

“Too inaccurate or acceptable?” Representations of the past in the mass media

Discussing (un)acceptable representations of the past in the mass media means talking about twilight areas and varying opinions: how archaeology is portrayed in a news article, in a radio documentary, or in a film may satisfy the journalist. The archaeologist, however, regularly notices omissions, mistakes, exaggeration, stereotypes, and distortions. For the journalist, the narrative style of a text contributes to its quality and should make it easier to grasp; for the scientist, it often means nothing other than fantasy and commercialising the past.

The archaeologists' complaints about the media's inaccuracy and sensationalism characterize much of the profession's attitude towards communicating with journalists. Archaeologists often see the power of the media in influencing the masses as a threat to their authority of interpreting the past. The journalist, they think, is the translator of their message to the general audience. How the past is represented should therefore depend on the archaeologist, be it the short article in a newspaper or a blockbuster like Mel Gibson's "Apocalypse".

On the other hand, a scientist's attention to detail and his or her prosaic way of narrating is an unacceptable representation of the past for many journalists. Their first priority is to be understood by the reader, the listener or the viewer. Editorial departments are using their own criteria for selecting topics, and these criteria follow different rules to those of science. Most journalists do not consider it as their task to portray archaeology and its view of the past in an exact manner and insist on creating their own reality.

The paper examines the facets of a strained controversy that lasts for decades. It attempts to find a basis for a more constructive interaction of archaeology and the mass media.

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