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Museum memes

Gabriel Moshenska [iD][1,*]

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*Correspondence: g.moshenska@ucl.ac.uk
[1]UCL Institute of Archaeology, UK

Museum memes

Gabriel Moshenska

Abstract

Internet memes are a culturally significant aspect of digital media and communication. Many memes draw on themes and sources from museums, including specific objects and images. This has significance for museums' digital communications and audience development, presenting not only opportunities for engagement but also reputational risks. This article presents a brief overview of relevant scholarship in memetic media to introduce some key definitions and dynamics of internet memes. Following this, it explores three brief case studies of 'museum memes' to illustrate some of these concepts. Finally, it considers how museums and heritage institutions might respond to popular memes and how heritage scholars might begin to approach memes as research subjects.

Keywords: digital heritage, memetics, museums, public archaeology, social media, viral content

Introduction

From LOLCats to Distracted Boyfriends, internet memes are a pervasive contemporary cultural form. Memes have shaped patterns of communication across political campaigns, news media, social movements and even the financial sector. In response there is a fast-growing field of meme research with aims and methods drawn from media and communication

studies, sociology, anthropology and digital humanities. Many popular memes draw on content from archaeology, ancient history and museums, but to date these have received very little attention from within these disciplines (see, for example, Vlachou and Panagopoulos 2022).

Perhaps the best-known example of a museum meme emerged in April 2018, when the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) tweeted an antique photograph of an Exmoor Horn ram, captioned 'Look at this absolute unit'. The viral success of this tweet, which received tens of thousands of likes and retweets, led to a rapid and significant growth in the MERL's online engagements and global fame. The museum capitalised on this success, selling merchandise branded with the meme in their gift shop. As the fame of the MERL's 'absolute unit' spread, billionaire Elon Musk briefly made the ram photograph his Twitter profile picture.

The premise of my current research is that museum memes have value and significance for the public's understanding of the past, including as driving forces for engaging with new audiences. This potential has largely been neglected by researchers and practitioners, leading to missed opportunities and misunderstandings. In this article, I explore some explanatory frameworks for researching memes, present some case studies of museum memes and offer some suggestions for practical responses and future research.

'Spreadable media': memes in context

What makes a meme? Ryan Milner (2016, 2) calls them 'aggregate texts, collectively created, circulated, and transformed by countless cultural participants'. There remains some confusion around the term, and Milner (2016, 3) notes that 'It's an easy shortcut to call a solitary image we scroll past on Twitter or Tumblr a meme, as if the term is synonymous with "a quirky little JPG from the internet."' It is also important to distinguish memetic media from viral content. The latter enjoy a sudden burst of popularity on social media but can disappear relatively quickly. Some viral content becomes memetic through incorporation into cycles of adaptation, juxtaposition and spread online (see Jenkins et al. 2013). For example, the term 'absolute unit', to describe something as large, was being used in memetic media before the MERL

attached it to a picture of a ram, but this particular juxtaposition proved successful in spreading and generating further adaptations.

Limor Schifman (2014, 41) has defined memes by three connected criteria: '(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users'. By this measure, memes are a larger, more dispersed form of the 'in-jokes' and cultural references that emerge within teams or friendship groups, shaping their discourse and serving as ways to perform identity and belonging. Schifman's definition aims to direct the focus of meme scholars towards the human agency in meme culture, identifying the different voices and viewpoints involved in their social construction as public discourses.

Beyond their identification it is useful to consider memes in action, and in particular their characteristic forms of emergence, transformation and transmission. Milner (2016, 23–34) identifies five fundamental logics in memetic media:

- *Multimodality*: the combination of text, image and other media
- *Reappropriation*: combining emergent and pre-existing materials into new content and context
- *Resonance*: the ability of memes to attract enduring attention, interest and interaction
- *Collectivism*: the transformation of memes into 'in-jokes' that help to define a community
- *Spread*: the dispersal and dissemination of memetic media, with greater endurance and complexity than viral content.

These logics also present starting points for research, whether focused on the forms or content of memes, patterns of meme consumption and production, the nature of their audiences or the specific social media or digital platforms where these memetic processes occur. This wealth of potential approaches and entry points, combined with the slippery and fast-moving nature of meme cultures, are just a few of the many challenges facing meme scholarship in any discipline. Added to this, there is the enduring uncertainty around research methods and ethics for social media-focused research.

Case studies

A few brief illustrative examples can shed light on the significance of memes to museums and the value of a stronger understanding of memetic media and processes. More details of the case studies below can be found on https://knowyourmeme.com, a wiki that has become an invaluable resource for tracing the emergence and trajectories of individual memes, although Pettis (2022) has drawn attention to its limitations as a research resource.

'Boar Vessel'

Like the MERL's absolute unit of a ram, it was a charismatic animal – a ceramic figurine in the Cleveland Museum of Art – that became the basis for the meme 'Boar Vessel, 600–500 BC, Etruscan, ceramic' (accession number CMA 1977.42) (Figure 1). Most boar vessel memes, such as those collected on the subreddit r/BoarVesselMemes, focus on creative reappropriation, combining the image of the artefact with other meme forms and popular culture references. Some play on the absurdity of an ancient ceramic boar as an object of uncontrollable lust, or ascribe it a serene persona. Boar vessel merchandise can be

Figure 1 Boar Vessel, 600–500 BCE, Etruscan, ceramic, probable forgery (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

found online, including stickers or 3D printed replicas. The object itself is now suspected to be a modern forgery and has been removed from display. The museum's webpage for the vessel includes a brief mention of its celebrity: 'DID YOU KNOW? This boar enjoyed brief internet fame, with a series of online memes peaking in 2018' (Cleveland Museum of Art 2023).

'Stealing Things'

The 'British Museum Stealing Things' meme has its roots in the ongoing debates around the museum's contested retention of objects such as the Parthenon Marbles, the Rosetta Stone and the Benin Bronzes. The website Memebase quoted human rights lawyer Geoffrey Robertson as saying that 'the trustees of the British Museum have become the world's largest receivers of stolen property' (Dawn n.d.). Memebase also jokingly implied that the British Museum might even steal the 'British Museum Stealing Things' memes themselves (memes as objects of museum collecting activity are a separate but interesting topic; see Rees 2021). Popular forms of the meme include images of the British Museum lying empty after returning all of its stolen goods, or the institution personified as a bold or sneaky thief carrying away comically huge monuments such as the Parthenon. On social media the meme is frequently associated with broader anti-colonial sentiments and expressions of solidarity with historically looted populations.

Low-quality copper

Perhaps the best-known museum object meme is based on the Complaint Tablet to Ea-Nāṣir in the British Museum, a cuneiform text from Ur, dated to *c.* 1750 BC, complaining about a delivery of low-quality copper and poor customer service (accession number BM 131236) (Figure 2) (Figulla and Martin 1953; Oppenheim 1967; Killgrove 2018). First appearing in 2015, this is a highly multimodal meme with a variety of different starting points, including the artefact itself, images of its display, the text and the individuals it names. Complaint Tablet memes often feature mashups with established meme formats and feature other famous tricksters such as the Norse god Loki and art dealer Redd the fox from the video game *Animal*
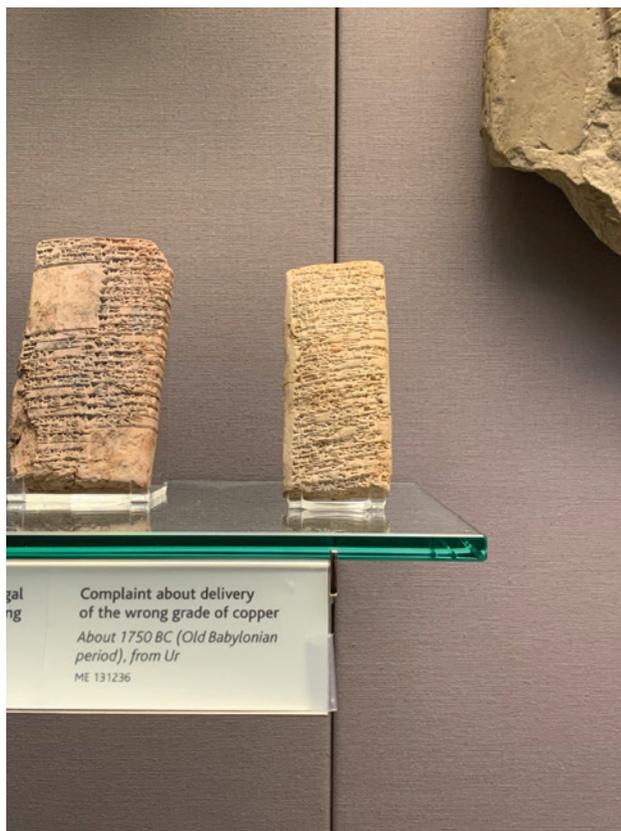
Figure 2   The Complaint Tablet on display in the British Museum
(Source: photograph by Gabriel Moshenska)

Crossing. Much of the meme's enduring success derives from fascination with the tablet's addressee Ea-Naṣir, and subversive enjoyment in his elevation to modern-day internet celebrity. In 2021 a Chinese firm hit the news after being sold a huge shipment of stones painted to look like copper ingots. Ea-Naṣir fans rejoiced: 'The Return of the King!' Online shops sell Ea-Naṣir merchandise, including bumper stickers reading 'Don't buy copper from Ea-Naṣir' and Christmas-tree decorations that advise 'well-behaved copper ingot salesmen rarely make history' (Moshenska n.d.).

Discussion

Following the success of the MERL's absolute unit tweet, the museum's social media manager, Adam Koszary (2018), reflected on memes as a factor in public engagement with heritage, as well as the practicalities and brevity of internet popularity for museums: 'We of course plan on milking this meme for as long as we can … We then fully expect the meme to die, and we'll go back to a sort of business as usual and hope to do it again.' At the time of writing in April 2023 the MERL twitter account is still using 'absolute unit' and the image of the ram in their digital engagement.

The examples above illustrate some of the unpredictability and variety of museum memes, as well as their general tone of humour and playfulness (even in the otherwise serious critique of the British Museum). The complaint tablet and boar vessel are based on intriguing, charismatic objects: Milner's resonance factor in memetic media. The boar, like the absolute unit of a ram, ties in to the well-attested popularity of animal images in memes (Milner 2016, 80).

How should museums respond to memes? The MERL's attitude is pragmatic, but only so far as the meme remains culturally and politically unproblematic. It is worth noting that the phrase 'absolute unit' in memes was originally used to comment on people's weight. As a more extreme example, the adoption of the Pepe the Frog cartoon as a popular white supremacist meme was an unwelcome surprise to the creator of the character (Glitsos and Hall 2019). There is no scenario where the British Museum could engage with the Stealing Things memes without attracting ridicule, outrage and other difficulties. The Cleveland Museum of Art's brief allusion to the Boar Vessel meme is sensibly terse, but also implies (largely correctly) that the meme is no longer particularly current. While the Complaint Tablet meme has had a surprisingly long life, there would likely be more risks than rewards for the British Museum in engaging with a meme that is past its peak, and has branched in some peculiar directions. Institutions of different sizes and specialisations are likely to respond to memes and virality in different ways: some museum social media accounts are run by volunteers, others by teams of professionals and input and interaction with curators is similarly varied. Similarly, institutional policies around media and publicity are likely to be shaped to their specific interests and

circumstances, although unexpected internet fame or notoriety is likely to be a black swan event outside the scope of guideline documents.

The study of heritage memes remains a small and emerging field. Based on the cautions outlined above, there is value in building up professional and scholarly understandings of memes. This requires not only a familiarity with the relevant platforms and internet cultures, but also a good grasp of digital research methods, including the practical challenges and ethical pitfalls of studies that draw on social media. Some of this research might be case-study-focused, looking at individual memes; other elements might be more audience-focused; or aim to evaluate the impacts of meme-driven publicity on institutions. There is certainly scope for future research looking at the demographics of meme-driven public engagement with museums, and exploring whether or to what extent digital engagement translates into other forms of interaction including visits: research of this kind has particular salience in the aftermath of pandemic-driven closures and the rush to generate online visitor experiences (for example, Kist 2020). As more museum memes emerge, my sympathies are with the museum social media managers who will have to explain the intricacies of internet culture in crisis meetings with their baffled bosses.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this article. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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