# Stone Age clothes in popular media – a balance between producers, audiences, and sciences

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**Zusammenfassung**

Steinzeitkleidung in populären Medien – ein Gleichgewicht zwischen Produzenten, Publikum und Wissenschaft

*In der Öffentlichkeit gibt es klare Vorstellungen vom Aussehen eines steinzeitlichen (meist paläo- oder mesolithischen) Menschen, welche jedoch laufend variieren, und diese Ideen sind in populären Medien wie Comics, Fernsehserien, Videospielen und Filmen zu sehen. Viele dieser Bilder stammen aus der wissenschaftlichen Forschung oder sind zumindest von ihr beeinflusst sowie in einigen Fällen eindeutig von rekonstruierten Bildern in Museen inspiriert. In anderen Fällen weichen die Darstellungen in den populären Medien stark von den wissenschaftlichen Erkenntnissen ab. Dies geschieht nicht ohne Grund, denn wissenschaftliche Genauigkeit oder Authentizität ist nicht das einzige Ziel der Produzenten und nicht das einzige Interesse der Konsumenten. Es wird ein Gleichgewicht angestrebt zwischen historischer Genauigkeit, dem, was die Produzenten zeigen wollen, und dem, was das Publikum erwartet bzw. sehen möchte. Diese Erwartungshaltungen ändern sich auch im Laufe der Jahrzehnte.*

*Allerdings beeinflussen diese Darstellungen von Kleidung und Aussehen in der Steinzeit in den populären Medien wiederum die Vorstellung des Publikums von den tatsächlichen Steinzeitmenschen. Das wirft die Frage auf, welche Ausgewogenheit im Hinblick auf die Einbeziehung der wissenschaftlichen Forschung erforderlich ist und welche Verantwortung die Archäologen mit ihrer Forschung und im Rahmen der Wissenschaftskommunikation haben. Im vorliegenden Beitrag werden diese Aspekte anhand mehrerer Fallstudien untersucht.*

**Schlagwörter** Visuelle Identitäten, Videospiele, prähistorische Kleidung, Rekonstruktionen, visuelle Medien

**Summary**

*Among the general public, there are clear but everchanging ideas of a Stone Age (usually Palaeolithic or Mesolithic) person's appearance, and these images can be observed in popular media, such as comics, TV series, video games, and movies. Many of these images derive from or are at least influenced by scientific research, in some cases clearly inspired by recreated images in museums. In other cases, appearances in popular media strongly deviate from scientific evidence. This is not without cause, since scientific accuracy or authenticity is not the sole goal of producers and not the only interest of audiences. One can observe a balance between historical accuracy, what producers aim to show, and what an audience expects and enjoys, which is also subject to change across the decades of production.*

*However, these presentations of clothing and appearance in the Stone Age in popular media again influence the public's idea of actual Stone Age people, which begs the question of what balance is needed regarding the incorporation of scientific research and also what the responsibility of archaeologists is with their research and public science communication. In this contribution, these aspects are explored through multiple case studies.*

**Keywords** Visual identities, video games, prehistoric clothing, reconstructions, visual media

## Introduction

Visual identities have previously been discussed for prehistoric societies based on archaeological evidence[1]. Many images and ideas about specific time periods, cultures, and societies have evolved – and also changed over time – in the public mind, not necessarily reflecting the historical realities. These images are manifested in popular media, such as movies, cartoons, TV series, and video games. They are influenced by multiple factors, such as current fashion, politics, ideals, education; research conducted and shared by archaeologists also has a significant impact. This begs the question of what archaeologists' responsibilities are to the public and thus to popular media, which in most cases may shape people's ideas of the clothing and appearance of past societies much more than museum exhibitions and scientific literature. In movies and TV series, clothing plays a vital role in storytelling (e.g. Aldrete/Sumner

1 E.g. Eicher-Evenson 2015; Grömer et al. 2024; Huijsman et al. 2024; Martin/Weetch 2017; Roach-Higgins et al. 1995; Sørensen 1997.


**Fig. 1** Idealised image of Palaeolithic people, living in caves. »*Idealbild aus der Steinzeit. Höhlenbewohner*«, by Hugo Darnaut, 19th century.

***Abb. 1*** *Idealisiertes Bild paläolithischer Menschen, die in Höhlen leben.* »Idealbild aus der Steinzeit. Höhlenbewohner«*, von Hugo Darnaut, 19. Jh.*

2023; Llewellyn-Jones 2018; Powell 2023). The costumes, in many cases, are not representative of historical or archaeological research, which is also not the aim of their design. Instead, they often reflect the expectations of the audiences – »creating the illusion« – as expressed in the title of a book on Hollywood costume design by J. Jorgensen and D. L. Scoggins (2015). Video games are one form of popular media where immersion and character design play important roles, and thus also the clothing. The costumes bring a further dimension to the playable character(s), making some aspects of visual identities resemble real life. In some games, the playable character can be seen as somewhat of an avatar, where its appearance can be changed by the player.

## Bridging the gap between archaeology and the public

As archaeologists, our research perspective usually starts with the material culture – the finds – from which aspects of the lives and behaviours of past societies can be identified to a certain extent. Communicating these research results to the public without elucidating each step of the methodology can sometimes be challenging, especially when only minute traces survive. The Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods usually leave only small finds, which do not produce a clear image of Stone Age life when shown in museums. At this point, visual reconstructions are vital tools for showing imagined scenes from daily life when based as closely as possible on the available evidence. For the Palaeo- and Mesolithic periods, such reconstructions are usually paintings or digital artistry, but dioramas and life-sized recreations of clothing are also options. However, they are always witnesses of a specific period (when they were made) and a specific *Zeitgeist*. This is clearly demonstrated by the painting of »Idealised Palaeolithic Cavemen« found in Hall 11 at the Natural History Museum Vienna (Fig. 1).

## Clothing to create or fit a narrative

However, these images are not restricted to museums or other scientific contexts. Many examples of popular media are set in (pre-)historical eras or inspired by them, e.g. in the fantasy genre (usually the Middle Ages and Renaissance) but sometimes in the science fiction genre, as well (Jensson 1987). Here, the costumes are a crucial narrative element, describing the character non-verbally and immediately. Features such as functionality are sometimes completely left aside – for example a female warrior's armour that more or less consists of items resembling a bikini; here, the image seems more important than the actual protection.

An example is the widely known *Asterix and Obelix* series (comic books by R. Goscinny and A. Uderzo, 1959 to present), set in Gaul in the year 50 BC. Here, the differences between the Gauls and Romans are very clearly communicated through the characters' appearance and clothing: The Gauls are often displayed with a moustache, trousers (often overexaggerated, e.g. as worn by Obelix), and striped or chequered garments. Also, the iconic helmet worn by Asterix has wings, resembling Late Bronze Age helmets, such as from Pass Lueg in Austria. Typical Celtic helmets are different (Fig. 2). Though there are known finds of Attic


**Fig. 2** Comparison between Celtic helmets at the Natural History Museum Vienna and the visual design of the comic series *Asterix*.

***Abb. 2*** *Vergleich zwischen keltischen Helmen im Naturhistorischen Museum Wien und der visuellen Gestaltung der Comicserie* Asterix.

winged helmets and also a La Tène helmet with a bird with massive wings from Ciumești, Romania (Rusu 1969), it probably did not serve as inspiration directly for the design of Asterix' helmet. Most likely the inspiration derives from the fantastical 19th century depictions of Vercingetorix. Though the display is far from historically accurate, the inspiration from archaeological and historical research is clear[2]. On the other hand, the Romans are clean-shaven, wear Roman-inspired armour (sometimes togas), and do not wear trousers. The reference to trousers is especially interesting, as there is a literary evidence fitting the narrative of *Asterix and Obelix*. In the 1st century BC, Diodorus describes the Gauls as wearing colourful clothing, featuring stripes and cheqs, as well as trousers (Diodorus Siculus, Bibliotheca historica V, 30). This was a striking difference for the Romans at the time, who did not wear trousers.

Differences in narratives told through clothing can contrast sharply when similar stories produced at different times are compared. For example, the legend of Arthur, perhaps dating to the 5th or 6th century, has been presented many times in popular media, with Queen Guinevere portrayed in varied ways. To mention just one comparison, in the movie *Knights of the Round Table* (1953), she is a delicate damsel, sometimes dressed in white to symbolise her innocence. In *King Arthur* (2004), however, Guinevere's image is quite the opposite: here, she is a warrior, seemingly inspired by a Celtic warrior cliché, wearing barely any clothing, leather, and blue paint. Neither of these portrayals displays Late Antique or Early Medieval clothing based on known sources.

## Authentic versus inauthentic – is it that simple?

As archaeologists or history buffs, it might seem tempting to point out each historical inaccuracy in movies, video games, and other media, and ›authenticity‹ in popular media is difficult to define (Houghton 2022, 1–3). However, media producers often have many other things in mind besides historical accuracy and have other goals than archaeologists who create reconstructions. The visual codes shown through clothing in media always reflect the time of production (e.g. Aldrete/Sumner 2023; Jorgensen/Scoggins 2015) as opposed to the visual codes of history (see Grömer in this volume), which, themselves, are challenging to identify. Thus, the main characters in movies or drama series with prehistoric, antique, or historical content usually represent a ›historic spirit‹ composed of garment designs, hairstyles and jewellery that are combined to create a ›period look‹ but reflect the *Zeitgeist* of the era the movie was made to attract the contemporary audience. Connecting current visual codes with impressions of ancient times helps the consumers to dive into these past worlds and relate to the characters.

## The scruffy caveman – myth versus research

For movies, comics or even video games that deal with periods far back in time, it is usually the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic eras that are shown in media rather than the Neolithic, in which the sedentary lifestyle might seem similar to that of modern western people. The image people usually have in mind is that of a hunter-gatherer with unkempt hair, dwelling in a cave and wearing furs. Here, old stereotypes are shown, as perpetuated by images from the 19th century (Fig. 1). There are many ways in which the Stone Age has been displayed in popular media. Compared to the Medieval period, often depicted as the literal ›Dark Ages‹ (von Taeuffenbach 2023, 22), lacking colour and with a dark filter added, the Stone Age is usually shown in brighter hues, emphasising the colours of nature and thus bygone times. Various Stone Age periods are rarely differentiated but seen

2 E.g. Iron Age textile patterns: see Grömer 2023, Fig. 99; Iron Age garments: see Schlabow 1976.



**Fig. 3a–b** Reconstruction of a Palaeolithic upper garment as presented at the Natural History Museum Vienna (a), based on finds of ivory beads from Grub Kranawetberg, Lower Austria (b), c. 30 000 years old.

***Abb. 3a–b*** *Rekonstruktion eines paläolithischen Obergewandes, wie es im Naturhistorischen Museum Wien präsentiert wird (a), basierend auf Funden von Elfenbeinperlen von Grub Kranawetberg, Niederösterreich (b), ca. 30 000 Jahre alt.*

as one distant time in prehistory – sometimes even including dinosaurs or other anachronistic fauna.

## Sources of Palaeolithic and Mesolithic clothing and reconstructions

Clothing in the form of preserved garment remains can only be proven from the Neolithic period onwards. From this time in prehistory, a wide variety of sources, including almost complete garments, textile fragments found in settlement and burial contexts, finds of costume components and jewellery, as well as pictorial and written evidence, provide a more detailed picture of our ancestors' clothing (Grömer 2023, 335–470). For the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods, many of these sources do not exist or are still unknown. As a result, there is no direct evidence for clothing from these earlier periods. It is only possible

to infer clothing from indirect evidence (Gilligan 2010, 32; Merthen 2015, 10–27), such as pieces of jewellery sewn onto clothing or evidence for sewing needles. Most spectacular are the Palaeolithic burials from Sungir in Russia (Bader/Lavrushin 1998), where individuals have been found who apparently had rows of thousands of ivory beads been sewn onto their garments – their placement clearly suggesting tunics and leg covers. Jewellery from the hunter-gatherer period, including ivory beads or perforated shells, can also be found in Palaeolithic settlements in Europe (Fig. 3), e.g. the Gravettian site of Grub-Kranawetberg in Austria (Antl 2018).

The Australian archaeologist Ian Gilligan has introduced a concept that classifies Pleistocene clothing into two categories: simple and complex. Simple clothing is single-layered and not tailored to the body, while complex clothing has two or more layers and is tailored to the body. Complex clothing also protects against natural phenomena such as rain or wind. Another distinction between simple and complex clothing is the manufacturing technique, which will be illustrated using the example of animal skins. Simple clothing only requires scraping tools to process the skin. If the pelts were small, piercing tools, such as bone awls, may also have been necessary to join the skins together. On the other hand, complex clothing requires special tools for scraping, cutting and piercing (Gilligan 2010, 24–26).

Gilligan identifies the presence of specific stone tools and technologies as potential indirect evidence for Pleistocene clothing. Other indirect evidence includes the exploitation of animals and plants (Gilligan 2010, 32). Additional insights can be drawn from known climate and weather conditions, as well as the thermal requirements of Palaeolithic and Mesolithic environments (Gilligan 2010, 17–18).

## The Stone Age in popular media

A well-known example is the animated sitcom *The Flintstones* (by W. Hanna and J. Barbera, first aired in 1960). It is obviously not trying to depict the Stone Age realistically but rather humorously, combining elements of the Stone Age with the 1960s and including dinosaurs. Regarding clothing, the character Fred Flintstone wears fur clothing, but also a necktie; the hairstyles are typical of the 1960s, but Pebbles Flintstone adds a bone to her hair.

The racing video game *Cro-Mag Rally* (developer: Pangea Software, published by Aspyr 1998) has some similarities in the design of the characters' clothing, likely inspired by *The Flintstones*. While the playable characters fit the cave dweller cliché, wearing fur clothing and tooth jewellery, the vehicles and settings are humorous twists on various (pre-) historical eras.

A more realistic approach can be seen in the survival and city-building video game *Dawn of Man* (developer and publisher: Madruga Works, 2019). In this game, the player can start in the Palaeolithic period, organising the life of hunter-gatherers and advancing to the Mesolithic, Neolithic, Chalcolithic, Bronze Age, and Iron Age by learning new technologies. With each period, the clothing also changes and is quite accurately based on archaeological research.

Some depictions of the Stone Age can be problematic for multiple reasons, such as the movie *10,000 BC* (producer: R. Emmerich, 2008). While we do see some inspiration from Mesolithic archaeology, such as the Shaman from Bad Dürrenberg in Saxony-Anhalt (Germany) (Meller/Michel 2022; Orschiedt et al. 2023), we also see finely woven, blue-dyed garments, at least 8000 years too early. This costume aimed to match clichés of clothing in a warm climate and to let the main character stand out, while designed with a modern look.

An interesting example of the Stone Age inspiring science fiction media is the video game *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (developer: Guerilla Games, publisher: Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2017), which is set in post-apocalyptic North America in the 31st century. It features tribal societies of hunter-gatherers and shamans, whose identities are clearly communicated through the characters' clothing, especially members of the »Nora tribe« – obviously inspired by Stone Age archaeology – whose wardrobe consists of skins and furs. However, the game and its costumes show an admixture of science fiction, i.e. necklaces made from robotic parts.

## Case study: Far Cry Primal

The following analysis focuses on the video game *Far Cry Primal*. Developed and released in 2016 by the French video game company Ubisoft, *Far Cry Primal* is a single-player, first-person shooter game set in Central Europe around 10 000 BC during the Mesolithic period. As an open-world game, it allows players to explore and navigate the game world freely. The storyline follows Takkar, an unarmed hunter who must return to his tribe. Players are tasked with crafting weapons and clothing from gathered materials, as well as sourcing food through hunting and foraging.

How were the game's setting, characters, and other elements created? In an interview (Te 2016), game developer K. Shortt explained that once the decision was made to set the game in 10 000 BC, the team began with thorough research. They consulted anthropologists and linguists to ensure a degree of authenticity while maintaining creative freedom. Shortt emphasised that, while the roles, such as shamans, warriors, and hunters, had to make sense for the hunter-gatherer period, the team also aimed to make these characters unique, eccentric, and entertaining (Te 2016).

Additional insights from Ubisoft's website reveal that the production team maintained constant contact with experts to create an authentic setting (Ubisoft 2016). However, they also identified areas where historical evidence was sparse, allowing for creative interpretation. According to Ubisoft, the scarcity of evidence from this period, primarily limited to stone and bone artefacts, gave the team greater freedom to develop imaginative elements while still grounding the game in historical plausibility (Te 2016).

In summary, while efforts were made to create a realistic setting and foundation for the characters and their clothing, the game's development also allowed significant creative freedom: the language spoken by the characters was invented, and some animals featured in the story did not exist around 10 000 BC. For instance, the genus *Megacerops* is depicted in the game, although humans could not have

**Fig. 4** Reconstruction of the Shaman of Bad Dürrenberg, Saalekreis District (Saxony-Anhalt). Painting by Karol Schauer, Salzburg.

***Abb. 4*** *Rekonstruktion der Schamanin von Bad Dürrenberg, Saalekreis (Sachsen-Anhalt). Gemälde von Karol Schauer, Salzburg.*

encountered it. Nevertheless, the representation of characters and their clothing seems to draw inspiration from archaeological sources.

The portrayal of clothing involves a blend of imagination and archaeological evidence. Players can craft their own garments in the game by hunting specific animals, skinning them, and using plants as binding materials. Additionally, many characters are depicted wearing necklaces or bracelets made of bones or shells – a type of jewellery known from many Palaeolithic and Mesolithic sites.

## The Shaman of Bad Dürrenberg – a major source of inspiration

This burial of the Shaman of Bad Dürrenberg was discovered in 1934 and is located in the German state of Saxony-Anhalt (Meller/Michel 2022; Orschiedt et al. 2023). The grave contained a woman and a child accompanied by rich grave goods. These included over 140 artefacts made from animal bones, turtle shells, 120 fragments of freshwater mussels and much more. Exceptional finds included, for example, a crane bone that served as a container for over 30 microliths, many pendants made from the front teeth of bison, deer and roe deer and one antler of a roebuck, which served as a headgear (Orschiedt et al. 2023, 126). Many of the bones show signs of artificial processing. Due to these circumstances and the woman's bodily anomalies (Orschiedt et al. 2023, 127–128), this grave is interpreted as a shaman's grave. The Shaman of Bad Dürrenberg (Fig. 4) may have served as a model for the character of the shaman in the game *Far Cry Primal* (Fig. 5; Te 2016). Tensay, the shaman from *Far Cry Primal*, is depicted wearing antlers on his head and adorned with various types of jewellery, including teeth, animal bones, and numerous shells.

The shaman »Old Mother« from the film *10,000 BC* (2008) and the shaman from the movie *Alpha* (2018), also resemble the Bad Dürrenberg Shaman, particularly in their use of jewellery made from animal bones and teeth. Even stronger parallels can be observed in the character of the shaman from the TV series *Barbarians* (2020), who closely resembles the reconstruction of the Shaman of Bad Dürrenberg, despite the fact that the series is set much later, during the Roman occupation of Germania Magna in 9 AD.

**Fig. 5** The shaman from the video game *Far Cry Primal.*

***Abb. 5*** *Der Schamane aus dem Videospiel* Far Cry Primal.

## Conclusion

The inspirations taken from research in popular media are very diverse, appearing in contexts ranging from humour to science fiction and more realistic depictions. Public ideas of Stone Age clothing are then reinforced by these depictions. This results in people being more strongly influenced by images in popular media than by museums, documentaries, or other scientific sources, and therefore believing fantastical appearances to be historical fact. However, both media producers and researchers bear some degree of responsibility – or at least have the power – to improve the public's understanding of prehistory. A powerful example of the impact of a recreated image is the Shaman of Bad Dürrenberg, which has been adapted for video games, TV series, and films.

Thus, we propose more such high-quality reconstructions or recreations be made and presented to the public in museums and popular science publications. Although it can be challenging to recreate the visual appearance of prehistoric people, attempts based on the evidence we have are already valuable, and uncertainties can even be shown with different variations. We also suggest increasing the communication between researchers and those producing historically-themed popular media, thus better reflecting scientific research and also taking into consideration the perspectives of both sides when discussing the »balance« necessary between producers, scientists, and the audience.

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## Source of figures

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