



Debate Response

Encounters with otherness and uncertainty: a response to Frieman

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I find myself largely in agreement with the argument presented in Frieman's debate article (2024) on knowing and narrativity in archaeology, and I share the author's view of feminist epistemology as key to embracing the conditions of the discipline (see e.g. Pétursdóttir & Sørensen 2023; Sørensen *et al.* 2024). Here, I consider some of the perspectives that Frieman leaves slightly underexplored.

Like Frieman, I believe that archaeology must confront a source material that is inherently, and inescapably, messy or unruly, in Frieman's vocabulary. I also believe she is correct when contending that this chronic archaeological condition seems to invite many colleagues to "retreat to data and simple narratives" (Frieman 2024: 1680). In itself, 'datafication' and comprehensible plots with distinct conclusions may not sound problematic. Yet, as Joan Gero (2007: 312–13) contended, "it is precisely because the achieving of unambiguous facts is so difficult in archaeology that non-ambiguous knowledge is highly valued—probably overrated—in our discipline". Since the archaeological material is always and everywhere characterised by some degree of absence, fragmentation, vagueness and tracelessness (Sørensen 2021: 9), datafication and grand narratives do not do justice to the archaeological material, but only lead to oversimplification, reiterating a masculinist tradition of rhetorical certitude and grand narrative constructed around singular truths.

Frieman (2024: 1684) further points us towards Ursula Le Guin for an alternative to the masculinist discourse on knowledge production, arguing that 'unproof' might create new possibilities in archaeology, challenging "singular, grand narratives and totalising chronopolitics" (2024: 1679). This alternative approach heads in a feminist epistemological direction, described by Le Guin (1989: 90) as "dark, wet, obscure, weak, yielding, passive, participatory, circular, cyclical, peaceful, nurturant, retreating, contracting, and cold". Yet, in the archaeological context, I believe the pursuit of this feminist ethos is not simply a personal option; rather, the feminist ethos is necessary because the foundation for knowing archaeologically is inherently ambiguous, vague, incomplete and opaque.

This observation leads me to challenge Frieman's (2024: 1679) notion that "archaeological data are unruly". As I see it, 'data' must be distinguished from what we might call archaeological material, or remains, or—the term I prefer—traces (Sørensen 2021: 13). Datafication is a process of reconfiguring traces into a completely different epistemological order: data are a manufactured version of traces; data have been identified, named and

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labelled, placed in categories and thus stabilised. This is also the reason why data may seem, to some at least, to be independent of the researcher's standpoint, perspective, and context, being somehow objective, lending themselves to the production of 'absolute knowledge'. Traces, on the other hand, are dependent on relations between the observer and the observed—that is, they depend on situations that are unstable and transgressive. Attending to unproof, as Frieman proposes, thereby invites us to dwell on other moments in—and experiences of—the archaeological process rather than on those disciplined by the order of data, because traces retain a speculative open-endedness (e.g. Pétursdóttir & Sørensen 2023; Sørensen 2023; Sørensen *et al.* 2024) or what Gero (2007: 314) spells out as “three non-exhaustive sources of ambiguity: (a) under-determination of conclusions; (b) interpretive complexity; and (3) indeterminacy”.

Frieman's proposition for attending to unproof, and thereby narratives engendered by embracing the unknown, rests on the questions emerging from the gaps and uncertainties in the archaeological material. She shows convincingly how the interpretation of the famous Bronze Age burial from Egtved, Denmark—traditionally portrayed as belonging to a young female of elite descent, and recently reinterpreted as a non-local female that had arrived at Egtved as part of a marriage alliance between male-dominated polities—rests upon a host of unproven assumptions reiterated as facts. Frieman suggests that these scenarios are possible only by silencing and overwriting what we do *not* know. Hence, it is by disregarding epistemological absences that it becomes possible to continue to depict male power as a neutral norm within which women were neither agents nor victims, but merely compliant instruments, adornment or exotica. But instead of simply debunking existing narratives, or writing new singular truths, Frieman (2024: 1684) invites us to pursue alternative possibilities: “As soon as we map out our unknowns, a thousand new stories emerge, each ready for critical analysis and each with a different resonance in the present”.

Here, Frieman could be clearer on the role these stories might serve. She proposes tentative scenarios regarding the individual from Egtved (Frieman 2024: 1684), yet these are formulated as questions: “Did they [the deceased] have kin connections that eased the back-and-forth flow of wool?” Or “Were they travelling to nurse a cousin, a parent, an aunt? To bring a beloved child home for burial?” But do such questions serve merely to challenge dominant narratives by offering starting points for formulating new hypotheses? Or are they formulated to show how much more there is to ask of the archaeological material that currently remains untapped because of the bias towards male elites in Nordic Bronze Age research? And how do the stories help to facilitate the better future at the core of Frieman's ambitions?

Part of the answer is found in Frieman's (2024: 1685) contention that imagination offers a prism for taking seriously strangeness, alterity and distance: “We are ontologically distant to the past people we study—our wildest imagining will not and cannot accurately reproduce their perceptions of reality”. For Frieman (2024: 1685), this condition reveals the “extraordinary power in the unknown, the unfortold and the unproven”. To me, this implies the unknowability of the past is as epistemological as it is ontological: to narrate strangeness requires more than the realisation that past people—and animals, plants, rocks and dust particles—are different from the archaeological interpreter. It also requires us to be able to account for the encounter with otherness and uncertainty (Rizvi 2019; Pétursdóttir &

Sørensen 2023; Sørensen *et al.* 2024): how are archaeological others different and what forms of translation are necessary—or become possible—in the storying of ontological otherness and epistemological uncertainty?

Frieman's (2024: 1685) concluding statement that "Attending to unproof requires us to navigate the holes in our data and embrace the unknown" indicates that it is the holes in the archaeological material that are responsible for the strangeness of the past. I suggest it is the archaeologist's *encounter* with uncertainty and indeterminacy that harbours alterity, and this underscores the importance of Frieman's critique of any retreat to data and simple narratives.

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