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Exploring materiality and sensory experience through Viking Age reenactment

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ABSTRACT

Sensory archaeology explores how past individuals engaged with their world through all their senses. The use of senses is also a cornerstone in Viking Age reenactment. We argue that research on Viking Age material culture can benefit from the knowledge and experience of Viking Age reenactors, particularly when studying the sensory dimension of using and crafting objects. The traditional dichotomy between archaeologists and reenactors can also be challenged, as many individuals can be professional archaeologists but also reenactors. The application of reenactment in archaeological research is nevertheless situated on the boundary between subjective experiences and objective academic research. For this kind of research to work, methodological rigour and a theoretical framework is required to ensure the reliability and validity of interpretations. By applying a relevant theoretical framework, for example one that embraces the theories of sensory archaeology, while acknowledging the nuanced interplay of authenticity and subjectivity, Viking Age reenactment can provide a unique tool to study Viking Age material culture.

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Introduction

Historical reenactment and living history involve participants recreating elements of the past by assuming the role of historical individuals and engaging in period-specific activities in settings that closely resemble the environment of the time they are portraying (Dean 2020; Gapps 2009; Handler and Saxton 1988). Both aim to make the past more accessible and understandable, complementing traditional academic approaches. Living history is often used in museum contexts (e.g. Anderson 1982), while reenactors and reenactment can refer to leisure activities that focus on experiencing life in the past.

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Reenactment is a complex phenomenon in which participants and groups engage in various activities with differing levels of intensity. Some groups emphasize historical accuracy and fidelity to material culture and historical sources (see Kobińska 2013) to the extent that their involvement in the hobby can be described as serious leisure (Hunt 2007). Serious reenactors typically possess valuable expertise in material culture, including a practical understanding of the use and potential application of objects and clothing. This prompts the question of whether their knowledge and experience could be used to improve the understanding of archaeological material culture, particularly from a sensory perspective. In this article, we explore the question in the light of our own observations and conversations with Nordic Viking Age reenactors, with whom we have collaborated for many years. We will also discuss the research potential of personal experiences and perspectives of reenactors, and the limitations and challenges involved.

Sensory history, reenactment, and material culture

Within academic research, the fields of sensory history and archaeology have explored the dimensions of historical experience, particularly how the past manifested visually, auditorily, olfactorily, and tactually, and the meanings given to sensory encounters by people in the past (for example, Hamilakis 2002, 2011; Fahlander and Kjellström 2010; Graff 2020; Pellini, Zarankin, and Salerno 2015; Skeates and Day 2020). The starting point in the archaeology of senses is the fundamental corporeality shared by all humanity.

Before the development of formal theoretical frameworks, the idea of sensory history had been used in museum exhibitions and educational settings to enhance historical narratives through sounds, scents, and tangible artefacts. This multisensory approach, often seen in specialized living history museums, aims to attract audiences and convey information through more engaging and immersive means (e.g. Alexander and Alexander 2007; Pye 2008; Levent and Pascual-Leone 2014). In museums, the preservation of original historical objects is of utmost importance and museum visitors can rarely touch or handle original archaeological objects. However, replicas or reconstructions have allowed the public to engage with material culture through hands-on, tactile experiences, either in exhibitions or in separate handling sessions and demonstrations. Museums have also long collaborated with reenactors to enrich visitor experiences and offer tangible insights into the daily lives of people in the past. Various reenactment events and activities, such as those organized at the Jorvik Viking Centre in York or the Lofotr Viking Museum at Lofoten, are excellent examples of such activities.

Viking Age reenactors typically rely on archaeological finds as a key source for understanding the material culture of the past, and they often try to replicate objects and garments found in graves as closely as possible. The detailed,

period-specific production of such replicas can be considered a form of *experimental* archaeology (Coles 1979, 36–37) but, according to a stricter use of the term (Schöbel 2019, 70–71), most replicas are not crafted through explicit scientific processes. Objects produced through experimentation and testing of various techniques and tools can be called the products of *experiential* archaeology (Reynolds 1999, 157). Whereas experimental archaeology emphasizes precision and scientific approach to historical technologies, reenactment places greater importance on creating historically plausible experiences and atmospheres (see Daugbjerg 2018) by utilizing recreated material culture. For example, Viking Age reenactors might experiment with cooking with period-accurate ingredients, organize a craft event to deepen their handicraft skills or go hiking wearing period-appropriate clothing.

Clothing is an excellent example of how recreational crafts, archaeological evidence and sensory experiences are intertwined in reenactment. It is common to see Scandinavian clothing in international Viking reenactment events, but there is a growing interest in portraying distinct regional characters, which reflects a broader interest in reconstructing ancient clothing (Vartiainen 2010, 105–106). In Finland, the interest in recreating ancient costumes began in the late 19th century after the discovery of Late Iron Age inhumation cemeteries, and it has continued to the present day (Appelgren-Kivalo 1907; Pälsi 1928; Lehtosalo-Hilander 2001; Riikonen and Ruohonen, 2023). Certain graves have become iconic within scientific and reenactor communities. One example is grave 56 from the extensively studied and published Luistari cemetery in Eura (Lehtosalo-Hilander 1982a, 1982b, 1982c, 2000). Known as the grave of Eura matron (Figure 1), this 11th-century grave stands out due to its abundance of jewellery, clothing



Figure 1. The dress reconstruction known as ‘Eura costume’ (on the left) is based on finds from grave 56 (on the right) at Luistari cemetery in Eura, Finland. Photos: Ulla Moilanen & Rauno Hilander.

accessories and well-preserved textile fragments, which have provided direct information on the fabrics used in the Viking Age, and their weaving techniques, colours and patterns. The finds from grave 56 have also played a crucial role in the reconstruction of ancient Eura costume (Lehtosalo-Hilander 2001), which has influenced numerous reenactment costumes worldwide. These adaptations have contributed to our knowledge of the practical decisions involved in reconstructing textiles, and the bodily and sensory experiences of wearing this type of costume, such as the soundscapes created by the jewellery or the way the fabrics feel in different situations and environments.

Sensory engagement plays a central role in reenactment, and the primary goal of reenactment is not so much about *knowing* what history was like but rather about *feeling* what it was like (Agnew, Lamb, and Tomann 2020, 5). Reenactors typically emphasise the use of senses when sharing their experiences from battles, markets and camping. Conversations reveal their desire to feel the texture of woollen clothing against their skin, inhale the scents of smoke and food and listen to different sounds of the past, including those produced by animals, music, cooking or battle. This experiential approach to history is anchored in the idea that engaging with historical elements through the senses is crucial to a comprehensive historical encounter. Like their historical counterparts, contemporary individuals experience the world through their physical bodies (Day 2013; Metheny 2022). However, research has revealed that the senses are not only biological systems but also shaped by cultural influences and, therefore, their interpretation is not universally consistent (Day 2013, 3). Thus, there are significant challenges in adopting an embodied approach to archaeological material through reenactment (see Day 2013; Johnson 2020).

Despite the challenges, would it be possible to use the practical experiences of reenactors to provide insights into understanding historical interactions between people and objects, especially the sensory experiences and embodied practices involved? Next, we will discuss the topic from opposing perspectives and finally aim for a middle ground.

No, we cannot understand archaeological material through modern experiences

Viking Age reenactment features various interconnected elements with *authenticity* in its core (Gapps 2009; Brædder et al. 2017; Kobińska 2013; Handler and Saxton 1988; Strauss 2001). Through authenticity, the sensory experiences of reenactment are claimed to be analogous to actual historical experiences. In reenactment, authenticity is typically established through expert assessment, which often involves validation by authoritative researchers or references to specific grave finds (Holtorf 2014; Bruner 1994). Thus, it can be argued that reenactors do not actually produce new knowledge about the past themselves

but instead rely on existing research and interpretations and, hence, their insights are of little value.

The concept of material authenticity in reenactment is also problematic. Viking Age reenactment is typically centred on the production and use of objects and clothes that have archaeological parallels. However, the fragmentary and incomplete nature of the archaeological record presents challenges to achieving a precise and accurate reconstruction of Viking Age material culture. For example, material preservation biases, such as the better survival of wool compared to plant fibres (Good 2001, 11), can lead to distorted representations of materials in reenactment, such as the over-representation of wool clothing (Moilanen and Therus 2023, 382, 391). Reenactors often avoid combining objects from different periods and consider such combinations inauthentic (Handler and Saxton 1988, 244), although they may use these kinds of objects and materials in the absence of archaeological evidence. For example, they may wear winter shoes that have no direct archaeological counterparts from the Viking Age. While these shoes may keep the feet warm, there is no evidence that the experience of wearing them reflects the actual experiences and feelings of a Viking Age person. Similarly, in modern Viking-themed markets and other reenactment events, sensory experiences are generated within fictitious structures and material culture, such as living in a tent village instead of houses (Figure 2). In these events, structures and elements are designed and adapted to the requirements of modern event planning (Halewood and Hannam 2001, 567–568). Consequently, historical accuracy is compromised in favour of creating an enjoyable and memorable experience for contemporary audiences.

In addition to material culture, deep immersion in Viking Age life and accessing its sensory dimensions would also require a complete understanding of past practices and behaviours. Concrete, physical artefacts can be observed,



Figure 2. Viking Age reenactment camp at Ancient Laukko event in Vesilahti, Finland, summer 2018. Photo: Jenni Sahramaa.

excavated and handled, but it is impossible to discern the significance of objects and the complex social, political and religious contexts in which they were situated (see Hodder 1994). Furthermore, reenactment and embodied experiences are fundamentally subjective and interpretive. They rely on reenactors' individual perceptions and backgrounds, which may also be influenced and shaped by commercialised Viking imagery in films and television series that highlight warriors, exploration, adventure and mystery (see Cederlund 2011; Walsh 2020; Croix 2015). The subjective interpretations lack the rigour of academic research and they influence the ways reenactors engage with material culture. It is also common for Viking Age reenactors to create idealised representations of the era. They may emphasise aspects that are aesthetically pleasing or reflect their personal preferences (Hall 2015; Hannam and Halewood 2006). The idealisation and romanticisation can manifest in the clothing, behaviour and social roles the reenactors adopt – particularly in the tendency to focus on warriors and high-status individuals (Moilanen and Therus 2023, 386–388, 396–397). Prioritising visual aspects, spectacle and entertainment over historical accuracy easily leads to oversimplified representations that fail to capture the nuanced social roles and identities that existed in the past.

Interpretative challenges accompany any attempt to reconstruct sensory aspects of the past through reenactment. It can be argued that sensory experiences are so culture-bound that we can never claim to know what people in the Viking Age thought and felt. This means that interpretations of sensory experiences always reflect contemporary sensibilities and cultural biases, leading to selective reconstructions that do not automatically reflect historical realities. Since reenactment is always situated in a present context (see also Daugbjerg 2018; Kobiałka 2013), it can offer limited tools for understanding archaeological material that was initially used in different time and space by people with a completely different knowledge and worldview than people today. Therefore, while reenactment has educational and entertainment value, it should never be considered a reliable source for academic archaeological research.

Yes, we can understand archaeological material through modern experiences

Serious reenactors engage with the past in a very intimate way and they often have a very passionate relationship with history, or at least with the periods they are interested in (Auslander 2013). By imitating life in that period, reenactors gain actual bodily knowledge about producing and using period-specific gear. Despite their embodiment and sensory perceptions being constructed in the present (see Hamilakis 2013, 410), reenactors can provide diverse perspectives through the realism of their activities and the embodied experiences these activities generate. It is important to note

that reenactment serves as a valuable *interpretive tool* rather than a definitive account or portrayal of the past.

Reenactment generates sensations that are sometimes very strongly connected to specific archaeological finds and historical manufacturing techniques. Rather than focusing solely on visual aspects, reenactment seeks to recapture experiences that allow us to see, hear, smell, taste and touch what our ancestors did in their environments (Day 2013, 6). We have heard reenactors recalling the first time they dressed up in reconstructed Viking Age clothing and how it might have felt unfamiliar and uncomfortable, potentially evoking self-awareness and even a sense of looking funny. Long skirts might have felt awkward and impractical if one were accustomed to wearing modern trousers. However, experienced reenactors become accustomed to their garments and wearing them becomes an integral part of their enjoyment. Their bodies adapt to the sensation of the clothing and often wearing the costume brings back pleasant memories of the fabric against their skin, the smell of smoke or tar from past events or the weight of jewellery and the sound they make as they move.

The essence of sensory archaeology lies in the recognition that we must include sensory and embodied knowledge, which are central to human perception of the world, in our understanding of the past (Day 2013, 5–6; see also Tarlow 2000, 720, 723). This has already been applied to reenactment and recreation of past environments for research, particularly in a 19th-century context. For example, Smith (2015) uses reenactment to examine what the American Civil War sounded and smelled like, and Gaitán Ammann (2022) recreates the soundscapes of Spanish-American slave markets to gain a new perspective on the study of colonialism through the experiences of enslaved people.

Reenactment can be considered a performative method, which Dupré et al. (2020) label with the abbreviation 'RRR' and which also includes reconstruction, reproduction, and reworking. They emphasise that, although it is impossible to recreate the past by using modern methods, play and experimentation open new possibilities to explore how knowledge is constructed, reproduced and communicated across disciplines. This is very much in line with what Hamilakis (2013, 417) calls for when hoping for sensory archaeology to develop a 'hybrid academic, creative media'. The process of gathering knowledge through reenactment differs significantly from the use of traditional archaeological methods and sources and, thus, it provides a qualitatively different kind of information. Through lived experiences, reenactors can access dimensions of sensory and embodied knowledge that traditional sources and methods cannot reach. According to Johnson (2020, 172), this kind of performance plays a fundamental role in all aspects of historical research and exploration. Employing reenactorial knowledge in object studies means deploying a sensory or affective dimension of experience, which helps to focus on how

the senses intersect with the knowledge production process (Tringham and Danis 2019, 49).

Towards the middle ground

Shanks and McGuire (1996) have suggested that archaeology should promote methods that involve both archaeologists and the broader community, as this approach reconciles the subjective and objective dimensions of archaeology and encourages an active and interpretive process that allows for a more comprehensive understanding of material culture. Volunteers have long been able to contribute to the collection and production of archaeological data, for example, by adding information on metal detector finds in databases (e.g. Wessman et al. 2019), observing and identifying human-made structures in satellite images (e.g. Smith 2014, 755) and participating in public excavations (e.g. Aalto 2020, 149–150). So far, relatively little consideration has been given to the potential involvement of historical reenactors in similar collaborative efforts, although the need to address the societal impact and implications of archaeology has often been raised (see Huvila et al. 2022; Van den Dries 2021).

Viking Age reenactment is not usually considered a research method because it is fundamentally interpretive and subjective in nature and because of the large temporal gap between the period and today. It is also true that idealised notions of Viking Age may cause reenactment to move towards the fulfilment of reenactor's personal desires for nostalgia and fantasy associated with the past. But does imagination not play a role in research or dissemination of research results? With serious reenactors, the attention to detail and level of knowledge of specific aspects of material culture can easily equal or exceed that of a generic museum worker or archaeologist. Is this a problem? Do reenactors threaten traditional forms of research or the dissemination of archaeological knowledge? Is it ultimately a question of who is allowed to make interpretations (see Brædder 2020, 77–78)? The dichotomy between archaeologists and reenactors is a complex issue, as the distinction between the groups is not absolute. A substantial number of individuals belong to both categories, working as professional researchers and practising reenactment in their spare time. This phenomenon challenges the traditional boundaries and broadens the scope of academic archaeological research. Nevertheless, the question of who can be considered an authoritative expert is a serious one. Amateur interpretations have been applied, for example, in archaeological tourism to improve the understanding of ancient sites and cultural heritage, although it has been underlined that, in these cases, accuracy and authenticity can be debated and criticised in the absence of rigorous academic standards (Ross et al. 2017; Moscardo 1996). Amateur interpretations are not always unproblematic and they can sometimes lead to confusing situations, as in the case of Ale's Stones in southern Sweden. Amateur archaeoastronomer Bob Lind challenged the

scientific consensus on the dating and use of the site as an Iron Age boat burial, and his alternative interpretation of the site as a solar calendar even made its way onto an information board installed by the Swedish National Heritage Board in 2007 (Rudebeck 2008, 30–31). It can be very difficult for the press and the general public to distinguish legitimate archaeological interpretations from fringe theories, especially if the latter appear to be officially validated.

In Viking Age reenactment, both academic debate and popular culture are reflected in the ways reenactors interpret and perform the roles they assume. These representations are often based on subjective choices that are shaped by personal perceptions, beliefs and values. The debate on female warriors in the Viking Age is a good example of the complex interplay between archaeological research, reenactment and contemporary society. Female warriors are firmly present in popular culture, where they promote the image of an empowered woman in a male-dominated world. Accordingly, reenactors have argued that women should participate in combat scenarios, as banning their warrior roles would only increase inequality among the hobbyists. Questions have been raised about the historical accuracy of portraying women as warriors and some reenactors have recommended that women should only play male characters during combat. At the same time, the academic discourse on warrior women is rooted in various elements, primarily the limited existence of contemporary written sources and the interpretation of archaeological evidence. Grave finds of female skeletons equipped with weapons that are traditionally associated with male warriors challenge previous assumptions about Viking Age gender roles and stereotypes (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. 2017; Gardela 2021), but new interpretations may spark scepticism and resistance even within the academic community (e.g. Androshchuk 2018). The continuing debate (Price et al. 2019; Jesch 2021) has highlighted the interpretative nature of archaeological phenomena. The debate must continue and evolve, as absolute truths are seldom attainable (e.g. Sørensen 2016). Rather, the significance of interpreting the past lies in what it can teach us about the present.

Since absolute authenticity is unattainable, it can be argued that reenactment only provides simplified and subjective interpretations through reconstructions that can be considered imagined material culture. However, absolute authenticity remains elusive even for institutions, which is particularly evident in the use of replicas in museums. These tangible material expressions of archaeological interpretations are dangerous because they are readily accepted as definite truths. A replica, even when presented next to the fragments of the original find, immediately gives the impression of the original materiality of the object and shuts the door on other possible reconstruction options. Reenactment does not have the same interaction between original fragments and replicas, as the sources for the reenactor's kit are not always presented. The sources used and the knowledge produced in reenactment are not regulated by an institution like a university, museum or peer-reviewed publication system

but by amateurs with varying educational backgrounds. Therefore, authenticity may be more flexible and culturally determined in reenactment, where the concept is shaped by negotiations within the reenactor communities (Brædder et al. 2017, 172: 177–178; Dean 2020, 121; Holtorf 2014, 790–791). Authenticity may also need to be adjusted for various reasons, which are not all related to interpreting archaeological material. For example, most Iron Age costume reconstructions include commercial yarn, not only because spinning it would be too time-consuming but also because it is challenging to find people experienced enough to spin yarn that resembles the original tightly spun, even yarn (e.g. Vedeler & Hammarlund 2017, 27; Lehtosalo-Hilander 2001; see also Demant 2009).

Despite the obvious epistemological problems, reenactment can be employed to increase our understanding of the past material culture and the associated sensory aspects. Serious reenactors imagine what people of the past might have looked like and how they behaved and interacted. Here, senses can be crucial in bridging the gap between the tangible and the intangible (see Hamilakis 2002, 2011), and they can contribute to a deeper understanding of certain aspects of Viking Age life. This perspective accepts that knowledge can emerge from experiential and sensory encounters with the imagined past in a present-day context (Brædder 2020, 77–78; Cook 2004, 491).

The practical knowledge and handicraft skills of reenactors have previously been applied in collaborative costume reconstruction projects, for example, the Late Iron Age Finnish Ravattula costume (Riikonen and Ruohonen 2023). Costume reconstructions are usually based on textile fragments preserved in graves and seldom form a complete outfit. In reenactment, clothing needs to be complemented with underwear, footwear, headgear and warmer outerwear (Lehtosalo-Hilander 2001, 63–64). The experience of reenactors on these aspects could be utilised when planning research on archaeological textiles and their reconstructions. Also, when used continuously and in different situations, the choices made in costume reconstructions can be evaluated from various perspectives. Are the clothes comfortable, warm and practical? How do they suit different bodies and life situations, for example, being pregnant and nursing a baby (Figure 3) (Lehtosalo-Hilander 2001; Maaranen 2023)?

Reenactment can provide embodied knowledge that can be applied to detecting impractical and improbable proposals about the meanings and uses of different objects. For example, questions regarding brooch combinations and their use in different clothes are widely discussed among reenactors. Some brooch types may be too thin to hold heavier fabrics, some replica brooches may look good but open easily in use, and some brooch placements may be considered impractical when compared to other options. Although the knowledge of fastening garments with brooches comes from archaeological research, the interpretations are considerably improved when they are put into practical use. When archaeologist Annika Larsson challenged previous reconstructions of



Figure 3. Reenactment offers opportunities to test Viking Age clothing in practical situations, such as nursing. Photo: Jenni Sahramaa.

Scandinavian Viking Age women's clothing with her costume interpretation that placed oval brooches on the wearer's breasts (Larsson 2008, 2020, 117–118), she caused outrage among Viking Age reenactors. Archaeologists and textile researchers were also sceptical about the evidence Larsson presented for her reconstruction choices (Thunem 2020), but the practical criticism came from reenactors. Contrary to Larsson's claims that earlier reconstructions with brooches roughly above the collarbone were prudish, reenactors stressed that Larsson's interpretation would have been very uncomfortable to wear and would not have suited different body types.

In addition to clothing, Viking Age weapons can be used as an example. When handling replica swords at museums, the visitors can experience how heavy the weapon is to hold or perhaps even swing it. In the hands of a reenactor experienced in the martial arts and Viking Age weaponry, the same replica can provide detailed information about the practical use of the

object – assuming it is a high-quality reconstruction by a skilled artisan who can realistically reproduce the original object. Furthermore, it is even possible to compare the actual damage seen on Viking Age weapons with the damage occurring on reconstructions in fictitious combat situations (see Moilanen 2010).

The potential for collaboration extends to sensory archaeology, where the combination of archaeologically grounded contextual information and the embodied experiences of reenactors could provide fresh insights into the archaeological material culture. As Auslander (2013) notes, this goes beyond physical authenticity and the use of objects or costumes to investigate the emotional and affective dimensions of the reenactment experience. Viking Age reenactment could contribute to research, for example, by providing insights into the soundscapes of the period in the same way that Gaitán Ammann (2022) uses the slave markets to understand the past. The clank of tools or the sounds of costume accessories contribute to the understanding of the acoustic dimension of material culture. Rainio's (2006, 2014) archaeoacoustic studies have approached the soundscapes created by jingle bells and bell pendants worn as costume accessories by Viking Age women, men and children, but the experiences of the reenactors could further deepen the insights. It could also be possible to better understand the textures, materials and properties of objects by handling replicas of tools, textiles and ceramics. With a sound theoretical framework, reenactors could also be used to answer questions about how the tactile properties of objects influenced their functionality and whether different properties had an impact in particular space or social context. However, these applications need to be tied to theoretical frameworks. Shanks and McGuire (1996) emphasise the significance of theory, not as an abstract concept but as a practical and reflective tool that is open to critical scrutiny and improvement. Without theory, subjective, common-sense chains of reasoning can quickly take over. Therefore, methodological and theoretical rigour is essential in the collaboration between archaeologists and reenactors to ensure that interpretations remain well grounded.

Despite the apparent potential, certain issues remain. Firstly, archaeological projects often require significant resources, including funding, equipment and skilled personnel. Limited resources may affect the project's capacity to engage effectively with volunteers. Volunteering can also be time-consuming and demanding, making some volunteers hesitant and unmotivated to contribute. Secondly, sensory reconstructions rely on speculative interpretations and creative extrapolations, raising questions about the reliability and validity of the resulting interpretations and observations. The embodied experiences of reenactors are shaped by cultural, temporal and social factors (e.g. Smith 2007) and modern individuals can never experience the world the same way as the people in the Viking Age did. However, the imaginative dimension of reenactment can complement the interpretive dimension of material culture. While the interpretation of sensory information is culture-dependent, the ways

our bodies move and operate have not changed in thousands of years. Thus, practical questions about the possibility or impossibility of different theories can be explored through empirical knowledge grounded in experience. Speculation is not always something to be avoided, as it has been noted to be a prominent part of archaeology due to the inherent vagueness of archaeological data and material (Marila 2017; Sørensen 2016). This does, however, underline the significance of personal background knowledge and potentially the influence of bodily and sensory experiences in forming archaeological interpretations (see Marila 2017).

In any case, conducting sensory archaeology through reenactment poses methodological challenges related to interpreting and integrating sensory data within broader archaeological narratives. For example, the ephemeral nature of sensory experiences can complicate documentation, analysis and interpretation. It is also essential to consider whether and to what extent the information provided by reenactors is used to collect data and material for research and whether reenactors are also directly involved in making interpretations.

Conclusions

Expertise in Viking Age archaeology typically resides within academia, but, on the other hand, serious Viking Age reenactors, who are usually not trained historians or archaeologists, may have valuable experiential knowledge that could be harnessed for scientific purposes. The deep engagement of reenactors with historical practices such as clothing, crafting and combat offers a unique perspective on the embodied and sensory elements of Viking Age material culture. This practical understanding stems from hands-on experimentation and sometimes years of dedicated immersion in Viking Age materials and objects. The challenge is to find a balance between the academic and experiential sources of knowledge. We argue that while academic knowledge brings rigour and scholarly context to interpretations, reenactors can contribute an embodied experience of historical practices and allow us to understand elements of the past that are otherwise difficult to grasp. In a proper theoretical framework, this knowledge has enormous informative value.

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