

The Public Curatorship of the Medieval Past: An Introduction

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‘The Public Curatorship of the Medieval Past’ Special Collection explores how the medieval past is ‘curated’—that is, collected, interpreted, and communicated—across both professional and popular society, and takes a particular interest in the ways in which medievalism impacts these acts. In this introduction to the collection, the editors discuss the questions and issues which motivated the creation of the collection, and provide an overview of the articles collected.



The medieval past is connected and interacted with across all spheres of society. From the traditional realms of academia and the heritage industry, through to film, TV, games, and music—even tattooing and body art—the medieval world is continually being explored and reinterpreted in diverse ways, all of which impact how we as a society make sense of the middle ages. Thus, the memory of the medieval past is highly public and is curated—that is collected, interpreted, and communicated—across both professional and popular society. Despite these realities, however, few opportunities exist for the various parties involved in the analysis of the public existence of the medieval past to interact, collaborate and reflect. So too is there limited opportunity for those outside academia to engage in such discussion.

‘The Public Curatorship of the Medieval Past’ Special Collection goes some way to correct this imbalance by creating an open platform on which all those involved and interested in the public curatorship of the medieval past can make equal contribution. It opens much needed lines of communication within and beyond academic circles, and thereby supports greater cross-societal debate on how the medieval past can and should be communicated publicly.

Academic understanding and debate of medievalism, the ‘process of recreating, reinventing, and reenacting medieval culture in postmedieval times’, is covered within several publications (Emery and Utz, 2014: 2). These publications include the collection *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism* (2016), as well as the work of academics such as David Matthews’ *Medievalism: A Critical History* (2015) and Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz’s *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms* (2014) to name but a few. In addition, the journals *Studies in Medievalism* and *Postmedieval* provide paywalled spaces where academic exploration into the multifarious ways in which the medieval has been reimagined can be catalogued and discussed. At present, however, adequate lines of dialogue have yet to be established between medievalism and the overlapping disciplines of public history, public archaeology, heritage, reenactment, and cultural memory studies, in order to explore the impact of medievalism on how the medieval past is communicated to and by the public. Concurrent with the greater need for cross-disciplinary interaction on how the medieval past is publicly curated—as an issue which resonates far beyond the bounds of academia—a core belief here is that there needs to be greater opportunity for those outside academia to contribute towards these debates. Rather than bar them from discussions, this Special Collection instead actively recognises the contribution individuals from across society make towards curating and communicating the medieval past. By welcoming submissions from those working within such professions as heritage, and game development, this collection provides a more equitable, open, and inclusive research environment, enriching the discourse on the medieval and its public curatorship.

By accommodating research across a wider range of mediums, 'The Public Curatorship of the Medieval Past' Special Collection not only mirrors those real-world trends in communicating the past but assists in the effort to broaden public engagement by enabling individuals greater freedom to communicate their research as they see fit. In this way, while various forms of academic and popular mediums fall within the remit of the collection, its core focus is to explore how the medieval past is communicated and curated via such mediums for the purpose of disseminating historical knowledge. As such, the interest is not so much how the medieval is presented through popular culture, but rather how forms of popular media can be used with the aim to curate and communicate the medieval past to the public, and the impact of medievalism on this process.

This Special Collection is the product of a one-day symposium organised for the purpose of bringing together a wide range of perspectives from diverse disciplinary backgrounds to consider how the medieval past is publicly curated. The symposium was held on 15 September 2022 with the support of the University of Lincoln and funding from the university's Doctoral School. The accessibility of the symposium was crucial as we wanted to welcome as many participants as possible to encourage discussion and debate. As such, tickets for the symposium were free, we offered travel grants for students and unwaged participants, and we were able to stream the symposium online for those unable to make it to Lincoln. The aims of the symposium were to consider the multiple ways in which the medieval past is represented across both professional and popular society, and we were eager to not limit our discussions by focusing purely on academia. To consider the diverse ways in which the medieval past is presented and bring in multiple perspectives, we invited keynote speakers from a range of backgrounds, including the heritage industry, gaming and re-enactment.

From Heritage to Videogames: The Medieval in Public

Four of the papers in our special collection consider curatorship in the sense of the care and presentation of built heritage. In Fran Alfrey's paper 'Early Medieval Language and Literature as Heritage: a Sutton Hoo Case Study' (2023), she considers how visitors can learn about the early medieval period through the language and literature of the Anglo-Saxon period. First, she considers some of the challenges around this period of history, most notably how it has become entwined with predominantly white, masculine and national identities, before outlining how this view has begun to be challenged through the research and presentation of more diverse narratives. Then she outlines her event, 'Trade and Travel', which she held in Sutton Hoo, Suffolk in 2017, before demonstrating how the use of literature and language can prompt conversations and moments that give visitors a rich understanding of the early medieval period.

In homage to the host city of our symposium, Abigail Hunt's paper gives a detailed analysis of the challenges faced in managing and interpreting the medieval heritage of Lincoln. In particular, her paper 'Might a Sense of Place Approach Help the Public Connect to Brayford Pool's Medieval Heritage?' (2024), highlights the conflicting memories which complicate the communication of the medieval heritage of the 'Brayford Pool' region of the city. Utilising a 'Sense of Place' framework to guide her analysis, Hunt argues that the overlapping obstacles she identifies can be overcome through shared authority and public curation. Doing so would better convey the medieval significance of the region within the wider context of Lincoln's urban heritage and would produce more inclusive narratives of Lincoln's medieval past.

Two of the other heritage-focused papers look at the curatorship of the medieval past through the lens of castles. They provide complementary comparisons by considering the factors that go into presenting a castle narrative from the perspective of someone within the heritage industry and then evaluating interpretation from the perspective of a visitor. In Will Wyeth's paper 'The Lives Have It: Curating the Medieval Past at English Heritage Castles' (2023), he considers the stakeholders that are part of the process of curating, and the different interpretive methods that are available. He then puts forward the approach that he utilises at the castles he helps to curate, that of a person-centred biographical approach, where the stories of individuals are the focus of the narrative, not the architectural features of the building itself. Wyeth then explores how this was put into practice at Warkworth Castle in Northumberland, when a recent (re)presentation of the castle's interpretation put the person-centred biographical approach front and centre.

In Emily Michelle Tuttle's paper, 'Cultural Heritage at Consibrough Castle: Expanding Resident Narratives, Public Education, and Aspects of Medieval Domestic Life for a Diverse Audience' (2023), she examines interpretation installed at Consibrough Castle against the aims and objectives of English Heritage's interpretation policy. She considers how new research from within English Heritage has shown the importance of bringing in elements of play into a visit to a historic property alongside expanding the narratives that are offered. She then considers how this needs to be balanced against several important factors, including preventing damage to the historic environment, catering to multiple audiences, and retaining the originality of the specific site. Tuttle then considers scope for future development at the castle, particularly the expansion of narratives of the women of the castle as more than wives and mothers, and expanding the castle's timeline beyond that of the de Warennes.

The papers by Rob Houghton and Juan Manuel Rubio Arevalo tackle the themes of this special collection within the context of videogames. Rob Houghton's paper 'Awesome,

but Impractical? Deeper Engagement with the Middle Ages through Commercial Digital Games' (2023) gives a broad analysis of this issue by questioning the utility of digital games as a medium for communicating historical information. He considers the similarities and differences that exist between videogames and other mediums used for communicating the medieval past and explores the impact of audience and producer expectations on these products. From this basis, Houghton then surveys the strategies that might be implemented to enhance deeper engagement with the medieval period through videogames.

Juan Manuel Rubio Arevalo's paper 'The Illusion of Accuracy: Simulating the Crusades in *Ancestors Legacy* (2018)' (2024) offers a more focused investigation of medieval themed videogames with an analysis of the controversial game *Ancestors Legacy*. He investigates the game's use of crusading medievalisms as part of its 'civilization-conflict narrative', and argues it falls victim to the 'tyranny of reality'. As a result, Arevalo deems the game to be impeded in its ability to provide players the opportunity to critically reflect on the crusades and their causes.

Collectively, these articles represent an important step in broadening the discussion on how the medieval past is publicly curated. Moreover, it is our hope that the fascinating findings they present provoke further cross-disciplinary exploration of the numerous social milieus in which the medieval past is imagined and connected with.

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Competing Interests

The authors of this introduction are the editors of the Special Collection.

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