rowan & Baram 2004; Urry 2007:154ff). Nowadays, in many interpretative centres such as museums, open-air museums, heritage places, or reconstructed structures the past in different facets is being bought and sold as commodity, the more interesting the more idyllic, spectacular and idealized it is (see Ritzer 1999; MacCannell 2005). Archaeological festivals thus provide a suitable space for consumption of the past where the very product of archaeological research is offered to visitors in a form of consumable images, representations, narratives and experiences. At archaeological festivals the past is thus consumed at different, but mutually intertwined levels, as: 1) time (the journey into the distant past; 'time travels'); 2) space (the journey into undiscovered territories); 3) materialities/things (material replicas, copies, artefacts and/or reconstructed structures); 4) events/activities

(demonstration of ancient crafts and production processes); 5) spectacles (reenacted activities and presentations; living history; combat reenactments); 6) myths (contemporary images and/or stereotypes of the distant past, e.g. gender stereotypes; idealized/sentimentalized past; life in a harmony with nature, etc.); 7) the created aura of the past.

As already noted, archaeological festivals offer visitors the past as a product to be consumed. Moreover, they offer visitors a whole range of activities and experiences to consume in a form of simulacra, spectacles and entertainment. I will now discuss these issues in more detail.

## 2. The past as simulacrum

One immanent feature of any archaeological festival and generally of any form of recreation of the past is a concept of distance that denotes re-presentation of what is no longer accessible to us, re-presentation of the absent past. Having no direct access to the past reality we have to admit that our point of reference, that is the reality of the past, can only be the imagined one (e.g. Shanks & Tilley 1987). What is then at stake at archaeological festivals is not the past reality itself, but present images of it, shaped by modern conditions, interests and expectations.

French philosopher J. Baudrillard has claimed that nowadays we live in the era of simulations. According to him (2001:166) simulation 'is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal'. Consequently, simulacrum can be understood as a copy without original. The widespread existence of simulations, in the world of consumption and elsewhere, contributes enormously to the erosion of the distinction between the real and the imaginary, between the true and the false. In fact, according to Baudrillard, the real world has been lost for



the simulated one. Baudrillard (2001:170) argues that there are four main dimensions to the simulacrum. It has been proposed by C. Goulding (2000:848) that they can be applied to the experience encountered at various types of heritage interpretations. We may further extend them to the reality of archaeological festivals. Thus, the successive phases of the simulacrum are as follows: 1) 'it is a reflection of a basic reality' (as pure interpretation is impossible); 2) 'it masks and perverts a basic reality' (it refers to the selective portrayal of a (pre)history); 3) 'it masks the absence of a basic reality' (it hides the absence of certain realities what in consequence causes that the general product is being accepted as authentic); 4) 'it bears no relation to any reality' (it refers to 'hyperreal' experiences which purport to be more than a pure spectacle).

Thus, simulacrum might refer us to any attempt of the construction of the past reality in the present. During archaeological festivals the past is being resurrected, replicated, simulated and relived by different means. Objectification of the past in the form of material replicas or material reconstructions bears traces of unavoidable simplification, yet it is necessary in order to reach visitors diverse in terms of social and educational backgrounds. At archaeological festivals participants and visitors are given a sense of stepping back in time, and experience the past 'how it really was' through carefully selected means of interpretation. We can further list some general but intertwined levels of simulations, namely these of place, people, activities and artefacts.

*Simulated places.* Archaeological festivals often take place at 'reconstruction sites' in which full-scale images of the past have been created for reasons such as archaeological experimentation, tourism and education (see Stone & Planel 1999; Blockley 2000). Their very location thus constitutes a

suitable scenery on which the past is staged and performed: near medieval strongholds, within ruins of castles, on a territory of archaeological open-air museums or reservation sites.

Biskupin is an open air museum famous for the fragments and reconstructions of parts of its wooden fortifications from an Iron Age. There are two parallel rows of barrack like huts that are surrounded by a wooden dyke and fortified embankments with a tower, a gate and a footbridge (Piotrowska 1997–1998; Zajaczkowski 2001:7ff). These re-constructions of dwelling houses with furnished interiors and the craftsmen workshops constitute an arena for activities that take place during the festival and virtually possess strong visual potential for visitors. However, they help to create the aura of the past where the felt past can be seen as 'a function of atmosphere and locale' (Lowenthal 1985:240). Although Biskupin is not an original archaeological site, it is believed by many to mimic that of the past. The Biskupin reconstructions are based on detailed archaeological evidence and their credibility is accredited by authorities and as such are not easily dismissed as superficial. Yet, as with every physical reconstruction of archaeological sites, they can never accurately reflect the past. Thus, they should not be seen as a real reconstruction of an actual place but rather as constructions based on fragmentary archaeological material evidence and contemporary interpretations of the past (Piotrowska 1997–1998; Stone & Planel 1999a:2; see also papers in Stone & Planel 1999). Therefore, such a version of the past in a form of reconstructed structures, even the most precise ones, is a fake, as U. Sommer (1999:166) argues, a simulacrum.

*Simulated activities.* A large part of reconstruction and production processes at archaeological festivals is based on the evidence known from archaeological investiga-

tions, methods of archaeological experiments, as well as ethnographic and/or historical sources. Most often they are presented in a theatrical manner by professionals and reenactment groups who specialize in presenting the past to the public (e.g. Elliot-Wright 2000; Bogacki 2008). While some of such exhibits may be conducted in character as a representation of typical everyday life, others are specifically organized to inform the public and so might include an emphasis on handicrafts or other day-to-day activities, which are convenient to stage and interesting to watch. Depending on the historical period portrayed, these might include spinning, sewing, loom weaving, cloth dyeing, basket weaving, leather-working, shoe-making, metalworking, woodworking or other crafts.

These activities can differ with regard to the level of credibility and/or professionalization of those who perform them. Sometimes they are performed more loosely in an imaginative way, as with aspects of prehistoric spiritual life that cannot be accurately measured by archaeologists. Moreover, results of archaeological experiments 'can never give complete proof, but they can show possibility' (Hurcombe 2005:84). Consequently, even those presentations based on strong archaeological evidence are simulations due to a lack of direct access to the past reality. Nevertheless, these moving, living and interactive presentations have abilities to involve and occupy the visitor to a greater degree than a static representation and can help them to see 'how it worked' out or 'how it could be made'.

*Simulated people.* However, not only are the reenacted activities simulations, but so are the reenactors, that is people who work in them and the interactions that take place between people who dress up in a variety of costumes and play well-defined roles in the recreation and staging of a prehistoric life.

During festivals they are used to convey a sense of the everyday life in a certain period of prehistory. Additionally, different crafts and activities are presented by museum workers, experimental archaeologists or students of archaeology. Although for most reenactors it is a kind of entertainment or a hobby, for some it is a matter of personal self-identification, a way of creating a particular image of themselves in a mythic reality (Radtchenko 2006:134). Further, a small number of people make this activity their main source of income. In Poland, reenactors are organized in informal groups and most often connect their activities with the history of their home country, with a particular period of (pre)history, or with historical (ethnic) communities as Slavs (e.g. 'Eisen Ruoth', 'Tryglaw'), Vikings (e.g. 'Jomsborg Viking Hird', 'Winland') or Celts ('Celtica')<sup>7</sup>.

Historical reenactment can be divided into two, often supplementary categories, namely living history and combat reenactment (Bogacki 2008:227–228). It is often quite commercialized and diverse activity. For example, on a webpage of the reenactment group 'Walhalla' from Poznań one can read: 'if you have the desire to travel back in time – then please contact us'. Their activities involve 'historical reenactment from the centuries of antiquity to the days of Polish nobility'. They have worked alongside the Museum in Biskupin and co-organised 'The Viking Festival' on Wolin, and also took part in the making of Polish cinema films. Additionally, as announced on their webpage, their other 'specialities' include such strictly commercial activities as 'the organisation of historical events for town and city festivals', 'the preparation of integration events – an unforgettable attraction during conferences, events, training seminars and hotel receptions' and 'adding special attraction to advertising campaigns'<sup>8</sup>.

*Simulated artefacts.* Last but not least, ar-

archaeological festivals are dominated by material simulacra. At a festival there are no 'authentic' or 'original' artefacts that can be seen only through the glass of a showcase in museums. Most visitors are thus quite aware that what they see are only copies and replicas. These copies, unlike originals known from archaeological excavations, are in a complete state of preservation. Yet, because they are not originals, visitors are allowed to touch or use them. Moreover, they can also participate in the production of 'prehistoric' artefacts such as pottery vessels or a flint blade, while being guided by an expert.

Reenactors often pay great attention to details of their costumes or armour sets, hand made using ancient methods. Although they create copies, considerable research is often applied by them to identify 'authentic' techniques and 'authentic' materials in recreating replica tools and equipment since the tangible authenticity of objects is one of the

most significant goals of their activities (Radtchenko 2006:130). These material simulacra, in the form of 'authentic replicas' and 'original copies' (Holtorf & Schadla-Hall 1999:236ff), are based on archaeological finds and include portable handmade artefacts as ancient jewellery, costume, weaponry, pottery and/or household goods. These 'exact copies' of prehistoric artefacts made by using ancient methods or at least styled after originals are willingly purchased by tourists and then taken home as mementos of the past. Additionally, at any festival there are many more tourist souvenirs such as photos, pendants and other low-quality gadgets made of wood, clay or plastic, that are intended mainly for kids. They are purchased not for their historical value, but because they are suitable commodities to commemorate a trip and 'represent what the tourist/shopper takes away from her experience of the site' (Gazin-Schwartz 2004:101).



Figure 2. Material simulacra. Copies of prehistoric amulets and whistles being sold at archaeological festival 'Medieval Fair' in Chudów, Poland, 2008. Photo: Michał Pawleta.

All dimensions of simulations attested at archaeological festivals mask the absence of the past reality and at the same denote the unfinished fate of the past in a present. Perhaps the most important reason for their creation, or transforming 'real' phenomena into simulations, is that they can be made more spectacular than their counterparts, and, therefore, a greater lure to consumers (Ritzer 1999:104). However, as appealing or realistic as they can appear, they are what Ritzer (1999:110) has termed 'authentic simulations' and 'simulated versions of originals'. Thus, although some visitors seek authenticity at archaeological festivals (e.g. Wróblewska 2006), they are condemned to consume pseudo experiences since the past presented there unavoidably takes the form of simulation. It seems however, authenticity in a sense of originality, as the postmodernists use the word, is actually irrelevant (e.g. Szpocinski 2005). Authenticity, as the participants themselves use it, more often denotes an approximation of the original (Hart 2007:107). Therefore, for many visitors the perceived, 'pastness' is more important than the real past. According to Holtorf (2005:124), the experience of the pastness is very much defined by values of each present rather than by what is actually still there from the past (Holtorf 2005:124). Thus, probably he is right while arguing that 'current fashions in rhetoric, revivalism, resurrectionism, and reenactments give substance to Baudrillard's supposition that simulacra – copies for which there are no originals – can take the place of originals with no loss' (Holtorf 2008:129).

### 3. The past as a trick photo

It can further be argued that the past presented at archaeological festivals takes the form of a trick photo, a photomontage. During a festival the past is cut out fragment

after fragment and these fragments of the past from different times and spaces are pieced together in such a manner as to mask the incoherence (Gajewska 2005:170). Thus, objects are replicated, simulated or recreated in a new context, what Baudrillard calls the moebius-spiral of artificiality (Sommer 1999:167; Baudrillard 2001:174ff). In this process we can observe the temporal suspension of time and space. First, there is the negation of diachronic perspective in order to cumulate events in the space. Every year Biskupin is a meeting place for different craftsmen presenting activities related to different periods of time. Although organizers of the Biskupin festival try to avoid a repeatability of events and choose annually one specific topic as a leitmotif, during the festival time plenty of ancient and medieval crafts of different civilizations are shown parallel to the main topical event (Zajączkowski 2001:56–57). Second, the space is suspended. It is difficult to expect a long-term success of any festival if the same spectacles are offered again and again. Thus, in order not to allow such situations to happen, each Biskupin festival is themed, for example 'In the shadows of the pyramids' (2001), 'Indian Summer' (2003), 'Balts – the northern neighbours of Slavs' (2007), or 'Japan – not only samurai land' (2008).

Such an eclectic version of the past, evidenced through the temporary suspension of time and space, is thus characterized by a marked hybridity of practices and attitudes, a mixture of different events separated one from another by an epoch or a space. This hybridity and the intersection of different images is intended to meet visitor expectations as it allows them to choose from the great offer of reconstructed parts of the past as they like. However, such a strategy poses a risk; Visitors can observe situations that could not have happened in the past reality,

such as North American Indians or Ancient Egyptians walking in the (re)constructed Iron Age fortified village. Such a scenario creates an image of Biskupin as a ‘Prehistoric Disneyland’ and sometimes evokes ironic comments in the press. For example, calling it a ‘national kitsch’, K. Czubkowska has commented on the 12<sup>th</sup> festival in Biskupin ‘Romans and Barbarians’ in 2006: ‘tourists will have an opportunity to observe a reenactment of gladiatorial combat and the construction of the Roman tracks. They will be allowed to make and then fire the clay vessels in an oven that had been reconstructed by using ancient methods. Students of archaeology, dressed in costumes stylized in Roman-like manner, will be entertaining them as ladies or noble senators. There will be also a reconstruction of the battle of the Roman legions. And no one will care that the Roman legionary had never put his foot on the Polish land’ (Czubkowska 2006, my translation).

Such a market strategy of organizers providing a great number of attractions during any festival is partly explicable. Moreover, the fragmented nature of the archaeological record and/or archaeological interpretations are such that often it is extremely difficult to produce diverse presentations concerned with a particular period of time. Yet, ‘such interpenetrative hybrids may include anachronism, lack of congruence, fantasy, the overlaying of ‘like’ and ‘unlike’ in order to stimulate the imagination of the spectator’ (Pearson & Shanks 2001:119). Thus, hybridity as attested at archaeological festivals causes the lack of chronological or cultural framework of the presentation. As such, it might leave many visitors with a false impression that the past was or can be as-wished-for, regardless of any temporal and spatial context. Consequently, it can often take the form of a parody or a pastiche (Goulding 2000:838–839; Brzeziński 2001:187–188).

#### 4. The past as a spectacle

The reality as attested at archaeological festivals is unlike archaeological reality in which what is usually left of the past is known only through fragments (e.g. Lucas 2001). On the contrary, at festivals there is no debris, visitors can observe the entire ancient production processes, copies of artefacts are complete and reenactors and craftsmen convincingly explain the arcane of prehistoric techniques. Thus, there the knowledge about the past and the past are pristine.

G. Debord, in ‘The Society of the Spectacle’ (2006), describes the development of a modern society in which authentic life has been replaced with its representations: ‘everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation’ (Debord 2006:33). He states also that ‘in societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*’ (Debord 2006:33; emphasis in original).

It can be argued that archaeological festival is an accumulation of spectacles. These spectacles range from small-scale events to engaging dozens of participants, as in the case of reenactments of battles. As noted above, these performances usually take place in a (pre)historical location which is aimed to create the unforgettable aura of the past. Thus, these activity based places are sensuous places when all visitor senses, not merely sight, are engaged: they can smell the past, taste prehistoric dishes, hear the buzzing voices of conducted activities, or even touch ‘original copies’ of prehistoric artefacts. Archaeological festivals might also be described as spectacular in that sense that what is of great importance is the form of presentation of the knowledge about the prehistory of the human species by employing the scenographic devices and dramatic techniques of theatrical practice. They often make use of ‘interpretive agents, actors, normative techniques such as characterization,

impersonation and plot to re-create supposedly authentic images of the past' (Pearson & Shanks 2001:68). Therefore, the message of archaeological festivals is based mainly on icons, pictures, performances and spectacles, leaving behind description as dull and unattractive. Consequently, the festival activities presented every year in Biskupin and at other festivals across Poland involve presentations of the making of ancient pottery, flintknapping, spinning, sewing and loom weaving. They also include recreation of such crafts as jewellery, minting and weaponry, experiments with wood tar and pitch distilling processes, baking bread as well as smelting iron in furnaces. Yet, the most spectacular attractions, and consequently arousing the most interest of visitors of every festival, are knights' tournaments and/or battle reenactments.

This mimetic play is virtually far more at-

tractive than static and descriptive ways of presentation of the past in museums as it possess the ability of having strong visual and emotional impact on visitors. Therefore, these reenactment presentations can be seen as spectacles oriented to fulfil different expectations of visitors, at the same aiming to paraphrase the title of Ritzer's book (1999) 'enchant a disenchanted world'. Pearson & Shanks (2002:113) have been sceptical about outdoor museums, claiming that 'the lack of heavy and detailed interpretive presence offering information and historical, chronological and social context could bring the criticism that visits verge on the historically incoherent, being more to do with spectacle and entertainment than the 'real' past. This reservation also seems to be true as far as archaeological festivals are concerned. Although being an influential educational tool in conveying the knowledge about the past



Figure 3. Battle reenactment. 'Medieval Fair' archaeological festival in Chudów, Poland, 2008. Photo: Michał Pawleta.

to visitors, archaeological festivals confirm one of the Debord's thesis that 'the spectacle is the chief product of present-day society' (Debord 2006:37).

#### 5. The past as an entertainment – archaeological festival as a part of carnival world

The majority of presented activities are intended to convey the knowledge about the past through entertainment. Thus, visitors are encouraged to discover numerous aspects of prehistoric life by themselves, being guided by archaeological interpreters or by reenactors, albeit sometimes with less stringent standards of authenticity. In addition to education, the very visit to archaeological festival reminds us of a past time. Visitors are welcome to entertain and amuse themselves and take the advantage of all facilities similar to those usually known from visiting tourist attractions or from holiday, and archaeological festivals have many to offer in this respect. Visitors of Biskupin are offered a lot of services in the form of drinks, alcoholic beverages, barbecue or food prepared according to old recipes and served in clay pots styled after ancient ones. There are numerous possibilities to buy souvenirs, material mementos of a visit to a festival. Tourists can also sail on a small ship on the Biskupin Lake for a small fee. Moreover, they can participate in strictly amusing activities, often in a form of competition, such as bow shooting, axe or spear throwing, horse riding, duels or playing ancient games as well as bathing, dancing, singing, fortune-telling or making a prehistoric tattoo.

All of the described activities possess ludic features and are connected with an amusement, play and entertainment that are seen by many scholars as icons for the consumption of mass reception of culture and education in a postmodern society. J. Huizinga in his famous book 'Homo ludens' (1985) saw

the instinct for play as the central element in human culture by claiming that all human activities are playing. For Huizinga the importance of the play element of culture and society is a necessary condition of the generation of culture. In a similar vein, R. Caillois (1973) has demonstrated the degree to which games and play are universal characteristics of human behaviour and essential to the understanding of human experience. However, the immanent characteristic of any archaeological festival can be best described by M. Bakhtin's theory of carnivalisation as defined in 'Rabelais and His World' (1984). In a carnival the high, the elevated, the official, even the sacred, is degraded and debased, but as a condition of popular renewal and regeneration. The carnival atmosphere allows a temporary suspension and inversion of established social norms, a moment of chaos and creativity. Yet, carnival is not merely a spectacle seen by the people as they live in it and everyone participates, because its very idea embraces all people (Bakhtin 1984:7; also Denith 1995:63ff; Dudzik 2005).

The very interesting interpretation of archaeological festivals in light of Bakhtin's theory of carnivalisation has been recently proposed by Ł. Dominiak (2004). He considers them as a part of carnival world and draws analogies between the Renaissance carnival and contemporary archaeological festivals. They include: 1) both events take place once a year; 2) there is a temporal suspension and overturning of serious scientific rules and boundaries during the festival; 3) a predominance of a festive-popular atmosphere and forms; 4) a hybridization and mixing of incompatible discourses during the festival (e.g. scientific with popular); 5) the majority of events offered to people in a form of competition; 6) the presence of strictly ludic activities (e.g. dancing, playing,

consumption of food and drinks, bloodless battle reenactments; 7) the possibility to hear 'mythic' (semi-scientific, semi-popular) stories; 8) like a carnival, an archaeological festival is 'time beyond time' and 'space beyond space' (Dominiak 2004:86).

Thus, an archaeological festival is a kind of a secular feast out of ordinary life and/or time, experienced in an unusual, pleasurable and unforgettable atmosphere. These events let people come together without the limitations of conventions or hierarchy. Regardless of many similarities, however, Renaissance carnivals must not be confused with mere entertainment as they fulfilled important social roles, namely pushing aside the seriousness and the hierarchies of civil and religious authorities and power relationship (Dudzic 2005:106–107). Consequently, they served different goals than archaeological festivals whose prime goal is education through entertainment. Nevertheless, the theory of carnivalisation allows us to look at archaeological festivals through the lens of ludic tendencies and entertainment that are characteristic for contemporary consumer society. Dominiak (2004:84) is rather sceptical as far as educational aspects of festivals are concerned. He claims that their popularity has nothing to do with the attractiveness of the journey into the distant past, or with the discovery of the knowledge about the past. For him, the very reason for their popularity among visitors is caused by their ludic aspect. Having based his arguments on N. Postman's (1985) analysis of the deceptive role of the modern media, he states that the attractiveness of 'playing the past' lies not in the past itself, but in the very attractiveness of the play. Therefore teaching and learning about the past, believed to be core elements of any archaeological festival, are only a daydream as festivals are intended to be vastly amusing events.

### *Concluding remarks*

In conclusion, archaeological festivals can be seen as an arena for the operation of three fundamental aspects, namely mimesis, *hybris* and *ludens* (Dominiak 2004:86). First, *mimesis*<sup>9</sup> that refers to an imitation and representation, being a main principle of any festival. Through a temporal suspension of time and space and through mimetic spectacles of the past in the present, the distance that separates us from the past reality is being refuted and visitors are given a sense of 'how it really was in the past'. Second, *hybris* that relates to intersection of irrelevant discourses (e.g. education and entertainment). This eclecticism results from a dissonance between expectations of visitors and the fragmentary evidence from the past that constitutes the basis for its re-constructions. Coexistence of opposing forms is possible due to the carnival atmosphere of a festival. And last but not least, *ludens*, which makes popular-scientific festivals full of life. Ludic elements are ensured by the presence of numerous participants, both professionals and non-professionals, carnival atmosphere and by getting rid of a scientific seriousness of the archaeological message.

Although archaeological festivals are an easy target for academic criticism, undoubtedly they are becoming more and more popular among the wider public. It is doubtless that they serve positive goals, namely educational, scientific and economic, to mention a few. They are not only a good way of educating the public about the past in an attractive manner, but also of popularization of archaeology and archaeological heritage. Of the key importance here is 'hands-on' approach that constitutes a vital part of encounters with the past and/or experiencing it.

However, as I have tried to demonstrate, encounters with the past as attested at ar-



archaeological festivals possess some dangers. The threads are twofold. First, there is a risk of blending the past to popular tastes and market demands. Thus, every form of presentation of the past, even that deprived of historical context, might be worth presenting if only it can arouse interest of visitors. Such a strategy often involves sacrifice of scientific authenticity and reliability. As a consequence, popularization of the knowledge about the past without any serious discussion can threaten scholarly credibility. Second, archaeological festivals create a false image of archaeological practice and archaeological interpretations of the past. For example, copies of complete artefacts presented to visitors, or a reenactor as an expert who knows how it *really* was in the past, are unlike archaeological reality. Thus, what a visitor is offered is the idealized version of the past. Furthermore, an emphasis placed on the spectacular, the popular, the pleasurable and immediately accessible during the festival can strengthen visitor impressions that access to the past can be easy and possible for everyone. Thus, scientific archaeological research and interpretation of the past can be trivialized in a public outlook or become a burlesque, redefined by a perpetual round of entertainments and spectacles.

All these reservations seem to be urgent in the light of the recent commodification and/or commercialization of the past as observed through the proliferation of archaeological festivals in Poland and elsewhere. This trend is conjectural with the rapid 'heritage-ization' that is now becoming an effective industry within a free market society, dominated by consumption, the acceleration of life and mass tourism (e.g. Baram & Rowan 2004). Yet, although a visit to an archaeological festival is to experience an essentially artificial (constructed) past, it is not one which is received passively by many visitors who seek authentic experi-

ences. It is important then to remember, as Pearson & Shanks (2001:115) argue, that consumption of the past does not mean that the past is necessarily served up for a consumer society, but it (potentially) means that it is taken within the self. There is a need to comprehend then how the public absorbs information about the past during such events and generally how societies remember the past (Urry 1996:55). Here is the key role archaeology has to play in this process. The real challenge for archaeological festivals is thus, to strike a balance between providing accurate information about the past with scholarly credibility whilst at the same time engaging the interest of visitors in a stimulating and accessible manner.

#### Notes

1. A term coined by S. Nowaczyk (2007).
2. An exhaustive presentation of archaeological open air museums in Europe can be found at [www.publicarchaeology.eu](http://www.publicarchaeology.eu).
3. The noble exception in this respect is Museum in Biskupin ([www.biskupin.pl](http://www.biskupin.pl)). Nowadays, there are some new initiatives undertaken in this respect, as for example in 'Karpacka Troja' in Trzcinica ([www.muzeum.krosno.pl/troja/trzcinica.html](http://www.muzeum.krosno.pl/troja/trzcinica.html)) or an archaeological village and centre of experimental archaeology in Wola Radziszowska near Kraków ([www.dziejba.org](http://www.dziejba.org)).
4. [www.festyn.suwalszczyzna.net](http://www.festyn.suwalszczyzna.net)
5. [www.jomsborg-vineta.com](http://www.jomsborg-vineta.com)
6. [www.dymarki.pl](http://www.dymarki.pl)
7. An updated overview of reenactment groups relating to different periods of (pre)history in Poland can be found at 'The Great Register of Robert Bagrit' ([www.bagrit.pl](http://www.bagrit.pl)).
8. [www.walhalla.com.pl](http://www.walhalla.com.pl)
9. Mimesis in its simplest use means imitation or representation. However, I refer here to mimesis as defined in Aristotelian tradition of poetics. For Aristotle, mimesis involves not only imitation or replication, but also framing of reality and thus imposes creativity (see Melberg 2002:54).

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