EXARC JOURNAL 2023/2
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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

A Hall fit for a King; a Meeting fit for All

Persistent Identifier: https://exarc.net/ark:/88735/10682

EXARC Journal Issue 2023/2 | **Publication Date:** 2023-06-17

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Denmark has a long tradition in educational activities in reconstructed environments. Lejre, Sjælland is one of the oldest examples, but by now the country has over 25 smaller and larger education centres where school children learn about the archaeological past. A number of these sites are also open to the public. You will be able to find most of them via https://exarc.net/venues.

These sites are well connected in a loose association. Their meeting structure is interesting; they have mini meetings, which are usually themed (e.g. blacksmithing or storytelling); midi

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meetings which are themed by a period (Prehistory, Viking and Middle Ages, and post-Middle Ages); and so-called maxi meetings which are for everybody in the network.

A maxi meeting took place in February 2023, the first time since 2019 (pre-Covid). This was held at Sagnlandet Lejre, and most presentations were linked with their King’s Hall which opened in 2019. Therefore, the theme was “hierarchy and status”. There were 54 participants from 18 sites across Denmark, about half of whom had never attended such a meeting before. It is interesting to see a good mix of managers and staff, pedagogical coordinators, and craftspeople.

We spent the first day in the large King’s Hall which was impressive, but not entirely suited as a conference room. Lejre’s director, Lars Holten, kicked off the meeting detailing the building process, but especially the research behind it. Holten called the hall a manifestation of power and status. He looked back at the excavations undertaken not far from the village Lejre itself, symbolism of many of its aspects, but also discussed the process of how the funding was obtained, and which goals the hall serves in the open-air museum. Holten will soon publish a book about the King’s Hall. One remarkable quote he used was “follow the person who is looking for the Truth, stay away from the one who has found it.”

Tanja Lousdal Jensen, head of communication at Lejre, presented the second paper on the role of the King’s Hall. The Lejre region has been a royal center for about 500 years, but when can you call somebody a king? This was already a bit more down to earth, but it became even more pragmatic when Lone Brøns-Pedersen, responsible for costumes, discussed the project of making clothes fit for the reconstructed hall. She started off from the point that clothes speak their own language, and that they opted to design costumes in different qualities, depending on their purpose. A birthday party group of young children, for example, will be dressed differently from an actor for a historic documentary. However, to be able to make quality clothes for simple use, one has to be familiar with the quality for professional use. This logic is probably used in many archaeological open-air museums. Lejre has a large workshop where many volunteers help make new costumes and repair existing ones.

Inger Heebøll continued in the same fashion and discussed the King’s Hall’s pottery project. Simply said, Viking Age ceramics is not something special, if we look at what is made in Denmark. This is a fluffy period, as she put it. However, the import of ceramics from the Rhineland, for example from Badorf, is much more interesting.
Forest manager Palle Nielsen then talked about “the wood for the King’s Hall”. Thanks to

many contacts and the exceptional character of the project, he was able to get many people from Zealand to deliver the wood he needed.

Before dinner, there was only one more presentation. Originally long-time senior staff member Jutta Eberhards would do this, but unfortunately, she was taken ill and therefore Laurent Mazet took over. He tried to explain how we make items from the past to talk, provide us their history. It starts with selecting artefacts and their context, followed by reconstructing items, buildings, processes and contexts. The third and final step is to interpret the role, meaning to convert data and facts into a dressed living piece. Putting an act together, as a live interpreter, is a serious piece of work. One can select several items or simple activities which one can link stories to, from the minute detail of each item up to the story of the society it was part of. Zooming in and out works very well if you have the right items or activities. Mazet also emphasised the need to remove what he calls aliens from your scene. Aliens in this case are items which do not fit in the space and time depicted in your show, for example glasses. Depending on your public, you will have to change your attitude; if there are only few visitors, you can be a nerd, but with small children for example one needs to work with more sensory material.

The nicest part of this conference is the so-called “workshop’s evening”. The phrase refers to how these places are called in Danish, literally translated, they are historical workshops.

Trine Just Hansen represented the school service from Copenhagen, which rolled out a network over the whole country. However, since the national school service stopped a long time ago, many municipalities have their own structure, for example to link their own schools to their own museums. In the past, the school service employed several people in the historical workshops, albeit part time, but we do not see this happening any time soon.

Next on stage was Anna Lund from Ribe’s Viking Center. She presented how they get volunteers from strong communities. Anne used the Ringborg project as an example. Ribe intends to build one quarter of a circular Viking Age stronghold, mainly with volunteers. Lund mentioned how this project is used to introduce new volunteers into the existing group and how they have several teams each with their own approach. One can think of a group for local children, a group of constructors, and a group of textile enthusiasts. Lund also thinks carefully about how to keep volunteers: what will stop them from leaving?

Another short presentation was by Mette Kofod and Mette Bohart, both from Ulvsborg Historiske Værksted. They presented a way to combine STEAM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) in the work of Ulvsborg. This project ran for three years and included many extracurricular activities. By using STEAM, it became easier to show relevance of our type of activities to schools.

In Hvolris Jutland, an Iron Age type reconstructed house had burned down in 2020, as explained by Berit Guldbrand and Jón Chamberlain. Insurance covers all, one would think, but the rules for building a replacement house were tough; it seems that no architects or engineers could give a qualified estimate for building a safe wooden house, even though humans have been done so for thousands of years. Wood joints were considered not considered safe on their own and should be secured with steel support. These discussions took place whilst in Lejre one of the largest constructions in wood was being undertaken. Information was exchanged for future reference.

On the morning of the second day, we took an extended tour through Lejre. This was very useful, even for those who had been there before. Lasse Nielsen was an able guide and explained why things happened over the years and what the plans for the near future are. It was wonderful to go behind the scenes on many sites within Lejre and hear about the issues they had to solve over time. The afternoon was reserved for several workshops in smaller circles, followed by a party in the evening with good food and everybody dressed in period costume.

Concluding, I can say that these couple of days at Lejre were very valuable, on the one hand because of the openness of Sagnlandet Lejre's staff in all matters, on the other hand because of the wonderful mix of participants from so many similar sites across Denmark, where both directors and staff joined. These maxi meetings are highly recommended if you work for a Danish historical workshop.

Keywords conference
review
archaeological open-air museum

Country Denmark

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FIG 1. THE DOOR TO THE KING'S HALL, SAGNLANDET LEJRE. PHOTO ROELAND PAARDEKOOPER

FIG 2. LARS HOLTEN, SAGNLANDET LEJRE, PRESENTING. PHOTO ROELAND PAARDEKOOPER

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