

## ARCHAEOLOGY AND ART IN LATVIA

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### **Abstract**

The correlation between art and archaeology in Latvia can be traced in various ways. First, despite all technical innovations there are still professional artists that work on field with archaeologists and are directly involved in the recording of archaeological evidence. Furthermore, art-related work is being done in reconstructions, book illustrations and museum exhibitions. In addition to those who devote their artistic skills to scientific and educational purposes under the supervision of archaeologists, we can see quite a lot of artwork that represents something archaeological while being the free fruits of artistic imagination.

Archaeological science is of the opinion that inaccurate stylisations of archaeological costumes in movies or arbitrary depictions of some archaeological period in literary or any other work of art can very easily lead to false impressions and misunderstandings that endure for decades. On the other hand, scientists have no right to restrain the public from interpreting its own past as it deems fit.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the relations and crossroads between art and archaeology by examining how they historically have developed, coexisted and influenced one another in the territory of Latvia from the 19<sup>th</sup> century till nowadays.

**Keywords:** *archaeological thought, history of archaeology, art, ideology, representation, visualisation.*

Art and archaeology do have things in common, especially since both concentrate on communication of ideas through material objects [Barrowclough 2004: 3]. The relation between archaeology and art in this paper will be viewed through the perspective of archaeologist by focusing on the representation of Latvian archaeological heritage in Latvian art throughout history. By “archaeological” in this paper I will mean specifically “prehistorical”, because in Latvia archaeology is most often recognised as a science that studies mainly prehistory. Since there are few extant

written sources about territory of Latvia before the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD, prehistory in Latvian archaeology lasts till the Crusaders invaded the lands of Latvian tribes.

In contemporary Latvian archaeology and heritage protection many problems and controversies can be discerned between the public and the so-called experts or professionals. Public media and Internet comment sections display a disconcerting attitude towards the archaeological heritage [Sprūde 2015; Sprūde 2016; www.DELFI.lv 2015; etc.]. The overall picture indicates the inability of institutions in charge to protect the heritage, furthermore, archaeologists as a scientific community most probably have failed to educate society and explain the meaning and value of heritage. Little of professional scientific work has actually reached the public. Metal detectorists and treasure hunters justify their actions by claiming that scientists are interested only in their cabinet work and meanwhile all the antiquities would rot if someone did not dig them up. It can be noticed that our typology studies and development of scientific methodology hardly impress the general public. While science is struggling to prove its utility, art on the other hand has almost always fulfilled its purpose to address the public.

When researching the history of Latvian archaeological thought, it is hard not to see the strong impact of visual characters, music and literature on the public. They are crucial and important for Latvian national consciousness, although not always quite historically precise.

Artists with their work have almost always sided with the public; correspondingly, their work has shaped the perception of the past much more than the efforts of professional archaeologists. That is a good reason why archaeologists should consider art very seriously by not always picking a fight or ignoring it, rather trying to reflect on possible deeper cooperation in order to achieve common goals.

There is no doubt that it is hard to imagine archaeologists' work without close cooperation with artists also directly during fieldwork. Significantly, the interest about ancient monuments first arose in the artistic not scientific milieu. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the very first interest about Latvian archaeology, influenced by romanticist ideas, appeared among Baltic German intelligentsia. Historical, mythological and religious themes were a topic of the day in the field of academic painting in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as well. Historical genre was seen as a high style which reflected the aesthetic concepts of the age. Romanticism which originated in art and literature allowed focusing on national histories and heroes.

Since old ruins and untouched landscapes were perceived as aesthetically pleasing, we can assume that artists loved such archaeological objects as old castle ruins and hillforts even before scientists had noticed their relevance. For example, Mežotne hillfort can be seen already in lithograph made in 1823 by Baltic German painter Karl Jacob Reinhold Minckeldé (1790–1858), while in scientific publications it was

mentioned only at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century [Broka-Lāce 2016: 31–33]. The idea that past was at first hand deeply imbued with aesthetic and artistic presumptions seems credible when we remember that even one of the first known archaeologists in Latvia – Julius Döring (1818–1898) – was a professional artist in the first place. Obviously, inspired by the same romantic and national ideas dominating philosophy and literature, archaeology as a science became noticeable all over Europe [Trigger 2010: 110–114].

The first known amateur-scientific attempt to depict the Late Iron Age inhabitants of the territory of Latvia, based on archaeological material, was made by Friedrich Karl Hermann von Kruse (1790–1866) already in 1839 [Kruse 1842: Tab. 78] (fig. 1). The reconstruction (or interpretation) of the appearance of a man, woman and child was based on archaeological artefacts that were found along the river bank after a big flood. The lack of burial context led to many – as we now know – wrong assumptions and heavily distorted the general look of ancient people. For example, man can be seen wearing a lot of jewellery pertaining to women, he has bracelets on his knees and ankles, and the child is wearing a neckring as a belt, etc.



Figure 1. The first known attempt to depict the inhabitants of territory of Latvia, based on archaeological material (original title: *Waräger-Russen nach den in den Gräbern sich findenden Überresten zusammengestellt*) by Friedrich Karl Hermann von Kruse (1790–1866) [Kruse 1842: Tab. 78].



Figure 2. The reconstruction of “warrior’s helmet” by Kruse  
[Kruse 1842: Tab. 19, No. 1].

When considering the lasting influence of visual information, in this case we must stick to one particular detail. The man is wearing a helmet-like thing on his head, actually consisting of several different artefacts put together, and basically a head ornament usually worn by women. Kruse, based on then-dominant Norman theory, thought that he had found the remains of some Rus people, although they were actually belonging to Latvian tribes (11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> century AD). However, after this unfortunate reconstruction (fig. 2) we see the same “helmet” appearing again and again in future artists’ works as well as in publications purporting to show a specific armament component characteristic to Latvian warriors [LNVM 2017]. Despite the inaccuracies, this very image has left indelible traces in the cultural history of Latvia, so the National History Museum of Latvia has preserved this artefact as a historical witness.

By examining the iconography of the so-called “Ancient Latvians”, we can notice similarities and influences both in independent artwork and educational illustrations. One of the first professional Latvian artists Ādams Alksnis (1864–1897) had also probably seen the work of Kruse, because near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century he drew Latvian warriors with such “helmets” constructed by Kruse [Sūniņš 1964].

The first school history books in independent Latvia also were in need to show some depictions of prehistoric Latvian ancestors (fig. 3). It is interesting to see that even the book from 1925 still displays oddly analogous remake (fig. 4) of the same picture made by Kruse in 1839 [Švābe 1925: 80] (and later adopted by Mikus Skruzītis (1861–1905) in “*Austrums*”), as well as the photo of the “helmet” (fig. 5) with a caption: “Helmet of a warrior in Aizkraukle” (*Karavīra bruņu cepure Aizkrauklē*) [Švābe 1925: 15].

Still in 1932 we see the ongoing tradition in graphic works by Kārlis Krauze (1904–1942) – *Senlatvju taurētājs* (“Ancient Latvian trumpeter”) [Krauze 1932:

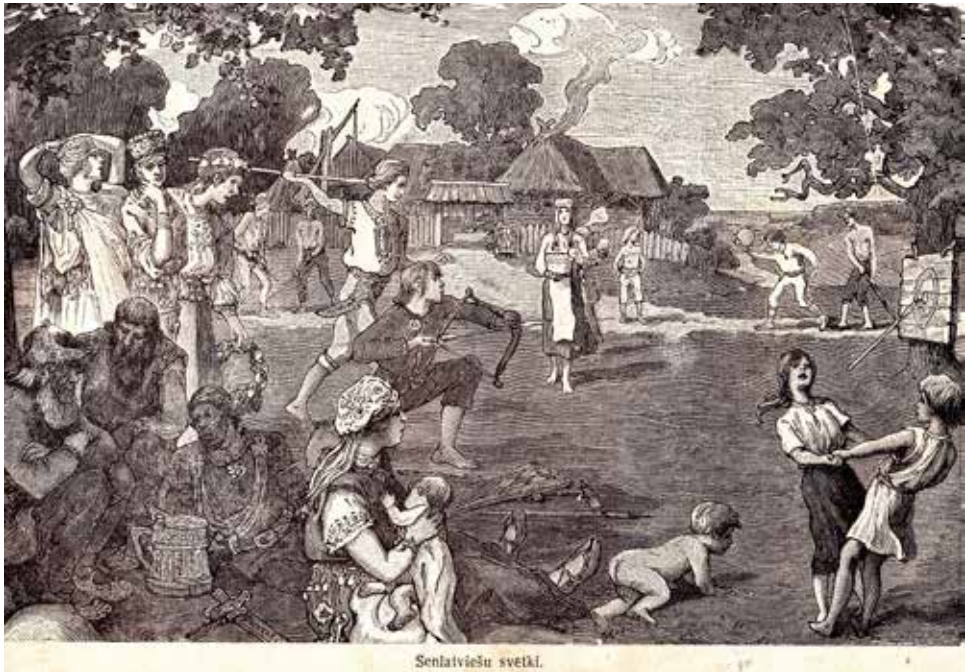


Figure 3. Feast of Ancient Latvians (*Senlatviešu svētki*).  
Illustration from school history book [Paegle 1924: 80].

32] (fig. 6) and even in his diploma work at the Academy of Art – *Latvieši atstāj Tērveti* (“Latvians leave Tērvete”) [Krauze 1932: 25].

The same influence can be seen in the works by Rihards Zariņš (1869–1939), who is known as the founder of Latvian national school of graphic art and etching and who has made some well-recognized contributions to National-romantic style in Latvian art history [Ducmane 2016]. Kruse’s helmets can be identified, for example, in the graphic *Dzīras pie latviešu virsaiša* (“Feast by Latvian Chief”) (1920s–30s) or even on a Donation sign (1928) for National Freedom Monument (*Brīvības piemineklis*) [Ziedojumumu karte. 1928. gads. LNA LVVA, 1303. f., 4. apr., 5. l., 210. lp.] (fig. 7). Even in the Latvian Freedom Monument (finished in 1935), designed by Kārlis Zāle (1888–1942), national mythological hero *Lāčplēšis* (Bear-Slayer) is not adorned with bear’s ears but instead wears the same “helmet”. Obviously, that is the commonly accepted and immediately recognisable appearance of an ancient warrior.

In the exposition of Latvian War museum (*Latvijas Kara muzejs*) we can see that even the border guards of Dagda have included the said “helmet” as a symbol of heraldic value in their flag (1937), along with other reconstructions of archaeological weaponry. It is fascinating how this single small detail started and gained a life of its own. Examples such as these in educational materials, artwork and other media



Figure 4. Warrior and Ancient Latvian woman (*Karavīrs un senlatviete*).  
Illustration from school history book [Švābe 1925: 80].

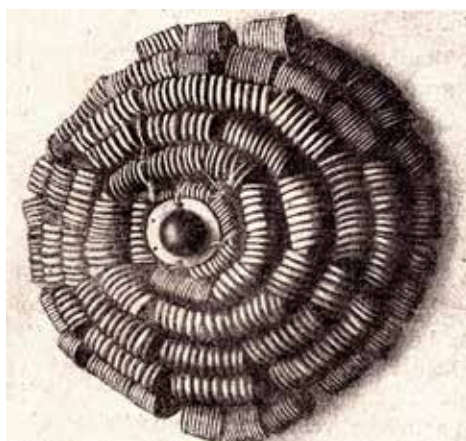


Figure 5. The “helmet” of a warrior in Aizkraukle  
(*Karavīra bruņu cepure Aizkrauklē*) [Švābe 1925: 15].



Figure 6. Graphic drawing by Kārlis Krauze (1904–1942) – Ancient Latvian trumpeter (*Senlatvju taurētājs*) [Krauze 1932: 32].



Figure 7. Donation token (1928) for National Freedom Monument (*Brīvības piemineklis*). Graphic work by Rihards Zariņš (1869–1939) [Ziedojumu karte. 1928. gads. LNA LVVA, 1303. f., 4. apr., 5. l., 210. lp.].

could be mentioned again and again, but in this particular case it is important to note that by the 1920s and 1930s scientists were absolutely certain that the artefact in fact was a woman's crown, but it seems that, despite the ascertained fact, artists just did not want to break the iconographic tradition.

As we look back at the history of artistic representation, besides the overtly heroic depictions of ancient Latvians there were also attempts to draw Late Iron Age Latvians as barbaric but noble savages: shaggy, dressed in furs, wild and untaught – half naked and armed with wooden maces as seen in paintings by Artūrs Baumanis (1867–1904). By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the “Ancient Latvian” theme had experienced a steady rise in Latvian painting. Notably the oil painting by Baumanis in 1887, *Likteņa zirgs* (“The Horse of Destiny”) is supposedly the very first composition of its kind in Latvian national painting, made by Latvian artist. Baumanis has depicted the events of the 12<sup>th</sup> century when a monk Theodorich von Treyden (ca. 1150–1219) came to preach the Christianity but Livonians (*līvi*) wanted to sacrifice him to their gods. Only the white horse of destiny that made the first step with the right foot, the foot of life, saved the monk from death. Baumanis depicted Livonians as corresponding more to Stone Age stylistics. It is also notable that some characters there are wearing women's neckrings exactly as the same man in Kruse's drawing; we also recognise the same “helmet” on one man's head. In another painting by Baumanis, *Jauns līvu kareivis* (“Young Livonian Warrior”, 1889), its subject is also depicted as a not very civilised person – half naked and, obviously, inspired by Kruse, wearing the traditional Latgallian woman's necklace.

After the First World War, when Latvia gained its independence from the Russian Empire (18.11.1918.), in context of Latvian War of Independence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was more than essential to show the greatness of Latvian warriors also back in the Iron Age. The political order was felt in archaeological research as this science was financially well supported by the government; seemingly the artists had also caught the *Zeitgeist* by depicting vibrant battle scenes. For example, Voldemārs Vimba (1904–1985) *Saules kauja* (“The Battle of Saule”, after 1930), *Senlatvieši* (“Ancient Latvians”, after 1930), *Cīņa ar krustnešiem* (“Fight against Crusaders”, 1938), Kārlis Stepe (1900–1945) *Senlatvuju kareivis* (“Ancient Latvian Warrior”, 1937), Uga Skulme *Pēc kaujas* (“After the Battle”), and many others.

As mentioned previously, archaeological themes were also embodied in sculpture. Besides the Freedom Monument, one of the greatest Latvian sculptors – Kārlis Zāle – included ancient warriors in the sculptural ensemble of Warrior's cemetery, thus showing the continuity of Latvian heroism from Crusades against ancient Latvians till the First World War and subsequent Latvian War of Independence. In compositional group *Senči* (“Ancestors”, 1936) in *Brāļu kapi* (Brethren cemetery),



we can see an ancient Latvian bowman – the Heracles-like character of manly hero with focused look and tense body that expresses a stern determination.

Although the trend for the depiction of Late Iron Age (supposedly the “golden age” in Latvian history) was already popular, it seems that even more Latvian archaeological heritage was reinvigorated in art and everyday life after the authoritarian regime was established by Kārlis Ulmanis (1877–1942) in 1934. Small naive pictures of romanticised past adorned the interior of President’s Castle. It was decorated with scenes of Latvian hillforts, like *Pilskalna nocietināšana* (“The fortification of hillfort”, 1930s,) by Ģederts Eliass (1887–1975), ancient warriors, and, what is most important – ancient rulers. The spirit of the age is embodied in such paintings of Ludolfs Liberts’s (1895–1959) as *Nameise, Rex Semigallorum*, *Westhardus, Rex Semigallorum*, *Lamechinus Rex* (1936), etc. The author showed them as westernised kings, even though, based on sources, scientifically it is only possible to talk about chiefdoms and kinships, not necessarily centralised governments ruled by kings.

Overall, during the interwar period, after the First World War, proclamation of independence, and – undoubtedly – in the context of Independence War, a pronounced accent on Latvian militancy was represented in Latvian art with archaeological weapons and hillforts even in book vignettes, bookplates (*Ex Libri*) and many other forms of art. Of course, there have also been other aspects of the archaeological in Latvian art. For example, mythological, in *Senatne* (“Antiquity”, 1908–1909) by Voldemārs Matvejs (1877–1914), *Upurkalns* (“The Sacrificial Hill”, ca. 1910) by Gustavs Šķilters (1874–1954), Latvian gods (1931) by Ansis Cīrulis (1883–1942), etc.

Furthermore, Latvian archaeological heritage has not been the only one exclusively depicted. We see great Egyptian stylisations in Latvian stage design art such as Ilmārs Blumbergs (1943–2016) set piece and costume design for Giuseppe Verdi’s (1813–1901) “Aida” (1871) at Latvian National Opera in 1998, or the precise and delicate illustrations for Homer’s *Odyssey* [Ģiezens 1943] done by Sigismunds Vidbergs (1890–1970).

Obviously, the relationship between art and archaeology in Latvia has been ambiguous. Judging from the viewpoint of archaeologist, there have been both good and bad examples. Probably, one of the most notable conflicts between art and archaeology in Latvia has been influenced by the legend (actually – the invented tradition [Misāne 2016: 138]) of Namejs’ ring (*Nameja gredzens*). Aleksandrs Grīns (real name: Jēkabs Grīns, 1895–1941) published a pseudo-historical novel [Grīns 1931] in 1931 that included the interpretation of Semigallian fights against crusaders in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The story quickly became very popular, thus giving a new opportunity for Latvian archaeological material to reach stage art, as “Namejs’ ring” was adapted for stage by Voldemārs Zonbergs (1905–1973) with stylised outfits and reconstructions of historical times. Along with the popularity of the story during the

1930s, accidentally, one specific type of archaeological jewellery – a ring with braided front part – started to be associated with Grīns' legend (it actually was most common in Latgallian not Semigallian material culture), thus later becoming a symbol important to Latvian national identity. After the Second World War and among Latvian émigrés the ring became a sign of identity, although it is not really scientifically correct to call it “Namejs' ring” [Broka-Lāce 2018]. During Third Latvian National Awakening (*Trešā Atmoda*) this ring regained its popularity also in occupied Latvia as a national symbol, was widely produced and also discussed [e. g., Urtāns 1989].

From jewellery art we come to cinematography. Namejs' ring is trending again. On 17 January 2018, a historical fiction action film “The Pagan King” (*Nameja gredzens*) (the initial English title: “The King's Ring”) was released [Grauba, Kinnings 2018], which gave way for new discussions about the authenticity and “red lines” that should not be crossed when artists use historical and archaeological material. Reviews show very different and contradictory opinions about the new production [Tomsons 2018; Matīsa 2018; Kuzmins 2018; Portāls nra.lv 2018]. The public mostly is satisfied to have so colourful visualisation of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Semigallians as never seen before, while archaeologists fall in despair regarding all the inaccuracies and ignorance of historical truth. Even though today archaeology has plenty of information about the depicted period, little of that is seen in the movie (for example, costumes with details from the Stone Age or the 19<sup>th</sup> century claiming to belong to the 13<sup>th</sup> century and the overall aesthetics tell more about contemporary fashion, ignoring the historical setting). This movie is a typical example of non-existent discussion between art and science, between professionals and public. The problematic part of such movies is that authors are well aware *how little this historical period has been depicted in cinematography, and they really believe* that their work will influence the way how people see and understand the ancient Semigallians and our prehistory in general. Unfortunately, such artists are not even ready to listen to suggestions by professionals. By claiming that the story will promote public interest in the past and increase the pride about their ancestors, authors actually give preference to cheap commercial tricks. Knowing the popularity of “Vikings” (TV Series (2013–) [Hirst 2013], we can easily see the overt similarity (fig. 8) that authors, in fact, are not hiding by personally pointing out that the film is a “Viking-style story about the Semigallian freedom fights in the 13<sup>th</sup> century” [LETA 2017]. While the “Viking” series depict period from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, we proudly present a movie in exactly the same style about the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Without trying to question the artistic freedom one must remember that this movie was financially supported by the government as a part of projects devoted to hundred years of Latvian statehood, and is widely presented as carrying a didactic relevance for national patriotic teaching [Aizsardzības ministrija 2016; *Nameja gredzens* 2017], but needless to say that, as a political commission, it should also show some accountability towards historical truth.



Figure 8. Semigallians from *The Pagan King*, initially *The King's Ring* (*Nameja gredzens*, 2018) (on the left) [DELFI 2017], and Vikings from *Vikings* TV (2013 to present) series [*Vikings* (2013 TV series) 2014].

Another interesting example of the way how contemporary art influences and teaches the past is the huge popularity of folk metal music [*Skyforger*; *Varang Nord* etc.] in Latvia. These bands always use strong iconography with replicas of archaeological costumes, merchandise and album covers with archaeological themes. For example, the cover illustration by Māris Āboliņš of music album *Latvijas metāls* (“Latvian Metal”) (fig. 9) shows oddly exaggerated warrior figures wearing a lot of



Figure 9. *Latvijas metāls* (Latvian Metal) music album cover illustration by Māris Āboliņš [Ism.lv kultūras redakcija 2015].

archaeological material as much out of context as in Kruse's picture in 1839 [Ism.lv kultūras redakcija 2015]. The lyrical content also often plays with historical truths, repeating such common stereotypes and myths as 700 years of slavery or Latvian kings. These bands undoubtedly are a lot more popular than archaeologists, so people are more prone to listen to their version of the story rather than hearing out sometimes dull hypotheses of official scientists. Since it is easier to sell well-known myths than new scientific proofs and truths, general public will see the history differently than the scientists trying to write it.

If we try to follow the evolution of iconography of the imagined warrior's helmet in Latvian art, we will ascertain how deep and lasting the influence of one single image can be, especially when we know that already in the 1920s archaeologists came to a conclusion that Kruse was mistaken. There is one interesting phenomenon which should be further researched that I highlighted before – namely – our story of archaeological in art tends to focus exclusively on the Late Iron Age. Even if artist claims to depict the “once upon a time” ancient and mythological ages, we will there always recognise the same romanticised iconography of Iron Age Latvian tribes. Although Latvian archaeology has accumulated quite a big amount of Stone and Bronze Age material, it is hard to identify any artwork pertaining to these periods. Due to inertia of national romanticism everyone concentrates on considerably the most heroic “golden era” of our history.

Another characteristic feature is that in Latvia archaeological themes in art are often strongly supported by government, and appear in such ideologically important artworks as the Freedom Monument, paintings of President's residence, and also in a movie created to celebrate the anniversary of independence. Art and identity of a nation are deeply connected [Rogers et al. 2016]. It is worthwhile to think about the correlation of archaeology, art and ideology.

Summarizing, the relations of archaeology and art in Latvia can be described as complicated, the dichotomy between professional and public archaeology in Latvia today also shows some symptomatic contradictions with historically entrenched roots. The representation of the archaeology-related themes in Latvian art can be seen on several different levels. First of all, there are depictions of archaeological objects, sites or artefacts that really exist. On the opposite side we see the reconstructions of objects, artefacts, buildings, and clothing. There are reconstructions created for scientific purposes or didactics, and other for artistic purposes. The artistic reconstructions can be divided into those claiming to depict historical truth and those having no claim for authenticity and are purely fantasy-based. But one always influences another, archaeology inspires artists, and they create archaeological visualisations; we can find archaeological discoveries in artworks as well as current tendencies of art in publications of archaeologists.

The general public in Latvia has a tendency to view and perceive their earliest history in a way different from what archaeology experts would like. All the notions are amalgamated in one postmodern, eclectic view on prehistory where scientists do not always have the last word. Each subsequent representation is based not on a historical source material but on a whole iconographic tradition – unlike science where discoveries and interpretations tend to change faster. It often seems that the truth in the popular culture is getting even further away from us.

The one thing that archaeologists often forget to mention is the fact that all our discoveries and conclusions about past are also our interpretations. Another archaeologist with different experience can interpret the same material differently, after all, archaeologists today are also products of their own time, their own social, historical and psychological backgrounds, and in such a perspective there cannot be a single truth, a single way to paint the past. The reconstructions of past cannot be 100% accurate. Our stories are always about ourselves – no matter how scientifically correct we would try to be, after some time another researcher will say how terribly wrong our ideas were. But after all, at the same time we as historians or artists are all still responsible towards the people we are talking about and their truth.

Latvians, of course, are not the only ones whose archaeological heritage encounters commercialisation. Similar tendencies can be seen with Viking or Celtic art. One element over time becomes a permanent and characterizing tradition and symbol of a whole culture, no matter how inaccurate towards the historical truth it is. Discussions all over the world [Perrin 2012; Howlett-Martin 2017; *NEARCHing Factory*] show that past cannot be monopolised by science, and compromises should be reached at some point. In general, there is a modern trend in contemporary archaeological thought to engage in more visual articulation of archaeological material, more representations, more public participation, that is not language-textually centred, but more based on visual material [Russell, Cochrane 2008; Bailey 2017: 246–256; Renfrew 2003]. Art provides a better ability for people to connect to the past than texts and it can deliver narratives that archaeologists at first reconstruct. It is the duty of archaeologists to think about how to represent archaeology, provide public outreach, and do informational art. Archaeologists must reclaim their voices, become authors themselves [Rogers et al. 2016].

In the end, it is important that professionals are not the only ones concerned about archaeological heritage, as well as it is crucial to promote awareness that the history of Latvia is not only reducible to the 20<sup>th</sup> century or the Second World War. Is caricaturing really the best way to show respect for Latvian ancestors? That is an interesting question, for example, artist and enthusiast of Latvian early history Agris Liepiņš on his own initiative has made visualisations of the past connecting them to the present by illustrating Latvian epic poem *Lāčplēsis* [Pumpurs 2016] with stylized archaeological elements and even creating his own textbook for children

about the ancient Latvians [Liepiņš 2017]. We could debate about the precision and other minutiae, but the most important thing is the fact that people have their own initiative and interest about the past that is not led by some kind of ideology or economic benefit.

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