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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Interview: “I have never Done an Experiment in my Whole Life!” with Mamoun Fansa

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For almost 25 years, Mamoun Fansa has been one of the defining personalities within the discipline of experimental archaeology.
In 1990, he introduced his exhibition `Experimental Archaeology in Germany'. The exposition continued to circulate all over Germany and Europe for the next 14 years.
It has helped museums, innovators, and many others, to develop a platform for creative thinking in archaeology.

Mamoun Fansa initiated and helped evolve a collaborative process within the European Union. This resulted in the formation of EXAR, the Experimental Archaeology Foundation that promoted and established his vision. Fansa sees EXAR (www.exar.org) as a means to exchange ideas about practical interests as well as theoretical concepts.
He spent a number of years as Director of the State Museum for Nature and Man Oldenburg. He is currently residing in Berlin and is actively engaged in preserving the Düppel Open-Air Museum.

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In the following interview, Fansa not only speaks about the past in the exhibition and the ‘Sturm und Drang’ period of experimental archaeology, but he also summarizes the goals for the future and how in his opinion experimental archaeology could proceed.

After you worked in the field of historic preservation, you switched to become the Director of the State Museum for Natural History and Prehistory in Oldenburg, currently the State Museum of Nature and Man. How did you get the idea in 1989 to develop a concept for an exhibition for experimental archaeology?

Mamoun Fansa: I was inspired by my excavations in Lower Saxony. Journalists and neighbours frequently visited the sites. I explained to them what we were doing, how we could make out where the postholes for the house were and about the purpose of the shafts beside the buildings. As I was relating these explanations, I realized that people were listening. They were more interested in stories than in abstract facts they could not understand. I kept this in mind when I started to work for the Museum of Oldenburg.

At my farewell, my former Supervisor at the Ministry for Science and Culture asked me about my intentions for the Museum. Shortly before, I had just read about experimental archaeology and had developed an idea to put together an exhibition related to this area of archaeology.

When I told him about my idea he just smiled and asked: “How is it possible to make an exhibition about experimental archaeology?” I just replied: “I am not sure yet. I will have to think about that.”

For me it is important to pass along information as simply as possible and make it easy for everybody to follow our methods and findings.

In preparing for this exhibition, I wanted to use all possible forms of media, in order to reach visitors at all levels. I told myself that we need to create written documents for people who prefer to read about something; pictures, similar to comics, for those who can read but don't want to; and documentaries for all. That was unusual for those times.

This was the reason why I travelled throughout Germany and visited groups who worked in the area of experimental archaeology and who carried out either an experiment or a demonstration and had recorded or filmed it. I also asked others to take pictures or provide their personal recordings and films. I even managed to convince some to create their documentation more carefully, in order to produce more solid and useful results.

Many of your colleagues never thought it would be possible that the exhibition would be a huge success. And not only that. You established the discipline experimental archaeology, giving it a platform from which a network developed with regular meetings, its own publication and the first signs of recognition within the profession.

Mamoun Fansa: During my preparations, I mostly encountered young professionals, either students or recent graduates. And of course archaeotechnicians.

Many complained that questions could not be answered through scientific literature, that they were more interested in real people and their realties. For example, 'What can you prepare and manufacture with a stone axe?' That kind of question can be answered with experimental archaeology.

The exhibition became a place for professional exchange. At the time, exchanging ideas was not common. Since the Museum was conducive to creating the right atmosphere for exchanging ideas it was possible for me to provide a platform.

With this context in mind, I organized the first meeting and from those meetings, with the contribution of 60 different authors, published the first edition of "Experimental Archaeology".

Did you ever have a chance to review the book?

Yes, but it was difficult to purchase.

Mamoun Fansa: Yes, even though it was printed twice, the demand is still evident.

As far as I know the publications of the early meetings, up until the 7th or 8th year are sold out. We did not print that many, maybe 600 copies per publication. I was not sure at that time if it would really be appreciated. That changed after we founded EXAR. With

the help of the Members we were able to print a few more copies. Now there are 22 publications altogether.

By the way, the first publication complements the exhibition. The main topics were about building and settlements; farming; land and water transportation; burials; stone devices; weapons; ceramic; bronze and iron works; textiles and the production of tar. Those were the areas that were well researched in those days but surely a lot more could be possible.

Additional annual meetings followed.

Mamoun Fansa: Yes, the discipline experimental archaeology became more integrated and established over the years. Currently, universities are offering lectures and labs in this area. I did not even imagine that we could get that far. I thought that after the Exhibition was finished it would be done and over with.

Yes, you got something started and did not do any damage to the "dry science". You already had a different approach at that time.

Mamoun Fansa: I wanted to show everybody how people had lived in the past. That has been my approach.

Especially where explanations were not apparent, such as what is "Thracian Gold" or "Tutankhamun".

Also questions like: How did people live? What were the problems people faced in everyday life? How long did it take them to cut down a tree? How did people build their dwellings? Is it hard to imagine that people were capable of building homes, when supposedly they were so "primitive "?

Neither professors nor any of the archaeological books were helpful at this point. In my books, I always described practical information as "the History from Below".

Also, I have a background as a special education teacher and because of that experience I always tried to teach my classes as simply as possible. When I started to teach archaeology at the museum, I frequently asked myself if my lectures were easy for people/students to understand.

Unfortunately, archaeology is not as well known in society as we would like it to be. We need supporters who understand and recognize our work. Traditional Archaeology is a very controlled science, which does not help to create interest for people in the profession.

Therefore, I appreciate television shows that present less dry theory and more human stories within an historical context.

This specific development, to impart archaeology more three dimensionally, contributes immensely to a more engaging format.

Do you think that this way of teaching was successful?

Mamoun Fansa: Yes, no doubt. With the addition of the documentaries, more knowledge could be shared in a variety of ways to more people.

Also, interest can be encouraged by showing historical techniques that still exist today such as; how to build a wood cabin or how to manufacture pottery. That way we can identify with and appreciate our past more readily.

But experimental archaeology not only serves communication and understanding for the public. I also see it as a connection between the various disciplines, on a theoretical level as well as on a technical level.

Theoretically, Experimental archaeology contributes to research in ethnology, in the History of Technology and also in cultural anthropology. Different aspects of experimental archaeology can contribute to these disciplines, incorporating broader understandings of our past.

It would also help to create more support and respect for our professions by making our studies more popular and more easily understood by the public.

Is the connection to humans missing in the archaeology?

Mamoun Fansa: Yes. Exhibitions are being offered on a very theoretical level, most of the time, without any relation to the visitor.

Even when multimedia is used, it is not applied in a way that engages the public.

And the meaning as well?

Mamoun Fansa: Thousands of objects in beautiful cabinets and questions like; who made those? How were they created and why? Those questions are being neglected frequently because it is difficult to convey.

You see, everybody who studies archaeology primarily learns how to interpret an excavation and rarely how to share that knowledge.

The student is only exposed to the requirements of his/her own faculty and the thesis is only read and understood by faculty members.

Did the previously introduced University reforms cause that development and consequently a decrease of research support?

Mamoun Fansa: Correct. That is our problem. Science is administrated and there is not an opportunity for innovative ideas that think outside of the box.

Meanwhile I am seeing only archaeotechnicians and a few scientists participate in our conventions on experimental archaeology. The question then is why is the connection between strict research and experimental archaeology not happening?

It appears there are two levels to this subject matter, which generally remain unclear, the archaeotechnician and experimental archaeology. Many who work in that field cannot distinguish clearly between the scientific gain of knowledge through an experiment and the use of these insights at presentations and conventions. Is this maybe a reason why Experimental Archaeology is still not taken seriously?

Mamoun Fansa: Archaeology always had problems accepting new methods. It took a while until the C14-method, as a tool, was accepted, as well as computerized statistics. Nowadays, these methods are recognized as part of the research process. But the field still has problems opening up to new ideas.

For myself, experimental archaeology is a method, which assists in knowledge acquisition. The purpose of the Association I founded back then is to indicate that this method is available as a tool. But it is still up to the scientists to decide how to work with it and how to build it into their knowledge transfer.

Unfortunately, few people are using it. At least professors and archaeologists working in historic preservation are taking it seriously and do not clash with us anymore.

But still, what we have learned through experimental archaeology is still not being effectively shared with the general public. Through presentations and publications, a relation between the community and the research is sought but much is still to be desired.

But therefore not only experimental archaeology but also the entire faculty has to present itself in a different way, correct?

Mamoun Fansa: Exactly. What is missing in the greater understanding of Pre- and Early History is the collaboration of the neighbouring disciplines. There are only a few written

sources in this area of expertise and therefore we have to use various methods such as experimental archaeology to convey that information.

We can also look at the early advanced civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt where a lot of written sources exist which explain products and technical processes.

Such interactions with other disciplines and the broader use of their knowledge is missing in Europe's Pre- and Early History. Also, the connection with natural sciences could supply more possible evaluations.

In my opinion, despite the fact that other archaeologists disagree with me, Archaeology is not really an independent science because it benefits from other sciences.

We do not just have our own methods. For example, typology originates from biology and art history; the C14-method originates from geophysics and dendrochronology, which originates from biology. Thereby, the support of other disciplines could enhance the knowledge of middle European archaeology and improve our presentations and interpretations.

We have dedicated the last 25 years to establishing the rules, which an archaeological experiment has to follow. Which I consider are strict rules for how an experiment has to function. If one does not adhere to these rules the results could be rejected.

Even though there are good experiments, there is one last step missing: how do I integrate this into history or overall related research?

After the Nazism in Germany, one is very careful with regards to interpretations that are aimed directly at humankind and were concentrated more towards typological and statistical questions, to avoid misinterpretation.

Mamoun Fansa: Yes, I was concerned with this as well. But this concept was attacked by many, because they disagreed that there was a connection. Those who created archaeology as a discipline after the war were viewed as somehow prejudiced and as having disassociated themselves rather vigorously.

But if I speak about the fact that a human being can fell a tree, with a diameter of 40 centimetres within 20 minutes, I only speak about singular human achievement. I am not trying to prove if someone is a real Teuton or not. Insights we receive through experiments are entirely not ideological.

There are other uncertainties of course, about early humankind, as the individual, e.g. how strong and weak someone was, how skilful, diligent or lazy. An experiment cannot

answer such questions. It would be very interesting, therefore, to dispute this from a sociological and psychological point of view.

Nevertheless, it would be important to finally overcome the resistance with regards to the Interpretation. It is possible to treat archaeology through neutrality and ideologically free and still fill it with life. Some younger professors meanwhile have accepted that.

What do you think about projects where there is talk about "experimental archaeology" but the site is more commercially driven and is primarily run as an event and not as research?

Mamoun Fansa: Exactly. Experimental archaeology supports scientific archaeology, it is not a means of income. It is not the same as the pedagogy of the museum.

I fought against this for years and I repeatedly pointed that out. Even conference transcript exists about that topic.

An experiment can and must be repeated if requested. But if it is only repeated for demonstration purposes it is not an experiment anymore but mediation work. People confuse that.

Museum educators see how an experiment is conducted and repeat it with participants and call it experimental archaeology but that is not what it is. It is the museum's pedagogy and not the means to reach these other areas of research.

But the public did not perceive that yet? Is it possible that a definition of experimental archaeology is still missing?

Mamoun Fansa: Such a discussion took place within the group of experimental archaeologists but with such a homogenous group that a definition was not needed. We would have benefited from an outsider who had analysed our methods and brought the discussion to a different level.

That means, when I spoke during meetings and events about experimental archaeology, some people understood what I wanted but other did not, but no discussions followed.

We should have come to a different level but that was not possible. You are right, experimental archaeology as a method has to be defined differently in the future.

During the first years after the exhibition and the first meetings, it appeared to me that an active exchange was happening and I had the feeling that a lot of things were developing. That eased up slightly with the years. Even the results during these years, partly valid as meaningful basic research, are not recognized anymore, either within or outside of the experimental archaeology. Some things just stalled.

Mamoun Fansa: Correct. Consequently, together with Dirk Vorlauf, we are planning to publish a book by the end of next year on the specific topic “Experimental Archaeology in Germany – 25 years after”. (editors: since this interview took place, unfortunately Dirk Vorlauf has died).

It is supposed to continue from the first publications of 1990 and include the experiences of colleagues from these later years – with selected experiments we have in mind that are performed and documented correctly.

We also need to talk about the methodology and define an observable path.

I think it is important to describe where we stand with experimental archaeology. It is important to talk again about what experimental archaeology wants and how it works.

The main goal is not to lose what has been accomplished so far….

Mamoun Fansa: Yes. After devoting myself so intensely, for ten years, to experimental archaeology, especially with the exhibition and the meetings, I turned again to other topics. I looked at different areas of study such as bog bodies and moor research. I specifically questioned the origin of the wheel and the wagon and the historic dialog between orient and occident, which is near and dear to me. Because of that, I had to neglect the contents, structure and development of experimental archaeology. My task at the time was to manage a museum with a variety of disciplines.

I also think that your work shaped many. You repeatedly encouraged new ideas and encouraging people to conduct scientific experiments and to exchange information. That was not pure administration.

Mamoun Fansa: I am happy you see it that way. But even if I had not been busy with other topics I could not have found anybody else in experimental archaeology who would have been able to continue its development. Everybody was too busy with the practical aspect of it.

Therefore, I wanted to create the Association EXAR, to keep Experimental Archaeology together.

My initial thought was, I founded the Association, now I could find somebody who could continue. But then I realized I could not say good bye that easily and continued to work on the board for another six years, which went by very fast.

Today I could imagine for example that EXAR works with an institution like VAT

(Department of research for volcanology, archaeology and history of technology) in Mayen. Since 2012 VAT has been a branch of the Roman Germanic Central Museum (RGZM) researching such areas as volcanology, archaeology and the history of technology.

Such an institution could support experimental archaeology in Germany for the long term.

It would have been great if the entire power of VAT could have established a cooperative process with the RGZM, resulting in one direction. Unfortunately, nothing has been developed.

Would you like it if EXAR financially and institutionally supported research of experimental archaeology a lot more?

Mamoun Fansa: Yes, that was always my idea. At every meeting, I held a short lecture about that topic.

I also advanced the idea of EXAR co-working and developing funding sources with Universities and Organizations of Research in Berlin. But nothing came out of it.

The museums cannot share in the research of experimental archaeology without shared funding and resources.

Even the freelance archaeotechnicians are limited. They can ask questions that are related to a practice, e.g. why a stone axe is scarfed in a specific way and not another and of course that maybe very interesting but they miss the incorporation into the bigger picture of the history of technology.

Scientific research itself has to decide how much experimentation can establish and/or confute theories.

EXAR as an Association could have had a big say in that. Why did that not work so far?

Mamoun Fansa: In my opinion, we should stop introducing additional experiments and museum projects and invite archaeotechnicians, researchers and institutions to a dialog. As I previously discussed, this can take place, specifically to find out how the established archaeological research thinks.

Universities offered a few seminars but no professional chair was appointed nor was experimental archaeology established as a priority so far. Therefore, it would be particularly important to not only perform experiments but to also incorporate experimental archaeology into the whole field of archaeology.

Experimental archaeology is not only about good administration, but we also have to closely observe and monitor in what direction our experiments go and what insights and knowledge we receive.

I am glad that Gunter Schöbel took over the Chair at EXAR. This way at least one institution in the background exists. But we urgently need a new theoretical discussion and I am honestly not sure how that could be initiated.

There are people in experimental archaeology that are open for that.

Mamoun Fansa: Yes, and I am glad we can talk about the principal future direction during this interview. It is more difficult to discuss that in a closed circle such as an association.

You have lived in Berlin these last few years and are currently engaged in the Society for the Promotion of the Düppel Open-Air Museum. Not far away from Düppel is the Free University, where Pre-and Early History is being taught. Is this local proximity ideal for combining experimental archaeology, research and conveying ideas?

Mamoun Fansa: When I arrived in Berlin, I tried to contact Professor Schier who is associated with the Free University. He previously conducted experiments for agriculture. Unfortunately, I did not receive a desire for collaboration so far. Neither Professor Schier nor Professor Meyer expressed interest for a possible cooperation.

The Düppel Open-Air Museum has a difficult position in Berlin Archaeology.

I met the Provincial Archaeologist, Dr Wagner, during the organization of the 8th German Archaeology Congress in Berlin. After she delivered the convention programme to me I asked her what happened to the Düppel Open-Air Museum and she replied “We forget about that”.

The fact that the Düppel Open-Air Museum was simply forgotten during the Convention, although it contributed a lot to experimental archaeology, shows that there are difficulties in cooperating between institutions.

Can you, as a Chairperson, make a change? Anyway, the Düppel Open-Air Museum is one of the oldest of its kind in Germany and it conducted a lot of basic research.

Mamoun Fansa: When I took over the chair it was pretty much on the ground. The people around Klaus Goldmann, who operated it over the years, became older and new energy was missing.

During my first visit to the Municipal Museum Foundation, I was asked if I could imagine the closing of the Düppel Open-Air Museum. In the last ten years, the Foundation had already done this with several museums they thought were not viable.

You can imagine what my reaction was. We could save the Open-Air Museum.

Although we are still part of the Municipal Museum Foundation, for the past year we have autonomously managed it ourselves.

We introduced a few changes; hired a museum guide, increased the admission fee, added one opening day and started to make a little bit of money.

Consequently, we have received a little more recognition. We increased the attendance from about 20,000 to 30,000 and therefore our proceeds have also grown.

Such financial and organizational problems unfortunately lead to the fact that we cannot concentrate on experimental archaeology, other things need prioritising.

But I believe that it is possible to revive the research in Düppel. Once we have the basic structure under control, and increase earnings. We can get back to focusing on research.

Mr. Fansa, thanks a lot for the interview.

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FIG. 1. PROF. DR. M. FANSA

FIG. 2. PROF. DR. M. FANSA

FIG. 3. PROF. DR. M. FANSA

FIG. 4. PROF. DR. M. FANSA

FIG. 5. PROF. DR. M. FANSA