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Teaching through living history – an educational role-play featuring life at an abbey in the fourteenth to fifteenth century

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ABSTRACT

Community archaeology is about people engaging with archaeology. This could be as participants in an archaeological excavation, but also through interacting and creating meaning with the material gained through archaeological research. As an example of the latter, Museum Skanderborg, Denmark, is offering local community schools the possibility of participating in an educational role-play in the excavated ruins of Øm Abbey, a monastery from the fifteenth century. As they dress up in the woollen dress of the Cistercian order and receive new names, they enter and experience a simulation of a part of medieval life. This paper presents the experiences of a type of museum learning, a scenario-based role-play. The content of the play is laid out as inspiration to others, who might want to try this form of museum learning. The paper also discusses the learning premises of school classes visiting museums, when a schoolteacher cooperates with an external teacher.

KEYWORDS

Medieval monastery; museum learning; living history; role-play; historical understanding; teacher roles

An educational role-play based on archaeologically recovered knowledge

In this paper, I present an example of a best practice learning session based on 15 years of experience of museum learning in practice at Museum Skanderborg. I am head of the learning department. In 2003, I completed a Magister Artium thesis of Prehistoric Archaeology on how schools can use museums as a place of learning knowledge (Paulsen 2003). This research covered how museum learning has developed by further studying the ways of teaching and learning and levels of comprehension for children of different ages, as well as theories on how visitors act at museums.

The theoretical approach is inspired by the work of the department of Museum Studies at Leicester University (Hooper-Greenhill 1999a, 1999b; Hein 1999; Shuh 1999). A simple communication model with a feedback loop underlines the communication and storytelling at the museum, especially when working with children and young adults (Hooper-Greenhill 1999a). Inspiration also originates from theories of the constructivist museum, where learning theory and epistemology can be analysed based on four combinations – Traditional lecture and text, Discovery learning, Behaviourist learning and Constructivism (Hein 1999, 75).

During recent years, the public schools of the Municipality of Skanderborg have attended the concept of Visible Learning provided and guided by John Hattie and Challenging Learning by James Nottingham (see, e.g. <https://visible-learning.org/>). As the main customers of the museum learning department are local primary schools, and as the museum educators work closely together with schoolteachers and attend some of their conferences, these programmes have also affected the view on how children learn, and thereby the museum learning sessions.

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The aim of the paper is to show that an educational role-play can work as a communication tool for archaeologist in order to engage the public with archaeologically recovered knowledge in a protected ruin park. The purpose of this is for other museum and archaeology educators to find inspiration and maybe use the elements at other museums with similar sites. The conclusions are based on my and other museum educator and schoolteacher observations during museum learning sessions.

First, I introduce the archaeological site and its background in order to show the source material on which the museum site and its history is based. I display and comment upon the way to the final edition of a well-functioning learning session, to share with colleagues both successes and failures.

Cara Insula

In 1172, a group of Cistercian monks founded the Øm Abbey or Cara Insula – the beloved island – as the monks called it (Nyberg 2003, 45). The abbey was built between two lakes in the Danish Lake District. As the monks dug two canals between the lakes, one on each side of the monastery, the abbey was literally lying on an island (Kristensen 2013, 321) (Figure 1).

The monks of Øm Abbey were part of a spiritual and organizational community with Cistercian monks throughout Europe (Lekai 1977; Williams 1998). They lived by the Rule of St. Benedict and by the ideals of Bernard of Clairvaux. In the monastery, there was silence and strictness. Everything was carefully measured and prepared in regular, continual routines: praying, working, eating, sleeping in the same way and at the same times every day.

After a period of conflicts in the area in the thirteenth century, the abbey buildings were fully erected during the fifteenth century. Øm Abbey expanded and rose to be one of the biggest land-owners of the region (Gregersen 2003). Part of the expansion was due to the tradition of Bequests – people giving money or property to the abbey in return of prayers for their souls after death and sometimes a burial in the monastery buildings.

The region in which Øm Abbey is situated was scattered with abbeys of different orders during the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. The lakes and streams of the region provided the abbeys with ways of transportation and possibilities for technical development such as water-powered mills, drainage, and sanitation. Through time, critical voices arose to different conditions within the Catholic Church, and in the sixteenth century in some European countries, the Catholic way was rejected in favour of the Protestant Church. The Danish king Christian III carried through a Protestant reformation to an evangelical, Lutheran church in 1536, and that became the beginning of the end for the monks at

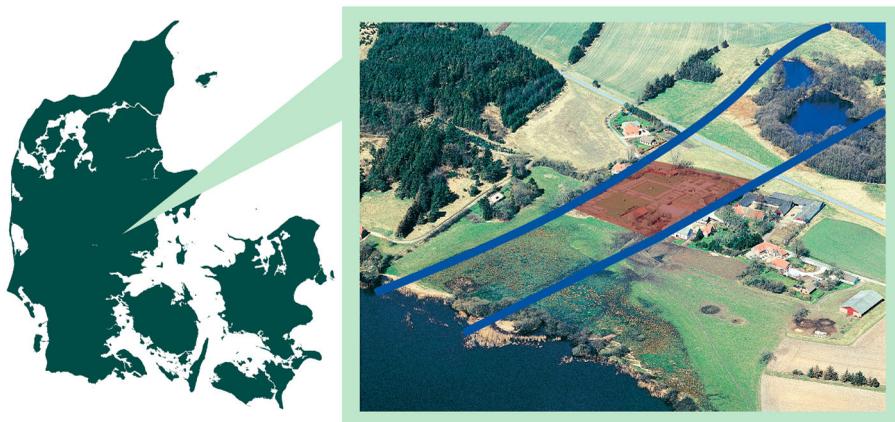


Figure 1. The placing of Øm Abbey. The ruins of Øm Abbey (red hatching) lie between the lakes Mossø (to the south) and Gudensø (to the north). The positions of two canals are marked with blue lines. Image: Øm Abbey Museum.

Øm Abbey. After a period where the remaining monks ran a school, educating Protestant priests, the Danish king in 1561 decided to have the buildings of the abbey torn down. The timber and bricks of the abbey were then reused as building material for the construction of the renaissance castle of Skanderborg (Gregersen 2003, 198). By 1566, most of the remains of the great abbey were gone and four farms now lay on the premises.

The excavations of Øm Abbey

Today the great Øm Abbey lies as a ruin at the Øm Abbey Museum and park (Figure 2). The Øm Abbey Museum was founded in 1925 to give access to the excavated site. The museum is now a department of Museum Skanderborg.

The National Museum of Denmark performed the first excavation on the site in 1896 (Gregersen and Jensen 2003). They continued from 1910 to 1941 excavating the church, parts of the main buildings of the monastery and graves within and outside the buildings (Figure 3). A modern road lay across the area, which hindered further investigations. In the 1970s, this road was relocated, and the remaining parts of the main buildings were excavated, this time by students from Department of Medieval Archaeology of the University of Aarhus. Museum Skanderborg and the University of Aarhus excavated a late medieval infirmary in 1986 and in 1994–1996.

The sources for the story of Øm Abbey are the finds from these excavations combined with written sources of the period, such as letters, documents and the most important source: the chronicle of Øm Abbey. This chronicle is a sort of diary kept by the acting abbot of Øm Abbey during the abbey's lifetime. The book is now at the Royal Library in Copenhagen, Denmark (Figure 4).

Museum learning and primary schools

In Denmark, the tradition of teaching at museums goes back to the end of the 1960s (Adriansen 1994). Museum Skanderborg has been running a professional museum learning department since 2009. The museum is a cultural history museum that covers historical periods from the Stone Age to the present time, with specialized departments on 13th to fifteenth-century abbeys, Iron Age sacrifices and World War II with the headquarters of the German Luftwaffe in Denmark. The knowledge and professionalism of the museum offer a possibility to relate to a wide range of subjects, both locally, regionally, and nationally.

Museum Skanderborg has developed a wide range of learning sessions for and in cooperation with the local primary schools. Museum learning is one of the museum's primary public obligations, as it is widely acknowledged that learning at a museum is an excellent supplement to the teaching at



Figure 2. The Øm Abbey Museum. The ruin park shows the foundations of the monastery buildings with the church to the north (left in the picture), three ranges of cloister walks surrounding the cloister yard and buildings with an economic function to the south. There is also a reconstructed cloister garden with healing plants and hop garden. An exhibition building displays some of the finds including a large and very interesting collection of bone material from the graveyards. Image: Øm Abbey Museum.



Figure 3. Left: Excavation of the grave of Bishop Peder Elafsen of Aarhus in 1941. Image: Øm Abbey Museum. Right: Graves under the floor in the eastern cloister walk excavated in 1975. Image: Department of Medieval Archaeology of the University of Aarhus.

the school, as the semi-formal learning room of a museum opens up for other types of interpretations (Hyllested 2007; Law no. L 51).

The museum’s learning sessions are available through a municipal School Service, free of charge for the municipality’s public schools, and available to private schools and schools from others municipalities for a variable fee (www.skanderborg.dk/skoletjeneste).

Museum Skanderborg and two centres of the Danish Nature Service (Naturskoler) are partners in the municipal School Service. The aims of the provided learning sessions in the service are to contribute to, and support, the lessons at the schools by offering settings and facilities that allow the pupils to make knowledge of their own through experience.

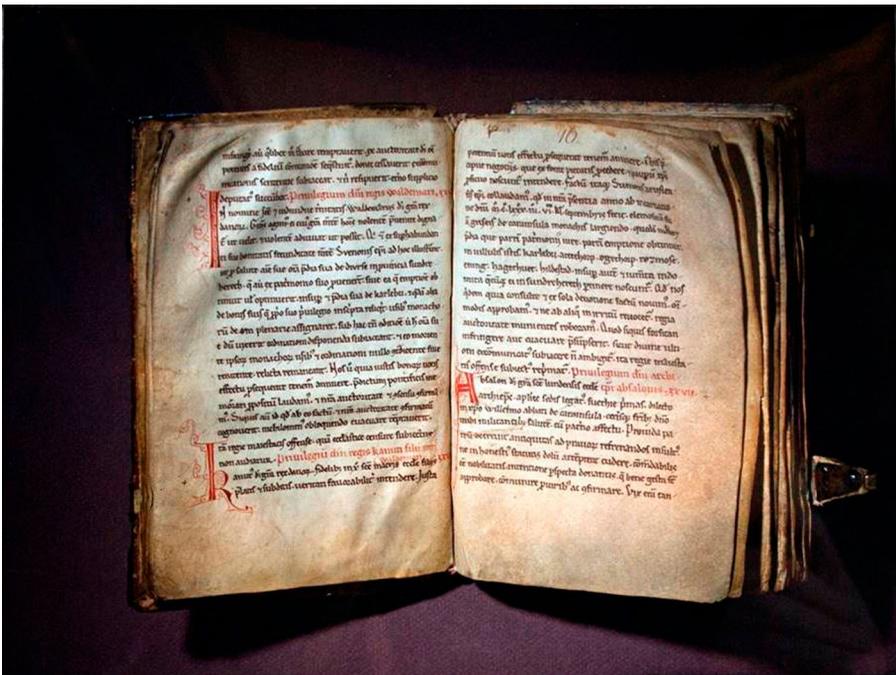


Figure 4. The chronicle of the Øm Abbey. Image: Royal Library of Denmark.

Through the learning sessions in the School Service, the municipality of Skanderborg and its partners also hope to support the awareness of, and strengthen and develop both the nature schools and the museums of the municipality. After a joyful and exciting day of cultural history or nature experiences, the pupils will come home, tell their parents and neighbours about it, and maybe drag them along to a visit.

In 2014, the Danish government reformed the law of the public primary and lower secondary school system (Law no. L 51). This new law has put forward a renewed attention on the collaboration of museums and schools, as some of the features are a focus on 'Open School' and the term: 'Supporting Teaching'. The idea of the 'Open School' is that each school must open itself to the local environment. The requirement to open the school offers new opportunities. A Danish community school has responsibility for the learning and development of all pupils, but this should now take place in cooperation with local community businesses, associations and cultural institutions. The purpose of the school can now be understood as a shared responsibility of the local community.

The intention of the 'Supporting Teaching' requirement is to complement and underpin the scholarly teaching in subjects, and it is anticipated that non-schoolteachers can undertake this training (via www.uvm.dk). With these two additions, the new reform opens the school to the surrounding world, where museums and other have the opportunity to contribute to the school's educational programmes.

With years of experience as well as the possibilities opened up by the new school reform, Museum Skanderborg has a lot to offer in the field of museum learning. In the following, I present one of the learning sessions. There is a special focus on the session's development and the educational goals for both museum and school.

Life of a monk

'To know who you are, and where you are going, it can be useful to know, what you come from'. That is a sentence often used to describe the value of history and museums. We teach children about the past periods to help them understand their society today. However, sometimes, past periods can be a bit hard to understand for today's minds.

The landscape around Skanderborg still bears signs of the society of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. In that period, Denmark was Catholic. A common conceptualization of medieval society involves a division into social groups of those who prayed, those who fought, and those who worked. The first group was priests, monks and nuns. The second group was knights and lords with the king as the highest ranked warrior. The knights were exempted from taxes to the king. In return, they had to come and fight, whenever the king called for them. The last group, the workers, were nearly all peasants plus a small number of artisans and merchants. They paid tax to the king who, in return, promised to protect them. Peasants were not part of the king's army as their job was to feed the country.

Skanderborg Municipality has a landscape and a history defined by the fact that the area has no manors, instead it was a land of abbeys. How do you teach about life at an abbey to today's children? Because, let's face it: a life of a monk with eight hours of prayer, eight hours of work and eight hours of rest per day, and the same schedule day after day can be a bit hard for present day children to comprehend. Therefore, we have tried to introduce the 'living museum' for the pupils as a learning tool in the form of scenario-based role-play. They *are* monks, so they learn with their own body.

The role-play has found its current form through analysis of a learning session of the museum in cooperation with a learning consultant. The evaluation included theories of teacher- and pupil roles when working outside the classroom, as these have an influence on the museum learning. The following presents some of the issues that the analysis addressed.

The museum offered the first version of the learning session 'Life of a monk' from 2009 to 2014. It was a three-hour session where the pupils wore reconstructed monks' habits made of wool like those



Figure 5. Pupils attending the educational role-play: 'Life of a monk at Øm Abbey'. Image: Øm Abbey Museum.

of the Cistercian order (Figure 5). The educational reason for the dress is that it helps with understanding a character when dressing up like the person. Researchers elsewhere have also noted the value of dressing up for giving schoolchildren on museum visits a sense of authenticity (e.g. Jackson and Leahy 2005, 319). You connect to the identity of the person you want to relate to by feeling their clothes on your skin. In addition, today's children are not used to wearing woollen dresses, like those of 600 years ago. It itches! That is just part of the tactile experience. That the pupils wear a similar garment to that of the Cistercian order, also helps to emphasize the great fellowship of the order and the equality – all are equal before God. The garments also give the pupils an opportunity of detaching themselves from their normal social roles in the class.

In the introduction to the session, the pupils were told that they are all young men, standing on the porch of the abbey, seeking to be monks. They were received into the abbey as novices, meaning monks on probation. They were given new garments and new names and left their past behind them. The Museum educator played the part of the Abbot, the leader of the abbey. The Abbot showed them their new home and talked to them in a dramatized way, as if they were real novices. As they walked around the ruin, there was no talk – as one of the monk's vows was silence. When one is quiet and the hood is pulled up, your mind is undisturbed. The monks used the silence to get into a meditative state. Today's children are used to communicating all the time, therefore silence can be a healthy challenge!

There were stops in different places in the ruin and a dialogue between the abbot and the novices on the story of this part of the abbey. During the tour of the ruin, they got an assignment of learning a verse of a hymn by heart. After a lunch break, there was a tour around an exhibition building, where finds from the ruin are on display – everyday objects and bone material from graves (Figure 6). Nearly 1000 graves over the whole area have been uncovered, both of monks and of the general population. We used the bone material to talk about the human body, and how it is possible to detect gender and age from the skeleton. Diseases and fractures on the skeletons were pointed out, and the pupils' own experiences with illness or fractures were involved in the discussion.

The learning session worked very well; the stories of the site are exciting and the pupils were very involved in the topics of the conversations. Nevertheless, the original intention was to make a role-



Figure 6. One of the big displays of human bone material at the exhibition building at Øm Abbey Museum. Image: Øm Abbey Museum.

play, and it had usually ended up more like a story line session. It did not really involve the pupils in a way where they could be active and make knowledge of their own. The dress up alone was insufficient, although the pupils enjoyed it and remembered it long after.

There was also a challenge concerning the schoolteacher. Over the years, the museum teacher has discovered some challenges regarding the role or position of the schoolteacher in this school session as well as in other learning sessions. The challenges for the museum teacher connects to the ways a schoolteacher might position him or herself when taking a class 'out of school'. There are many ways to be a schoolteacher when visiting another kind of teacher and environment. The next section looks into the different positions of visiting schoolteachers and how these influence the cooperation between the museum teacher and the schoolteacher during a learning session.

Who is in charge of the learning?

Many museum teachers probably share the experience that the schoolteacher on arrival at the museum leaves all the teaching to the museum educator, leaving also the responsibility for both learning and social behaviour to the museum educator. There is also the question of how to make the best learning experience for the pupils. How can the museum educator make meaning of the activities and the learning at the museum for the pupils and connect it to learning at the school? When asked about the work at the school by museum educators, my experience is that most schoolteachers give vague answers like: 'Everything at the museum is working great'. Those are rather important challenges for museum learning sessions and they depend on the co-operation between the two teachers; the museum teacher and the schoolteacher.

The involvement of the outside world that is set forward in the new Danish school reform puts great demand on the cooperation between the school and the external institution, as the cooperation must meet the school's law-bound learning outcomes and goals of the subjects involved. Part of the challenge probably has to do with the roles and positions of the two teachers.

The museum educator often feels that schoolteachers are uncertain and groping towards what their position is in relation to the learning scenarios at the museum. From the schoolteacher's point of view, moving outside the classroom and into a semi-formal learning room can be a bit scary, as it is not their natural environment. In the case of the learning session at Øm Abbey Museum, if you are not a role-play instructor in your spare time, how do you then lead your pupils through a scenario-based learning situation?

Research on schoolteachers taking classes out of the classroom shows that one of the reasons for doing this is for the schoolteacher to go to seek the expert's help on a certain topic (Hyllested 2007). When they visit the expert, it can then be a bit challenging to find their appropriate position in

professional communications. It is difficult suddenly to stand as a teacher in a professional context, where there is a person who has a better professional knowledge than the teacher does, and who is certain about what will happen on the trip.

In this authority-paradox, schoolteachers more or less purposely chose to take on different roles:

- Practical co-operator;
- Law and order co-operator;
- Socializing partner, make sure everyone has a good time;
- Tourist, like a student on a tour asking questions on your own behalf, or
- The invisible teacher, who stands in the background. They may not have visited the site before, or have studied the course thoroughly beforehand and therefore do not know what to do.

The best way of using the semi-formal learning space, like a museum, is for the schoolteacher to become a professional facilitator of the learning processes, and in that case using mostly the three first bulleted roles enlisted above (Hyllested 2007). The teacher's job is to connect the pupils' experiences from school with the ones at the visited place. The preparation of the visit is of great importance for the benefits of the visit because:

- The most important thing when you have to learn is what you already know;
- It is important to make a common understanding with the pupils of the reason for the visit;
- The teacher must take into account that the pupils each have their own cognitive readiness, and
- If you have not established a common understanding, it can prevent a new and altered cognition in the different learning environment.

The schoolteacher is seeking an expert voice, and that is what museums provide. The bigger picture of the pupils' learning is the schoolteacher's responsibility. Therefore, it is very important for the learning process, that the two teachers from school and museum have a joint understanding. The museum educator has to be aware of the 'expert role', but at the same time, it must be important to give room for the schoolteacher and to tune mutual expectations.

When the museum educator experiences that the schoolteacher positions herself as the invisible teacher who does not participate, it could also be because the teacher on an institutionalized basis is expecting that there is one only person who takes the expert role in the learning environment. In honouring the knowledge and value of this expert, they keep in the background. This behaviour conflicts with the museum educator's expectation of the teacher being actively involved in the process as a professional and experiential facilitator. The museum educator should be aware of this expert role and bearing that in mind, invite the schoolteacher in and hand them some responsibility too.

The most important tool is communication. Here another challenge comes in. How to make the best premises for the pupil's learning at the museum? It is the schoolteacher's responsibility that the pupils get an educational output, but it is also the museums educator's responsibility to make sure that the visit meets the needs of the school.

Many Danish museums plan their school sessions according to the school's learning outcome and goals of the subjects involved. Schoolteachers are often included in the development of the sessions at the museum. It is still important, however, that the learning at the museum reflects the knowledge of the museum. Otherwise, the schoolteacher would not be 'meeting the expert'. In the case of the learning session at the Øm Abbey, the next section provides an example on how some of these challenges can be met in practice.

Re-invention of 'Life of a monk'

The previous section described some of the issues addressed in the analysis of the former learning session at the museum, and in 2015 we reinvented the school session at Øm Abbey Museum, the 'Life of a monk'. Now, the museum educator, in order to ensure the learning outcomes of the pupils' visit at the museum, offers an introduction at the school before the visit. The museum educator visits the school and gives a presentation of the historic period and its community – the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries with social groups of those who prayed, those who fought, and those who worked. The session usually takes place in the classroom where the museum educator using a slideshow to present the historic period, the site, the role-play and the programme of the visit at the museum.

The museum educator invites the pupils to share their knowledge, general thoughts or questions. This way the museum educator seeks to gain knowledge of the work at the school and the skills of the pupils for when they come to visit the museum. The museum educator explains the programme for the learning session with special focus on the role-play and the different roles of the participants. When you say 'role-play' to Danish pupils, most of them think of the universes of Tolkien or Dungeons and Dragons with elves, wizards, orcs and fights as many children play role-plays in their spare time. In the Municipality of Skanderborg, there are yearly gatherings arranged by youth clubs where pupils from all schools meet in gigantic role-plays in the forests.

Therefore, it is important to state that the role-play at the museum has no orcs or fights, but time for absorption and reflection, and a great fellowship where all are equal before God. The pupils are told that they are to play novices, meaning students. They are reassured that it is ok to make mistakes, but that it is important that they all make an effort to participate and play along. The museum educator will play the role of the abbot who is in charge of the monastery. A new feature in the programme is a role for the schoolteacher in order to make the positions of two teachers more balanced. The role also helps the schoolteacher to become a professional facilitator of the learning processes as discussed in the previous chapter about teacher roles.

The schoolteacher is now the 'master of the novices'; a monk, whose task it was to educate and guide the novices – a sort of teacher monk. The novice master is in charge of the behaviour and the learning of the novices. The museum educator presents this role to the teacher at the school. The scenario of the role-play is thus set, showing reconstructions of the buildings of the great Øm Abbey, as they once were (Figure 7).

In addition to the introduction, the museum in co-operation with schoolteachers has developed educational material customized to aims and learning outcomes of the subject, for the schoolteachers to use in their teaching in the classroom. With this material and the introduction, the museum educator now has more knowledge of the school's preparation and the assumptions of the pupils, and can therefore make a better learning session at the museum.

The session at the museum has evolved from a story line course to an educational role-play with the emphasis on involvement and activities. The introduction is the same – the story is that the pupils are accepted as novices to the abbey. The museum educator is the abbot, who has responsibility of leading the abbey. The new teacher role, the novice master, is guiding the novices and maintaining order and discipline.

Everybody get dressed in woollen habits as these still plays an important tactile part. However, since there has been an introduction at the school by the museum educator, there is not much time spent on 'setting the scene' with roles and buildings at the museum. The role-play can get started quicker in the ruin park. The abbot still leads the novices on a tour around the buildings, but it is shorter and there is less focus at this stage on the museum tour (they heard about the museum back at the school). More focus can be placed on activities, that can give the pupils the possibility of making knowledge of their own and using their skills.

After seeing their new home, the day starts for the novices. A day in a monk's life consisted of eight hours of prayer, eight hours of work and eight hours of rest. The prayers were spread over the day and

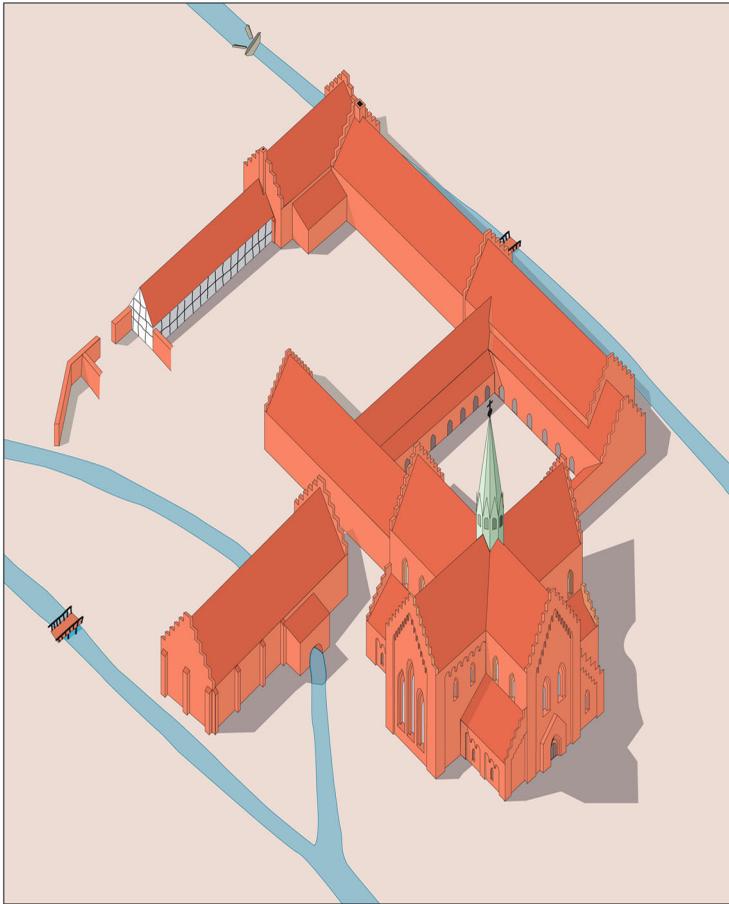


Figure 7. Øm Abbey at its full extension around 1500. Image: Øm Abbey Museum.

night as eight 'hours', some of them straight after each other (Figure 8 shows a monk in prayer). In the role-play, there is room for three 'sets of prayer'.

A prayer starts by the abbot and maybe a helping novice calling to prayer by ringing a small bell. The novice master collects the novices, wherever they are and leads them to prayer in the ruins of the church. The novices have already been shown their places on the tour around the ruin. Each finds their spot quietly and the whole group led by the abbot recites two hymn verses out loud (read from a note). Before saying the verses there is a discussion of the meaning of the words in order to be a prayer.

The three prayers are in between two working periods and two rest periods. After the first prayer, there is a small rest period with some water and a snack (from the pupil's own lunch boxes), before the novices attend their first working period. The change between prayer, work and rest is a good illustration of the real life of a monk.

In order to have time for all the new activities, the school session has been extended from three to four hours. As the reform of the Danish school system have extended the hours at school, this fits nicely with a school day. The aim of the two working periods was to create an activity that would teach the pupils about aspects of life at the abbey, where they should use some learned skills and knowledge. The museum has chosen to focus the activities on healing plants and the outlook on and understanding of illness in the fourteenth century.



Figure 8. A monk in prayer. Image after painting from the church of Sorø Abbey dating to the fifteenth century.

In the first working period, there are two work places. A group of pupils are usually a class with 22–28 children, so we decided to split them into two groups in order to make room for involvement for all. Before splitting for the two groups, the class is introduced to the definition of illness in the fourteenth century. At that time, people believed that health was influenced by the balance between four cardinal fluids in the body: blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. Unbalance in the fluids caused illness. The aim of treatment was thus to redress the balance in the body.

Sickness was perceived as either hot, cold, dry or moist. A warm and dry disease (typically a disease with fever) was treated with its opposite: a cold, damp drug. Medicinal plants were therefore characterized in terms of their properties, that is, whether they were cold or hot and dry or moist.

One group goes to the 'writing room'. Before the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg, books had to be copied by hand. As monks were taught to read and write, one of the jobs at the abbey was to produce books, copied from existing ones. The pupils are given sheets with translated plant descriptions of seven healing plants from Henrik Harpestreng's book: *Lieber herbarum*. Henrik Harpesteng was a famous medieval physician, who was also the personal physician to the king of Denmark in the thirteenth century (Danish translation from Olsen 2005) (Figure 9).

The story of the activity is that the abbot has borrowed the book from a neighbouring abbey, the abbot needs a copy for the library at Øm Abbey. The pupils copy the text with soft calligraphy pencils on yellowish, old-looking paper. Originally, the text was written with Gothic letters, but we use the letter type 'Old English' as the pupils would not be able to read Gothic letter. The museum has tried doing the writing lesson with ink and feather pens, but it was a mess with the woollen habits.



Figure 9. Deeply concentrating, this novice is trying to write the winding letters of the old book text about the healing plant Green Mint. Image: Susan Kipp Pedersen. Øm Abbey Museum.

The other working station is at the museum's herb garden. The museum has a reconstructed cloister garden with 63 square beds and a total of 80 cultivated plants, which in the Middle Ages found use as medicinal plants, edible herbs or were otherwise used in the household. Thirteen of the plants are relic plants from the old garden of the Øm Abbey, whose exact position we do not know. The relic plants grow all over the ruin.

In the herb garden, the novice gardeners have to categorize seven plants (the same as in the writing room) for their healing properties. As some of the real plants in the garden are poisonous; the pupils only handle small cards with pictures of the plants. They have to find the real plants and place the cards at the real plant's positions in the garden (Figure 10). Knowing the place of a plant in the garden would be important, so you could pick the right plant for treating a sick monk. Mixing up plants and their location and thereby using the wrong plants could be lethal.



Figure 10. A novice working at the herb garden finding the right place for Wormwood. This plant has dry and warm qualities. Image: Susan Kipp Pedersen. Øm Abbey Museum.

The first working period is ended by the prayer bell, calling the novices for prayer. After the second prayer, follows the second work period, which takes place at the 'hospital room'. Øm Abbey was placed far outside any large town as a place of asceticism and absorption. Where abbeys in bigger towns often played a role as a place for the poor and the sick, the monks of Øm Abbey mostly used their medical skills for their own residents.

The novices are divided into four groups of 4–6 children, some from both workstations. They now have to heal each other with plants for different illnesses, taking turns to be the sick person. The sick person gets an instruction card on what to say and do, and which plants will help (but that is a secret to the others).

The other novices have to figure out what type of illness it is by listening to the sick persons, who describes their symptoms using the instruction card. They then diagnose the type of sickness as hot or cold and dry or moist using their knowledge from the first work period (Figure 11). They then have to figure out what type of healing plants would cure the sickness, remembering that the healing plants should have the opposite characteristics to help. Someone stays with the sick person and the others go to the herb garden to find the right plants to cure the patient.

Both the novice master and the abbot help the novices if needed by listening to the groups and asking questions on the symptoms and the chosen plants. The biggest problem often is to remember, that plants with the opposite qualities will heal the sick. The ones from the garden group know where the plants are. The ones from the writing room have studied the plants and their qualities a bit further. If they come back with the wrong plants, the sick novice feels worse – and sometimes they 'die'!

When all groups have healed their sick, the abbot rings the bell for the last prayer. The novices then have a longer rest period, where they can eat lunch and have a look around the ruin. Then the role-playing part of the learning session at the museum is now at an end. As the museum collection, especially the large bones collection, has an exciting story, the learning session still contains the museum tour part of the old 'Life of a monk'. After looking at bones and talking about how you can detect age, gender, fractures and cause of death on skeletons it is time to return to the twenty-first century and take off the monk habits.

Before undressing, the whole learning session is rounded up by a talk about the experience of the museum visit. It is different every time as we are all different, but the role-play clearly adds value to the learning situation and leaves a large impression on the participants. A parent has told me that once, one of the pupils tried to guide a flu-suffering parent on which healing plants could help



Figure 11. A very sick novice. The illness is one where the patient has too much liquid in the body causing 'vomiting'. Image: Øm Abbey Museum.

him out of his misery. This example shows that the role-play has fulfilled another goal for the learning sessions – the pupils take their gained knowledge and tell the story to others. Participating in the role-play make them ambassadors of history and of the museum.

The role-plays take place during the normal opening hours of the museum. This means that other visitors to the museum get an extra experience on days of school sessions, when a group of ‘monks’ suddenly comes walking silently through the ruin complex. Other visitors are not invited to interact with the pupils, as it would interfere too much with the learning session. However, when participating in the role-play, the pupils help the museum telling the story of the abbey by ‘putting body’ to the monks.

So far, the educational role-play is an offer only for schools. The museum director and the learning department have discussed the possibilities of offering the role-play as an event to other groups of visitors as well. The activities of the role-play could work with everybody from the age of 10; for example, as an offer for firms using it as team building for employees. We will need more garments in adult size, but that can be solved.

Conclusion

Using museums as a semi-formal learning space and using the knowledge of the experts at the museum is a good supplement for the graduation purpose and subject goals of primary and secondary schools. It can also be a challenge for the schoolteacher to enter into collaboration with an external learning partner such as a museum. Part of the challenge comes from the roles and positions of the museum teacher and the schoolteacher.

The museum can gain a lot by helping and guiding the teacher to take a role as a professional facilitator of the learning processes at the museum. Although the teacher perceived the museum educator as an expert in a certain subject, they both have to be active to ensure the best learning for the pupils. In the case of the educational role-play at Øm Abbey, the role for the schoolteacher as a Master of novices has made a big difference, although we still see schoolteachers that are not prepared to take on the role in the role-play. However, that also has to do with personality – whether you are ready to play or not.

Teaching with living history and role-plays can contribute to a learning situation and is a way of engaging the community with archaeology. The role-playing children add to the museums storytelling for other visitors on the site. Feeling history on their own body gives them an experience to remember and they become ambassadors of the story and of the museum, telling family and friends.

It is important to create a setting to involve the pupils in a way that they can be active and make knowledge of their own through learning activities. When using educational role-plays, it is good to create significant teacher roles to allow the teachers to go forth and show the way by playing an active part themselves.

At Øm Abbey Museum, we have created an educational role-play that simulates a day of a monk. We have done so by dressing the participants in reconstructed garments, and by giving them new (holy) names for them to have a tactile experience and feel the history on their own body. In the play, the activities change between prayer, work, and rest as it did for the monks in the fifteenth century. Through the play, we put forth the scientific knowledge of the archaeological site and the museum, as this is why the schools come to a museum – to meet the experts.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on Contributor

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