Foreword

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From early engagements with history in the classroom to family visits of the JORVIK Viking Centre, from teenager discoveries of Tolkien's epic novels to TV viewings of *The Last Kingdom* in later adulthood, our everyday experiences have impressed upon our minds and hearts powerful but personalised images of what Nick Merriman called the 'official' past (Merriman 1991). These realms are constructions of knowing and feeling that may be more or less persistent. These images not only shape our understanding of the world as we see it, but stay attached to some of our deepest emotions; they are intermingled with our fears, hopes and dreams of safety, self-worth and acceptance. Endeavouring to understand the processes through which the past is presenced is one of the most important facets of our profession as archaeologists and historians (Bonacchi 2014, 2018; Brophy 2018).

This volume reveals a range of 'images' of the early medieval past in contemporary society. It comprises an anthology of essays and interview-based chapters authored by researchers working in an array of different institutions as well contributions by former student who participated in the 2017 conference. Together, they provide a rich variety of perspectives into the contemporary framing of the 'Dark Ages'. 'Darkness' still remains, within British and European society, one of the properties that are most frequently associated with the mid–late first millennium AD. I remember reading through substantive reports of evaluations made by large London-based museums on the public perceptions of the medieval period for my doctoral research. They were filled with focus group participants' descriptions of this epoch as a 'foreign country' (Lowenthal 1985) that is poorly lit, and mostly dull, cold, dump and technologically retrograde. Several years have passed since then and, building on previous studies, my latest investigations into the present-day use of the Iron Age, Roman and post-Roman periods[1] have showed how these ideas can be tied to exclusive narratives of 'self' and 'otherness' that bear dire social and political implications.

This book is, however, particularly effective in complicating the picture I have just portrayed and in bringing to light counter-narratives that reflect on the 'dark' sides of the Dark Ages in ways that go beyond the shadow cast in the early modern period and crystallised via the transformational writings of Edward Gibbon (1776). The idea of the 'Fall' of the Roman Empire and its intermittent and variously contested fortune in historiography (e.g. Brown 1971; Ward-Perkins 2005;) is alive in – amongst others – TV series, videos shared on YouTube, Twitter and Facebook conversations about the 'destiny' of polities such as the United States or supra-national ones like the European Union (Bonacchi *et al.* 2018). Yet, being 'dark' can also

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[1] This has been undertaken in the context of the AHRC-funded project *Ancient Identities in Modern Britain*, which is a collaboration between Durham University and the University of Stirling (grant n. AH/N006151/1; https://www.dur.ac.uk/research/directory/view/?mode=project&id=944).

carry elements of fascination, and those elements, whether accurate or inaccurate, may serve as compelling forces leading visitors to sites like Tintagel, or to participate in Viking re-enactment, to name just two of the examples provided in the chapters that follow.

Navigating issues relating to authority, interpretation, accuracy, appeal and value, this collection is the first focused attempt to shed light on the public lives of the 'Dark Ages' as both 'retrotopias' (Bauman 2017) and 'retrophobias', and as personally appropriated histories that are performed across online and offline fields of human activity and heritage crafting.

References

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