

Narrate-create: stories as old as time

Archaeology is the foundation for human stories, a narrative that connects us all emotionally to the past. Laura Basell, Kirsty Lilley, Fiona Coward, Lusya Zaleskaya, and Neil Redfern take a fresh look at innovative approaches and creative responses to the data we gather – and how science and storytelling are not opposites but partners in uncovering our human past.

Archaeology has always been about piecing together fragments, using art, science, and imagination to turn artefacts, ditches, and landscapes into stories about the past. The concept of ‘telling stories’ might seem unscientific, but it’s long been recognised that storytelling is fundamental to understanding human societies, past and present. Stories shape how we absorb information, connect with the world, and understand our place in it.

Folklore and story making are important ways through which people establish the rules that groups live by. Humans have evolved over many generations to tell stories that help us build and maintain relationships and share knowledge across generations. Psychological research shows that we understand and remember information

better when it’s presented as a story. It’s no surprise, then, that storytelling remains just as powerful in the twenty-first century as it appears to have been in the deep past.

Despite living in a world saturated with stories, archaeologists have done a pretty good job of getting theirs noticed. Part of this is practical. It’s hard to dig a trench without attracting attention, and people are naturally curious; they see something happening and start asking questions. But it’s also because archaeologists are good at ‘thinking aloud’. They often share their ideas and evolving interpretations openly, whether over the long arc of a project, from planning to excavation to publication, or in the moment, while examining a single object.

A great example of this openness is the hugely popular 1950s TV show *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?*, which brought archaeology and museum objects straight into living rooms, sparking public fascination and encouraging everyday viewers to

engage with the past. Today’s generally shorter-form equivalents can be found on many social media platforms.

In recent years we have seen a diversification of formats for storytelling. We can now create and tell a story simultaneously, and there’s been a huge increase in the reach and the speed of dissemination. Some archaeological stories use new media and technology but still present the past in fairly traditional ways. These might include documentaries, whether short or feature-length, interviews with experts, or podcasts.

Other approaches are more focused on triggering emotional reactions. They often use techniques borrowed from advertising, aiming to attract attention, go viral, and generate clicks, sometimes in pursuit of fame or even controversy. Importantly, it is not always easy to label these storytelling methods or media choices as simply ‘good’ or ‘bad’. The reality is more complex.

The challenge for archaeologists – as expert practitioners with a uniquely



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informed perspective on the past – is finding ways to navigate new media and modern styles of storytelling responsibly and ethically. It is essential that our voices contribute to the wider conversation and present alternatives to stories created by bad faith actors who ignore archaeological evidence or use it highly selectively to serve particular agendas about who we are and why the world is the way it is.

New storytelling approaches offer archaeologists opportunities to share informed and genuinely exciting stories about the past more widely – and to then improve those stories through shared knowledge generated from citizen science.

Creative storytelling about the past helps us share complex ideas in ways that are both sophisticated and easy to engage with. It also allows us to invite wider audiences to take part in shaping how we understand the evidence. Since archaeological evidence is always incomplete, different interpretations of the past emerge and are debated even between professional archaeologists.

Just as there is no single, fixed view of the present (you, I, and others will always see things differently), there was never just one viewpoint in the past. These aspects of the subject give archaeologists valuable creative freedom. By embracing interactive, collaborative, and democratic storytelling, we can explore diverse perspectives and invite more people to join us in discovering and shaping the stories archaeology has to offer.

This is precisely what we did at the 2024 Theoretical Archaeology Group (TAG) Conference in Bournemouth, through two sessions: Narrate-Create and Tales as Old as Time. Here we challenged contributors to show us new ways of ‘storifying’ archaeological research. Practitioners from wide-ranging backgrounds gathered to share their ideas, methods, and experiences of presenting the past using many creative and experimental formats, including performance, interactive installations, musical compositions, creative writing, digital media, and more.

Importantly, these approaches were not just ‘side acts’ to ‘real’ research; they were integral ways of thinking through, interpreting, and communicating complex ideas. The

From top: Fiona Coward, Kirsty Lilley, Neil Redfern, Lusie Zaleskaya, and Laura Basell



sessions were great fun, engaging the audience and opening up new pathways for thinking about what we do – and how and why we do it.

Contributors demonstrated that new methods don’t replace traditional scholarship; instead, they complement it, balancing an audience-entrancing creative licence with integrity, honesty, and respect for the rigorous study of the past. Let’s not leave it to others to tell stories about our pasts when we are uniquely qualified to craft stories grounded in evidence and informed by theory and experience developed from deep immersion in and scholarly study of the past.

In telling our richly-evidenced archaeological stories through collaborations with artists, writers, educators, performers, game designers, and many more, we can bring many pasts to life, shape the present, and create futures where archaeology speaks to and with more people than ever before.

Over the next several issues of British Archaeology magazine, we will hear from some of our TAG session creators. Their contributions were incredibly varied and overlapping, but we have grouped them into broad themes for the magazine, starting in this issue with the use of digital and alternative media storytelling. We hope you agree the following pages demonstrate interactive, collaborative, and multi-voiced interpretations that reflect the complexity and richness of the archaeological record as well as opening up new ways of thinking about the data we create and curate. If these inspire you to create your own archaeological stories, please let us know! We’d love to hear from you.

Email your thoughts and stories to the Editor, who will pass them on to the authors: editor@archaeologyuk.org.

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