



## Re-Enactments of Historical Seafaring Between Experimental Archaeology and Constructions of Identity

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### ABSTRACT

The paper discusses re-enactments of historical sea-journeys as connecting history of seafaring to the discussion of collective memory. Also, the role of lay-persons and experts on history and the role of re-enactments for communicating history are negotiated.

The paper looks on various re-enactments and their focus in execution and in presentation, and how these try to bind in to current discussions of history and its meaning for society.

For the discussion re-enactments are differentiated into re-building ships (and boats), retravelling historical journeys, experimenting with historical forms and ways of navigation, handling the vessel or even live on board. The paper concludes that as long as the participants understand about the unbridgeable gap between the past and the present, they can learn and tell a lot about how things most likely worked in the past and how this relates to the present, as one can understand, how people connect to the past, how sense is made of practices and artefacts from the past. The references in each choice of events to be re-enacted inform us on the construction of continuities and dis-continuities. The same is given in each choice of ship to be re-built. It is crucial to analyse the underlying canon of references: specific periods appeal more than others, they are attributed with importance in re-telling the past. The choices and omissions help to understand the current construction of historic developments that shaped the present.

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### 1. Introduction

The past is a foreign country, they do things differently there (Hartley 2004,5). And they do indeed. Their reports are of varying quality and depth: depending on the cultural and other knowledge of authors and recipients, they can be filled with meaning. The way things were done, machines worked, artefacts were constructed, occurrences and incidents were interpreted, and how general and particular working and living conditions were – all this can be deduced from the records. But a lot is left open. It has to. And it is human to try to fill the gaps in the understanding of things past and present. For all past is focussed by the present.

Memory is a method by which historical data can be brought to life and fruitfully contextualised with depth, detail and alternative perspective, while historical enquiry can help make sense of the changing role of memory over historical time (Keightley 2008, 191).

And so does re-enactment as a method. While history might be considered an object of academic disciplines, her-

itage can be described as communication of history. But every simplification like this immediately leads to the question of authority in reading and interpreting, in presenting and teaching history. There are very different forms of acquainting oneself with historical issues like specific sea-journeys, which are at the focus of this paper. But they, like other forms of re-enactments, are experiments in documenting and reflecting on historic conditions of life. Beyond that, re-enactments generate memories and connect historic topics to the present, or as Jorge González expressed it: They “re-tell the past to re-negotiate the presence and open-up for alternative developments” (González 2012).

There are many ways to gain more understanding of sources and their messages. Re-enactments are one method to fill the gaps in the reports and knowledge we have of past events (and non-events) that combines hands-on experiences and assessment of possible truth in historical reports or reconstructions of the past. But there are different kinds of re-enactments, not all can be considered as re-constructing aspects of the past to re-evaluate them in exchange and interrelation to scientific progress. The opposite extremes might be described as experimental archaeology on the one hand and commemorative events on the other, in between there are var-

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ious combinations of elements of both sides. Even though there is a growing lay-interest in results of history as a science, the interests behind re-enactments remain quite diverse. There is a poignant difference between re-enactments that try to establish a more precise understanding of specific historic constructions, maintenance, or usages and those that focus on emotional understanding of past events and their meaning for today's culture.

Re-enactments allow for practical participation – by those who are ignorant of detailed historical backgrounds and by those who have detailed knowledge of historical reports and constructions of the past, which they want to scrutinise. Participants can be experts on crafts that are linked to the object of the re-enactment. To reduce the opposition to stereotypes: participants are academics and non-academics, skilled or non-skilled, i.e. they are highly trained in things theoretical, in things practical, they come with a firm methodological catalogue and canon of background-knowledge, with a perspective trained in exchange with their peers, or they take in all kinds of sources and have any exclusive perspective in interpreting these and other information. And some are only in for entertainment. Especially for this last group, participation may lead to mayor changes in their understanding of the re-enacted issue and of their self-understanding. But especially in re-enactments, academics are met by non-professionals, who are experts on their specific field of interest, know academic and other sources on the issue, but deal with these in a different way than the academics, who have been taught specific traditions of dealing with sources, how to read and how to interpret them. The first encounters like this usually are highly irritating for the academic participants, for their knowledge is appreciated, while their exclusive views and methods are not. They are no longer the custodians of information, but meet people that have worked themselves into the same topic, but not following academic traditions or reading-lists. It often is a clash of cultures, first. And then both sides learn from each other and the differences between academic-expert and lay-expert are no longer a hindrance, but allow for both sides to learn about their subject and about themselves and their topical limitations.

Most re-enactments of historical sea-journeys are depending heavily on the non-professionals who are in for entertainment, as only a minority of the people on board are experts on the issues to be researched. It is mainly these lay-people that give colour and emotion to the experiment. They do the manual labour and experience the re-enactment with mind and body. This leads to stronger ties than most other ways of dealing with issues: Practical experience always has consequences for the assessment of related actions past or present, no matter if it is set in the frame of a historically or heritage-oriented re-enactment.

Re-enactments consist of different elements: The preparation and its cultural context, the working context aimed at, sequence of actions to be performed itself, the artefacts and the infrastructure that are used, the assessment of the whole and its parts afterwards. Some re-enactments use today's infrastructure, eat food that is not prepared and stored like it might have been done in the relevant period of the past, and the participants wear modern and functional clothing, especially rain-gear. Others re-construct a vessel from sources and archaeological findings, filling gaps from imagination or deduct solutions from comparable settings that exist in documents or boat-building traditions. The building of a vessel can be part of re-enactments, and depending on the focus of interest, the building is as important as its actual use. In the last 50 years, a movement comparable to the oral-history movement, has started to document regional and even local forms. By now, their archives have become the main (often: the only) sources for research in regional traditions in ship and boat-forms and in aspects and past practices of their building<sup>1</sup>. A much smaller movement of re-constructors has developed alongside, who build new boats in precise accordance to the old forms and methods.

As ships are quite expensive to build, re-constructions of historic ships only happen rarely and usually in the context of anniversaries that are used to draw attention to a related nautical achievement in the past. These projects often are supported by public money and usually are part of job-creation schemes and of touristic and scientific programmes<sup>2</sup>. But the heritage-factor is close at hand – especially when the re-construction is supposed to draw visitors and earn money, as in the case of the re-construction of Francis Drake's *Golden Hind* at Brixham:

Come aboard and explore the ship that was home to Drake and his crew of 70 for almost 3 years. Experience the sights, sounds and smells of life aboard a Tudor ship. Feel the romance of the seas in the great age of sail. The ship is an excellent resource for students studying the period especially KS2 Tudor history and we also offer a comprehensive education service for school visits<sup>3</sup>.

When the focus of a re-construction is on the boat or ship, the style of clothing and choice of food and beverages indicate what the re-enactment is aiming at: Modern clothing worn on an re-constructed prehistoric or historic is as possible as re-constructions of contemporary clothing. The differences show immediately, whether the re-enactment is about testing particular techniques or artefacts or whether it focusses on working conditions. Historic clothing might allow to understand its advantages or disadvantages, the comfort and discomfort it offers in specific working conditions. But usually it is used to get more "authenticity" for the production of documentation in film or photography, to meet the interest of the media and draw a wider audience that is used to costume-dramas and related stereotypical images. Some re-enactments are re-tracing historic journeys for commemorative reasons only. They want to remind of a specific historic event and its meaning communicated with the reporting on the re-enacted journey – a striking example for this is the re-enactment and docu-

<sup>1</sup> E.g. for Sweden, the method of documentations was described in Eskeröd 1970 and Zacke & Hägg 1973. The continuing research and practical work in Scandinavia is shown in Haasum & Kaijser 1998.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. the re-constructions of cogs in Bremen, Bremerhaven, and Kiel; somewhat grander projects are the *Batavia* and *De Seven Provinciën* in Lelystad, Netherlands.

<sup>3</sup> Start page of the *Golden Hind* at Brixham: <<http://www.goldenhind.co.uk/>> (14.04.2011)

mentation of the Australian “First Fleet”<sup>4</sup>. The commemorative re-enactment of the First Fleet that brought convicts and first settlers to Australia 200 years earlier, exemplifies the loose connection between past and present: The ships and their crews are firmly rooted in the present and its growing mobility and worldwide communication. The living conditions on land and on board, the social background of their predecessors must remain foreign to them – no one is deported or exiled to the end of the world, home is just a phone-call away, the dangers of the journey have become less, safety equipment and seaworthiness of the vessels, the quality of food and beverages are decidedly better. The participants are much better nourished at the outset of the journey. Even though the living conditions in Britain around the turn of the 18. century are described thoroughly and are generally known, the details and their consequences for the individual can not be fathomed any more, neither by researchers nor by amateur re-enactors: Leaving for the unknown was maybe not that scary back then, when hunger, housing, work, harassment or other social issues were dire.

Today, traveling on ships and boats is very different from the past. The clothing and food is very different, and health is directly influenced by these. It continues with the accommodation on board and the way, ships and boats are built, and does not stop with navigational infrastructure – not at least the existence of Coast Guards and other emergency services that can be contacted via today's communication networks gives a feeling of security out at sea that was not to be thought of in the past. Tim Severin points out in this context that all his re-enactments emphasize this difference because he wants the audience to keep this in mind. He is interested in the vessels and their sailing and other specifications, in the working condition on board, in historic methods and tools of navigation – and checks on all of these constantly by parallel use of modern technology. The highest priority is given to security, not to the production of emotional commitment and dramatic images.

The BBC commissioned “The Ship” in 2001, retracing for six weeks parts of James Cook's first voyage of discovery up the North-East coast of Australia and through the Great Barrier Reef in a replica of the *Endeavour*. After getting used to its peculiarities and the conditions of their work and live on board, the crew quickly and emotionally began referring to it as their “Wooden World” (Baker 2002), seemingly not knowing the book by the same name on the Georgian Navy and its social and other complexities that were not influencing their journey (Rodger 1986).

In the re-enactment, food like at the original journey was used, but no alcohol, there were no naval hardships, no drill and no hierarchies like in the Georgian Navy (Cook 2004, 248). One has to keep in mind that Cook was taking care to have his ships much better supplied with healthier food for all on board than his contemporary colleagues in the British Navy and on

other ships, but still, for today's palates the food must have been a challenge. Also, all participants knew at all stages of the journey that they would return to their lives on land, for them life on board was a break from their ordinary lives, it was not a chance to get fed and housed better than on land, like it was back then.

Re-enactment tends to make ordinary events grand and the grand ordinary. And so we grapple with things that would have been second nature to Cook and his men - using the log-line, taking soundings, sleeping cheek by jowl, obeying orders, washing in salt water, eating awful food. Wonder, elation, fear, exhaustion, seasickness. These visceral experiences are not diminished by the contrivance of the theatre. In fact, just the opposite is true. Our inexpert bumbling, our lack of mastery over ropes and rigging, is the very thing that makes this theatre of the past seem authentic<sup>5</sup>.

History and Heritage are part and parcel of re-enactments as there is no way of hindering the adaptation of a historically critical experiment into a heritage-oriented construction. Neither the conducted experiment itself nor its results. The “Invention of Tradition” plays into these interconnections as well as heritage builds on exactly those mechanisms that are crucial for the establishment of invented traditions.

It is the crew of re-enactment-journeys that consists mainly of volunteers who work as deckhands and execute the necessary sail-handling routines, they literally pull the ropes – sailing ships (and boats) with historic rigging and sailcloth is hard work. If those that organise and conduct re-enactments would have to pay these crews, experiments would be very expensive. But due to the image and reputation, the extra-ordinariness of these events, it seems to be no problem to find enough volunteers: Tim Severin points out in his description of the *Argo II*-journeys, that not even the hardship of rowing the replica of an ancient Greek galley of 20 oars upstream (e.g. up the Bosphorus) stopped the volunteers from turning up – quite to the contrary, it became a matter of pride for national or local rowing clubs to help out and give the original crew some rest (Severin 1986 and 1987).

The execution of historical reports in re-constructions and re-enactments leans towards the emotionalisation of the experiment, as all labour and thought-intensive projects are. The difference between text and “real” conditions, incidents, and actions is known from all those flaws and liberties of autobiographical writing. The logs and reports of commanding officers always describe and argue from the author's position. Research has shown that historical descriptions of events at specific locations often can not have happened as described. They have to be seen as constructions that depend on specific interests and views onto the world – leaving us in ambiguity and the need to consider various possibilities. Sometimes a re-enacted journey is the best way to scrutinise a historic report or story: Its individual details are tested and put into sequence to check their probability in relation to primarily geographical and/or nautical conditions. For example Tim Severin's “The Ulysses Voyage” does exactly this. He concludes his report on the experiment by discussing the probability of specific locations for the incidents described in Homer's epic (Severin 1987).

<sup>4</sup> E.g.: Iggulden 1988 and: King 1988.

<sup>5</sup> Agnew, Vanessa (04.09.2002): “What can Re-enactment tell us about the past?” in: <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/programmes/programme\\_archive/the-ship\\_history\\_reenactment\\_04.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/programmes/programme_archive/the-ship_history_reenactment_04.shtml)> (14.04.2011)

The building and use of a replica of a historic boat or ship, the taking part in the experiment itself offers pride and identification to those who took active part in planning, building and using the artefact. Looking at the boat and following its journeys allows for the construction of naval and cultural continuities and may act as a reminder of past events and bygone glories (etc.) of the nation in question (the national heritage). In Polynesia, experiments have been performed on navigation oriented at clouds, wave-patterns etc. as it was professed by mythical ancestors but hardly and only very restricted in the recent past. This way of navigation has been re-established in experiments, expanding on the fractured memories of a few and having become an issue of collective self-understanding of not only those directly involved in conducting the first experimental journeys that started the (re-)discovery of this method (Lewis, Oulton 1994). Building on the remaining bits of knowledge of former generations that had survived for their experiment, the art of navigation had to be learned more or less entirely new again. But the experience and understanding of the conditions at sea enabled the navigators to read more and more of the information given in the old maps, because now they were able to fill the details of the images, of the materials used with meaning: The different ways of knotting and weaving the strands of grass or sticks and applying sea shells on them, the way knowledge about the ocean was translated into images in their narratives (Akerblom 1968). Not surprisingly, those who took part are very proud of their activities, as they gained specialised experience and in consequence, higher social standing, as the re-discovered craft fits so well into the self-description of the Maori – in opposition to those dependent on modern methods of navigation – as being able to communicate with nature.

Greg Denning has argued that journeys in the footsteps of ancestors, oral tradition etc. in Oceania are not only experimental archaeology, but – if continued after the scientific experiment – are essential for the build-up of identities of the concerned groups / collectives as they are re-assessing their historic past and stabilising their understanding of historical meaning and abilities (Denning 2004, 182). This seems to be right not only in Oceania but in general: The taking into possession (“Landnahme”) of the ocean by groups and societies is re-established in those re-enactments or re-creations (strictly speaking: creations) of historical journeys. At the same time, this tests different models and possibilities in relation to their probability and hints of historical importance and grandeur are created or stabilised in the memory of the collective. It is not the documents that illustrate past glory or importance and their meaning for the present, but the re-enactment of the journey itself that might become a cult on its own as a pilgrim’s journey or the via crucis in any catholic church. Actions are canonised because of their assumed historic importance, their re-enactment creates a memory of suffering on the way to these achievements against certain odds and dangers, against ignorance and – in the case of the journeys of discovery for

example – limitations in the contemporary understanding of the world.

Restrictions have to be considered when dealing with the re-enactment of historical incidents: It is the lack of knowledge or memory that is described by them that usually triggers the re-enactment. Generally, they try to test assumptions on the ways things were done in the past, as one does not know it any more *en detail*, as the historic reports and descriptions are not convincing or fully understandable, or as the practical execution of things is not possible any more as a routine.

These lacks of knowledge, of memory, are resulting from the way human memory is working in today’s societies, they are the floating gap of memory that sets in after three generations and the end of their oral history of personal experiences (Assmann 2011, 4). Only exceptionally, with isolated incidents, a fourth generation is reached. After this, the memorial of living and working conditions is gone, if it has not been transferred into written material that is communicated to the following generations who might retrieve it from the sources. It is important to understand that written sources are falling into the floating gap, as well. But due to their material and medial nature they can be re-discovered and re-read.

Re-constructed historical boats and ships are reminders of the past, usually lifted from far beyond the floating gap of memory. They serve as condensed markers of past events and conditions and are filled with meaning by historical and heritage-approaches alike.

They usually are based on mediated sources, usually written material and illustrations, often archaeological discoveries, and are subject to the interpretational width of these sources and findings – not at least because wooden boats survive rarely longer than a limited amount of time.

## 2. The Bounty

For Britain and other nations that were part or heart of an empire the remembering of voyages of discovery and possession, of invasion or defence, of naval triumphs and disasters is crucial, if the self-understanding still builds on this part of the national history – or is used for arguing for contemporary activities in the wider world (be it naval or other) (e.g. in Regan 2001). But in this context, too, it has to be emphasized that artefacts are open to interpretation. The boat or ship itself is not carrying one obvious meaning but is open to interpretation. The memory of the Empire always comes along with its younger twin, the criticism of the Empire and its consequences for world history etc. Let us take the reconstructions of the *Bounty* as example: They were done at different times for different purposes, usually to be used as a prop for a film on the mutiny. But they are continued to be used after filming, and draw their audiences when they come to sailing events or when anniversaries of fitting historic events are celebrated. And here the problems start: people take them for true replicas, but they are not, necessarily. When their details are compared to the original plans, it is surprising, how far they vary<sup>6</sup>. One was built to accommodate bulky filming equipment and does appear quite

<sup>6</sup> The original drawings still are held in the National Maritime Museum Greenwich. Easier obtainable is: McKay (n.d.).

different from the original and leaves the audience with a wrong impression of the ship. The films have falsified the events around the ship more than even an extreme heritage-minded interpretation would dare to do (Denning 1994, 339-368). So we have a reduced setting in reference to the historical background, as we look on a myth, mainly transported and spun further by several fictional films and there are some ships that vary amongst each other quite a lot, while all of them are claimed to replicate the historic *Bounty*. But even under this circumstances it is quite difficult to say, what the *Bounty* is standing for, considering that the mutiny is only a small but prominent part of her history. Thinking of the *Bounty's* breadfruit-journey is incomplete without remembering slavery and colonial trade. William Bligh's command is incomplete without his orientation towards James Cook's example. His log and report of the journey show only his point of argument, they represent his priorities, are influenced by his sense of duty, and so on (Bligh 1792). The reception of the events in Britain at the time were highly influenced by interests of other parties, like the supporters of Fletcher Christian, who was socially much better connected than Bligh's (Alexander 2003).

### 3. Testing theories in the field and in the laboratory

Books only store and communicate lexical knowledge, even when they describe specific steps of action in the construction or assembly of something. The understanding of the meaning of the described actions depends on the practical experience and related imagination of the individual reader. Usually, the described steps of action and their consequences and meaning in context need to be re-created to understand all aspects given in their textual description. To value the information given in the text, it has to be comparable to other ways of doing them and to put them into the historical context – e.g. the quality of historic tools and the level of craftsmanship that was given on average. And here the experimental activation of text-based knowledge becomes extremely tricky: Generally, it is not possible to judge specific methods after having gone through their prescribed steps only once. They have to be trained to gain a thorough routine in doing them. Handling a sextant is not learned from a book, it has to be done again and again to understand the navigation-textbooks. Even for most contemporary sailing-enthusiasts and seamen, establishing a geographical position by sextant, clock, charts, and mathematics is quite demanding and is becoming more and more exotic due to the establishment of global positioning systems.

Scientific and other theories are tested in experiments, in our case in re-creations of journeys across different sections of the seas. These experiments are corresponding to and cooperating with other fields of science or argumentation and allow for the destruction or approval of theses on specific nautical feats. E.g. Thor Heyerdahl tried to prove the possibility of his ideas on the distribution of specific cultures by sea in

experimental journeys. He used purpose-built reed-boats, balsa-raft etc. for the different journeys. These provided material for films and engaged books but were proven wrong by archaeology, anthropology, and scientific history. Interestingly enough, even though the line of scientific arguments against his ideas is tight and well based, there are people in his footsteps, who are trying to prove by sailing reed-boats similar to his constructions that his theory describes a realistic possibility<sup>7</sup>. All their sailing does not counter the results of far reaching gene-matches that established other routes of distribution of humans on earth. If nothing else, this is a good example for the stability of ideas that can hardly be corrected by scientific proof but are happily in opposition to “the Other”.

Connections are constructed to the pre-decessors in each re-enactment. Re-enactments link the cultures of the past to the present, the amount of reflection on the unbridgeable distance between “then” and “now” allows for division of re-enactments into research or nostalgia-projects. Not always are traditions invented along the way, but the relations established between these aspects of distinctly different cultures are dominating over other possible links. At the same time gaps in the cultural memory are becoming obvious in re-enactments and can be re-filled: E.g. the technique of navigating with a sextant on the Southern hemisphere had to be developed from scratch by the navigators of the BBC-re-enactment of Cook's *Endeavour*-journey in 2001, as they lacked their usual Northern fix-points and curves to follow.

By re-constructing a boat or ship, one can learn how these were built using the existing tools. The construction tests the accuracy of the descriptions and re-establishes knowledge about the historic tools and how they could be used. By using the re-constructed vessel, one can establish how they can be sailed and what individual movements or strings of operations simply are not possible. And knowing this allows to evaluate the accuracy of reports of specific (historic) achievements made by boat or ship. Everything beyond that, esp. emotional readings of these activities and artefacts are limited by their contemporary context and can inform us on the present, but not the past.

### 4. Conclusions

All dealing with the past interprets the past and constructs relations to the present. Re-enactments put past events into the presence and allow for their re-entry into oral-history as the re-enactment is filled with personal experiences and stories. This is not closing the floating gap of memory but it can bridge it to some extent: in the form of the re-enacted interpretation it allows for the re-entry of issues from the past into personal memory. The difficulty is to differentiate between the contemporary content and the knowledge about the re-enacted historic event and circumstances. The re-negotiation of the historic event can be true to knowledge about the past, but it also can falsify and e.g. romanticise the past. The difficulty in re-enacting is to safeguard re-enactment and hinder invention of history.

<sup>7</sup> E.g.: The *Abora* project <<http://www.abora.eu/2010/index.php/abora2.html>> (14.04.2011)

From re-enactments we can learn about how things worked, how tools were used, what actions were possible or not possible with them in the past. We even can get a vague feeling for the difficulties of past actions and appreciate what they meant in their historic context.

First of all, we learn how specific things were done in the past and relate this to the presence and how things are done in our time. Differences, similarities, and continuities and their historical references become more clear in negotiating just this historical information.

And on another level, we learn about contemporary society, about the way, identity is constructed in reference to the past. Because we not only learn about how things were done, but also, how people connect to the past, how sense is made of practices and artefacts from the past. The references in each choice of events to be re-enacted inform us on the construction of continuities and dis-continuities. The same is given in each choice of ship to be re-built. It is crucial to analyse the underlying canon of references: specific periods appeal more than others, they are attributed with importance in re-telling the past. The choices and omissions help to understand the current construction of historic developments that shaped the present. In other words: From understanding how the presence relates to the past, we can learn about how sense is made in this relation to the past. We can learn how identity is built in detail.

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