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## Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

# Conference Review: Fields of Dreams - the EAC10 Conference, Leiden 2017

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In recent years, experimental archaeology has increased in popularity among academics and students alike due, in no small part, to pioneering universities such as Exeter, University College of London, Leiden and University College of Dublin. The examination and analysis of the past through reconstruction of lifestyle, *chaîne opératoire* of manufacture and the efficacy of produced materials is not new. Archaeological experiential sites, such as Britain's Butser Farm, which was set up in 1970 by the Council for British Archaeology to test theories

on how Iron Age peoples lived, have added greatly to understanding and reconstructing the past. As such, experimental archaeology has built on these pioneering foundations and developed into a staunchly academic discipline, invaluable for gaining knowledge of the past, and an unsurpassed means to engage with the public.



That weekend in April, there were several conferences throughout Europe; those who attended EAC10 will feel reassured they probably went to the most uplifting, which reminded everyone what the purpose of all archaeology is – asking questions, reconstructing the human past, and telling the story afterwards.

The 10th Experimental Archaeology Conference of EXARC took place in Leiden, Netherlands, over three days; 20th to the 22nd April 2017, in Leiden University's Archaeology department. The first two days hosted a diverse range of presentations from all over the globe, while the final day consisted of a visit to Vlaardingen prehistoric house-building project and Eindhoven Museum.

The conference started with the upbeat tale of the three reconstructions of the Gislinge boat, by Sørensen and Dael, with each event drawing more interest. This was achieved by involvement of people from all over the world, from locals in education and community groups to various social mediums, all disseminating differing layers of information from 'lifestyle' images on Instagram (no pouts or dinners shown, they assured the audience) to a website created for the more committed enthusiast, as much as the academic. This talk was followed by Leiden University's Professor van Gijn and her team who were instrumental in the Vlaardingen Broekpolder

house project. In developing a prehistoric community, they reconnected with a modern one, echoing Sørensen and Dael's theme of capturing the imagination and involvement of the professional academic, student, interested 'civilian' and traditional craftsman alike.

This theme of experimental archaeology as a means of engagement was part of University College Dublin's (UCD) effusive presentation on the reconstruction of early medieval roundhouses in Ireland, using the islands ancient annals as a guide to building, with Professor Aidan O'Sullivan and Brendan O'Neill fully engaging the conference delegates. The experimental unit of UCD archaeology has a highly active social media profile, and could be said to have built a community around that as much as in 'real time', just like the Gislinge project, allowing people from all over the world to be inspired by their projects.

The dissemination of knowledge via social media has proven invaluable in the rise of the public perception of experimental archaeology, with Postma utilising YouTube videos to demonstrate the reconstruction of a medieval turf-walled byre with the University of Groningen: internet communities proving not so different from real ones, proving time and again that "if you build it, they will come"<sup>1</sup>.

Tomsons of the Latvian National History Museum examined the working technologies used to produce metal artefacts in the eastern Baltic region. The region appears to have a much higher density of moulds and crucibles than would correlate with the number of metal objects found in the area, and Tomson has been exploring the possible reasons for this. His presentation issued in a series of metal-themed speakers, with Prof Thornton of Buffalo State University displaying next his discoveries on how to make soft iron tools much harder so they could be used to work on other metals. Godino and Bartoni of University of Siena and ARES experimental unit offered insight into the production of refined silver using the methods of the Early Medieval period. Brendan O'Neill of UCD enthusiastically drew the audience into his hypotheses of why Early Medieval Ireland has a lack of moulds and crucibles – the exact inversion of Tomsons' Baltic problem of too many! O'Neill asked if Ireland's paucity could be due to re-use of bi-valve moulds, and if so, how would this be done without losing detail?

Baena Preysler's team from University of Madrid examined natural attrition and rounding of lithic tools, while Cambridge's Ladanyi offered his take on possible shifts of interpersonal aggression, expressed by the use of archery, through the European Neolithic. Leiden's Gentile opened debate on the difference between real life or death fights compared to reconstructed combat in his examination of use-wear on Bronze and Iron Age swords. Still, it was the restrained and human reconstruction of a late Mesolithic baby sling from Skateholm, Sweden, decorated with boars' teeth, which proved to be the most humanising of the presentations. Rainio and Tamboer, from Helsinki University, demonstrated how the teeth would have created a soothing rattle each time the sling was moved. Parents who have devised similar coping methods for fractious infants through teething will know all too well the reasoning behind the sling's creation, showing how close we still are to ancient peoples. Only the technology truly changes. Afterwards, Pitone's lively presentation of Newcastle University's fresh look at copper smelting in Pyrgos-Mavroraki in Cyprus, energised a classical archaeological site to new relevance.

Day two started with a passionate *tour de force* of experimental archaeology by Professor Tim Messner from the State University of New York at Potsdam. One of experimental archaeology's great advocates, Messner summed up the mission statement "it is not about living like a caveman; it's about living as a human being". He reinforced how experimental archaeology can potentially engage all sciences, creating a platform for multi-discipline projects. The theme of experimental archaeology engaging the wider educational community continued with Comendador and Lackinger from Granada and Figuerido of Lisbon, and Prof Schindler of Washington College.

The next few papers looked at how people deal with changing and turbulent times in their lives and landscapes with Prof Ollich and team, of l'Esquerda, Spain, examining the reconstruction methods of a Carolingian wooden watch-tower, while Schepers of Groeningen examined crop cultivation on terps, prehistoric raised mounds made on the salty marshlands

of the Netherlands. Different aspects of firing ceramics were then examined, firstly by University of Amsterdam's Caroline Jeffra, who looked at the *chaîne opératoire* of pottery manufacture, then Costa and team from University of Trento, who presented their results of recreating the firing methods used at the Neolithic site of Lugo di Grezzana, Italy.


Theresa Kamper's experiments in prehistoric tanning techniques showed the dedication required by experimental archaeologists, with her use of some rather grisly raw substances on hides. Less grisly, but equally interesting was the examination of wrapped mummified animals from ancient Egypt by Drs Woolham and McKnight of Birmingham University. The theme of the treatment the dead continued with a lively presentation by Tapavički-Ilić on the cremation practices of Roman Viminacium. Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust can hint at manufacture techniques of glass beads in the Viking era, according to Neil Person, who introduced many to the concept of using pollution analysis in ways not considered before.

Reconstruction was the name of the game for the next few papers, with Rogier and Napierala presenting the workings of a pottery workshop in Campus Galli open-air museum, Germany, while Clerbault's team from Ghent recreated Roman heating tiles. Zagreb's Kudelić asked if we can ever really accurately reconstruct prehistoric pottery exactly as it would have been, offering food for thought over modern experimentation. Heather Hopkins presented her results of experiments in dyes used in Pompeii, while the penultimate speakers of Solodenko of Tel Aviv University and her team brought the themes back to engagement, collaboration and involvement. The final thoughts of the conference came from Linda Hurcombe of University of Exeter, whose work is well known to all archaeologists. Her summary reinforced what the enthusiastic audience already knew – that experimental archaeology is about asking questions, and having the passion and dedication to try and answer them.

Poster presentations were given five minutes each to discuss their work, which often went over time, as all were equally fascinating. This problem was also evident on Day Two, although it was handled with good humour and an acceptance that participants would discuss with all parties during breaks.

The thing which was most noticeable was the sheer energy and passion of all participants and their willingness to share ideas and discuss their work. Many archaeological conferences lack energy or the sheer willingness to engage and tell a story. EAC10 was not that conference. Instead, it bubbled with new ideas, new collaborations, energy and good humour. The welcome, organisation and energy of the conference was owed in no small part to the efforts of Roeland Paardekooper and Magdalena Zielinska of EXARC and their colleagues. That weekend in April, there were several conferences throughout Europe; those who attended EAC10 will feel reassured they probably went to the most uplifting, which reminded everyone what the purpose of all archaeology is – asking questions, reconstructing the human past, and telling the story afterwards.

1 Field of Dreams. Motion picture 1989, script by W.P Kinsella and P.A Robinson

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