



Debate Response

From proof and unproof to critical fabulation: a response to Frieman

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In her debate article, Frieman's (2024) reflections on the idea of unproof are a welcome and elegant addition to current debate on the nature of archaeological evidence, how we construct the stories we tell about the past, and the role of archaeology in the contemporary world. Frieman draws on both feminist and anarchist theory to argue that the value of archaeology is the way it allows us to grasp worlds different from our own and suggests that this can allow us to pre-figure better future worlds. This chimes closely with other recent work on the subject (e.g. Barton 2021; Cipolla *et al.* 2024; Schofield 2024)—clearly, archaeologists are considering the radical potential of our own discipline to change the world.

Frieman's argument is a powerful one: in the places where we lack proof, where our evidence is messy and where contradictions emerge from our data, this is where we find the space to do our feminist work by producing alternative narratives. Frieman talks about how archaeology allows us access to people other than elites, kings and entrepreneurs, and in so doing creates space for resistance.

In my response, I bring the idea of unproof (and proof) into conversation with critical fabulation. I begin from a position that: as archaeologists we do not *just* find other stories and counter narratives in the unproof. Archaeological evidence tells fantastical stories of worlds that are different and can inspire better futures. We need not embrace a position where the unproof is the only place to find difference. Frieman's suggestion that we can find the counter narratives that might help us imagine different pasts and build different futures only in the unproof puts us in a weaker position than we are really in. In what follows, I question the idea that proof and unproof are opposed in our archaeological evidence.

It is clear that those who try to tell stories about worlds and pasts that are radically different from the present often face challenges and a higher evidential burden. Frieman takes the narrative about foreign wives and chiefs in Bronze Age Europe as an example. She rightly highlights the model as masculinist, patriarchal, anachronistic and heteronormative. The evidence for this model can be questioned and there is plenty of unproof in the gaps between the distribution of sword types and ornaments and the story about foreign wives. Yet, when we attempt to tell a counter narrative, the weight of evidence required seems to be much higher. If you wish to argue that women might have been chiefs, or there were no chiefs in the Bronze Age, you not only have to prove your argument, you also have to disprove the dominant capitalist grand narrative. Thinking differently, it seems, requires more

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evidence. Frieman's move to working in the unproof is a canny one—we can create our counter narrative and build our worlds otherwise, in the unproof, in all those many messy cracks, contradictions and fragments that characterise the archaeological record.

It is helpful here to consider the concept of critical fabulation drawn from Black feminism. Saidiya Hartman (2008, 2019) uses critical fabulation as a key tool to explore the lives of Black women and girls subjected to slavery and in post-slavery contexts, whose stories are only faintly present in the archival records. Hartman's goal is to tell those stories and in doing so to provide a counter history. Her work draws from the archives and what we know (the proof) to give narratives to those who appear only as fleeting names subjected to violence. Hartman (2008: 11) talks about “playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story” that emerge from the archives in order to tell the stories that the archives cannot and how this can act to question received narratives.

Hartman is very open about the challenge of this process. She expresses fear about what she “might invent, and it would have been a romance” and about the process of choosing to tell or not tell a story as it “trespassed the boundaries of the archive” (2008: 8–9). As archaeologists, we can empathise—the step we take from our evidence to the production of narratives about the past is often tricky and invites introspection. Critical reflection is very clearly a key part of Hartman's work. We must consider the following questions: what kinds of narratives are we drawn to? What types of romanticising might we enter into more readily? What do our narratives do once they are loose in the world?

Yet Hartman (2008: 12) describes her work as “a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with *and* against the archive” (emphasis added). Proof and unproof are not words that she uses, instead I see her work as criss-crossing and erasing this boundary. The archive, as we all know, is only a partial story, written from a certain perspective. It is proof and unproof. Feminist standpoint theory reminds us to ask whose proof we are speaking of. Which narrators and whose power and knowledge systems are defining proof? Proof is emergent and relational rather than objective (Cipolla *et al.* 2024: 109–26). Hence, we can think of archaeology as speculative fabulation that erases, shifts and challenges the boundaries between proof and unproof.

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