

The Viking Way

In June 2016, the project managers of Hands on History (HoH) and Trondheim Vikinglag organized the one week reenactment event The Viking way (TVW). The event was located in the deep Norwegian forest of Trøndelag and had 120 participants. The event was a big success and the feedback has been massive. In this article I will explain what we made, why we made it and how we made it. I will also elaborate on my thoughts about successful dissemination. Furthermore, I will emphasize the importance of talking about historical reenactment and living history on a meta-level.

In 2015 I published my festival guide *How to organize a historical event involving reenactment groups*¹. Working all around Europe, I had both seen and organized several historical events, Viking Markets in particular. To me it seemed like most organizers were operating on pure instinct - copy-pasting elements from past events and making few deliberate choices. There seemed to be a set of unwritten rules and conventions being followed. Without really knowing why, organizers and participants made the same good and bad choices over and over again. I am not referring to choices regarding purely logistical matters, but rather choices concerning curation and dissemination; the conceptual frame, the over all aesthetic's, the program content, activities carried out by the reenactors and the marketing material. It looked like all of the events were cast in the same ill-conceived mold. The result was inflation in program content, poor dissemination, bored reenactors and confused outsiders. By outsiders I am not only referring to the visiting public, but also to those who in other ways encountered the content, pre, during - and post. Some outsiders will claim that the reenactment scene is very unserious consisting of «adults who like to dress up». Reenactors tend to blame the outsiders for not respecting and understanding what reenactment is all about. However the responsibility to heighten and deepen the understanding amongst the outsiders is not bestowed upon the outsiders. The responsibility is bestowed upon the practitioners and organizers.

¹ Free download at akademia.edu ISBN 978-606-93400-5-9

I wrote the guide to start a conversation about the reenactment practice on a meta-level. I wanted to put words to unwritten rules and conventions and ask *what, why and how*. My goal was to challenge and help organizers make deliberate choices. In its turn this might heighten the over all quality in the reenactment scene and deepen the understanding of reenactment as a genre and dissemination tool.

Changing the recipe

After publishing the guide I immediately felt the need to challenge the now outspoken rules and conventions. I now knew all the ingredients to make new recipes. Me and the rest of the HoH team members started hatching out a new conceptual frame that would take curation, facilitation and dissemination one step further.

Conceptual frame

We made some drastic choices when designing our conceptual frame. In my opinion, operating under the living history and historical reenactment banner demands some sort of actual reenactment - some theatrical guidelines and some considerations regarding the design of the area. We wanted to meet this demand.

The fictional alibi and context for most historical events (in Scandinavia) is «Vikings gathering at Kaupang to trade or sell goods». Therefore, we banned all sales tents, changing the fictional alibi and context to: Traveling Vikings living in a temporary settlement, living in and surviving off nature. This also meant that each participant could not bring more equipment than they could carry. No big tents, no chests, no chairs and no beds. In our opinion, this fictional alibi was very plausible and possibly a more realistic one.

In my bachelors thesis (2012), I investigated reenactors and their different agendas and motivations for participation. As you may have noticed, people are drawn to this activity for several different reasons, thus bringing different content to the table. If this mix of agendas is not accounted for by the organizers, the conceptual frame of any event will resolve, diverging in several different directions. This is why we decided to make an event for a particular segment of reenactors

namely «the hardcore reenactors». These reenactors are generally hard to please, they are less interested in the commercial aspects of an event, they tend to be obsessed with material authenticity and they are generally very into research. We knew that these reenactors would bring material quality and knowledge to the table. We would persuade them into working together and to disseminate their knowledge on our terms.

We challenged the participants by asking them to think about who they were portraying and why they were there. Scandinavian reenactors usually don't engage in acting a specific character, they lean more towards self-representation. However, we wanted their story and individual fictional alibi to match the events fictional alibi and context. Therefore we only allowed one jarl wearing silver, the rest of the participants were to be crafters and commoners.

Our event grounds met with a very particular need: a stream of fresh drinking water running through the camp. Furthermore, the event grounds were untouched, isolated from the modern world, (but not impossible to access for visitors). During TVW we did not allow any modern equipment at all. There is a simple reason for this: material authenticity will generate and maintain all other forms of authenticity; like situational authenticity displayed in actions and authentic atmospheres. This will fuel the imagination of both the reenactors and the visitors aiding them to engage in the fiction.

To help generate authentic actions and atmosphere, the camp was organized in a credible historical manner. *All* participants were assigned to every day life-tasks natural to a small community; doing the dishes, making sure there was enough fire wood, cooking and tending to the animals. We believe making the every day life-tasks visible is both a great form of dissemination and a nice opportunity to get emerged in authentic atmospheres. And besides, it freed time for the organizers to focus on other aspects of facilitation.

Dissemination and curated content

HoH curates participants by hand picking them and establishing a claim-counter-claim dialogue. We pick participants based on their skill, theoretical knowledge and ability to disseminate content. The invited reenactors fit our vision,

each of them being a part of the big puzzle. This form of curation is in deed time consuming, but the rewards are beyond measure. By balling ideas and actively claiming and receiving counter claims regarding the content and dissemination, we earn the respect of the reenactor. They bring unique knowledge and skill and we are willing to go a long way to enable them to be the best at what they do.

During the preparation for TVW we encouraged all participants to come up with ideas for experiments and projects. We promised to pay for any and all materials they would need to perform them. These experiments, along with the every day life work-tasks, were to be our program. No time schedule, no fight shows, no concerts, no games, no lectures - just on-going workshops for all participants, with all participants. During the week we had over 20 projects going such as turing wood and tanning skins, cooking, blacksmithing, pottery and iron production. When the event opened to the public the same projects were still going - this time with all participants, for all participants *and* the visiting public. Marketing the event, we made one simple promise to the visiting public: the promise of dirty hands.

Bake your own cake

Establishing a good dialog and exchange of knowledge between reenactors and between the reenactors and visitors rely on several factors. We succeeded in providing and communicating our conceptual frame. We managed to provide credible and functional event grounds. We curated our participants and facilitated the activities. We strived to help the reenactors to do their very best by supporting them both academically, creatively and financially.

In my opinion, any good historical event relies on the organizers and reenactors understanding of what they are doing and why they are doing it. Awareness about what, why and how on a meta level is just as important as the quality and authenticity of the material work. Awareness breeds security, security equals a solid conceptual frame and quality dissemination. I encourage all organizers to take a look at the ingredients - all the elements available for putting a successful recipe together. If we all tried to bake our own cake there would be so much more to talk about.

