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Conference Review: Documentation Strategies in (Archaeological) Open-air Museums

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The conference in Documentation Strategies in (Archaeological) Open-air Museums, organised through the Experimental Archaeology Society (EXARC), was due to be held in Berlin on March 26th and 27th 2020. Unfortunately, the first half of March 2020 saw the spread of the Coronavirus pandemic throughout Europe which caused the implementation of government restrictions on travel and public gatherings. It seemed as if the EXARC Berlin conference, along with so many other archaeological events, would have to be cancelled.

However, the organisers were determined to see it through, and so decided to adapt the event to an online platform. The speakers had already been asked to provide a recorded version of their presentations in case of individual Coronavirus-related cancellations, and so these recorded talks were used instead as the main content. Each video was uploaded to YouTube and a Discord page provided as a channel for discussion and questions during the course of the conference.

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Conference Content

The conference was introduced with welcome addresses from EXARC Chair, Pascal Barnes, Dr Julia Heeb from the Museumdorf Düppel, and ICOM representative Dr Rüdiger Kelm.

Session One focused on the more practical side of documentation, and examples of how different aspects of archaeological open-air museums could be recorded. The topic was introduced with a talk by Dr Enrico Lehnhardt and Dr Stefan Solleder, who provided a detailed overview of the standardised documentation approach used at Museumdorf Düppel. Another example of such documentation was provided by Ulysse Douillon and Nathan Schneider regarding their strategy used at Randa Ardesca, which aimed to enable good public outreach, the sharing of knowledge, and the potential to strengthen scientific collaboration. The talk by Dr George Tomega presented a slightly different strategy implemented at the ASTRA museum, highlighting the importance of preserving, and providing education on, more intangible traditional building crafts. The session was concluded by Lara Comis, who suggested a more integrated approach to combine data from experimental archaeology, the archaeological record, and surveys of ancient crafts being demonstrated in open-air museums in order to create a complete ‘taxonomy of technology’.

Session Two focused on how best to utilise data taken from the documentation of archaeological open-air museums when interacting and collaborating with external groups. Kirsty-Lee Seaton and Miglena Raykovska showed how digital documentation could be used to encourage and enhance visitor interactions, by using interactive 360˚ images and photogrammetry, as well as a range of other digital-related ideas such as “selfie tours”, to maintain and preserve the site of Saryazd Castle. This idea of interaction with a physical site was added to by Dr Rüdiger Kelm, who

demonstrated how the Steinzeitpark Dithmarschen focuses on a diversity of different educational and research programmes which allow the sharing of information with different target groups, ranging from children to senior academics. Caroline Jeffra took this idea of public outreach one step further by introducing the online Register for Archaeological Experiments, which allows experimental researchers from all over the world to upload experimental data into an open-access database, thus providing an online library of experimental archaeology resources. The use of similar international databases was further referred to by Professor Hisham Mortada, who described the requirements of the UNESCO World Heritage Listings in relation to archaeological open-air museums such as Dumat al-Jandal.

The last Session of the first day considered how open-air museums should remain authentic and relevant in modern society. Dr Peter Inker demonstrated how the 3D digital interfaces of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation incorporates the level of uncertainty related to the site documentation, such as unknown time periods, lost built structures, or uncertain environmental context, in order to provide a more authentic view of the original archaeological data. The day ended with a workshop on local action for global sustainability in museums. In this workshop, the idea of how open-air museums can both promote and practice adherence to the UN sustainability goals was discussed, focusing in particular on long-term resilience of structures, the reuse or minimalization of unsustainable materials on site, and future planning in terms of climate change and environmental impact.

The second day began with a session focusing on more alternative documentation strategies. Marta Licata started by suggesting how osteological information could be shared through the 'musealization' of sites, such as her example of three medieval cemeteries in Valcuvia, in order to inspire public interest and thus activate the developmental processes of poorly funded archaeological projects. The importance of blogs and diaries as a form of documentation in experimental archaeology and open-air museums was discussed by Marc Cox, who showed how these strategies can be used to demonstrate precise data such as the pros and cons of different crafting techniques, hours spent on construction projects, and the degradation process of reconstructed buildings. Similar strategies were discussed in the talk by Dr Delun Gibby and Liz Moore regarding Castell Henllys Iron Age Village, where archival images and documentation videos are used to share past information through platforms on social media, and as resources to inform future plans for the site. The session was concluded by Joseph Davis, who provided an introduction to database use for archaeological open-air museums.

The final session of the conference focused more specifically on the documentation strategies of three well-known open-air museums. Martin Rodevad Dael and Dr Tríona Sørensen showed how interactive experimental projects conducted at Roskilde Viking Ship Museum enabled a valuable and productive documentation and display of the intangible cultural

heritage of past boat-building techniques. Butser Ancient Farm also provided as a case study, with Trevor Creighton describing the documentation strategies used to facilitate the collection of both experimental and experiential data. The session ended with a presentation by Marco Romeo Pitone, who discussed the issues and processes of documenting the conservation of buildings at Jarrow Hall.

All of the presentations given at this conference demonstrated the importance of implementing documentation strategies in archaeological open-air museums. The recording of detailed data is a vital part of collaborations and enables the general sharing of information, which in turn promotes an international community of open-access research. Correct documentation can also be used to preserve both tangible and intangible culture; for example, archaeological architectural and osteological remains, and traditional knowledge related to ancient crafting technologies. Archaeological open-air museums must also rely on documentation strategies in order to maintain their relevance and value in present-day society by encouraging people to visit and experience the sites for themselves, as well as providing valuable examples of sustainability in an increasingly unsustainable modern world.

The overarching topic of this conference was particularly relevant considering the current international Coronavirus pandemic that forced the event to adapt to an online setting. This meant that the importance of digital platforms in documenting and sharing archaeological knowledge was already a central part of the conference organisation.

The Digital Experience

The most unique aspect of this conference was its position as the first online conference to have been held by EXARC. Considering the inexperience of the society in organising an online conference, and the extremely short period of time that they had in which to arrange all of the details, it was extremely successful.

Each video presentation was uploaded to the EXARC YouTube channel at the times referred to in the conference programme, thus enabling the participants to follow the talks in real-time. It could be argued that this approach was actually more beneficial to the smooth running of the conference than if it had not been online. Due to this format, the organisers could more easily control the length of the talks, thus preventing those delays that are too often caused at conferences by speakers going over their allocated time. Additionally, those presenters who might have trouble talking in English or to a larger audience were able to practice and record their talks in the comfort of their own home, thus preventing any confusion associated with speaking clarity or language – again, a common issue at many international conferences. The concept of uploading a talk as a video also allowed for some imagination in presentation methods above the standard PowerPoint format. Many speakers incorporated 360˚ images and videos as part of their talk, and a special mention should go to Marc Cox and Trevor Creighton for their ‘on-location’ documentary-style scenes.

Alongside the YouTube channel, a Discord was created specifically for the event. This online platform is most often used by gaming enthusiasts as a method of discussion and troubleshooting and provided an excellent space for questions and discussions throughout the duration of the conference. Every participant was able to type their questions or comments in different channels, such as 'conference chat', 'casual chat', and the essential 'trouble-shooting'. The speakers had the added ability of using a microphone to answer any questions related to their talk. This was particularly useful in the sustainability workshop, as it allowed the speakers to answer any questions and comments quickly and efficiently without getting lost while typing. The conference Discord is still online, as are all the YouTube presentation, to allow the participants (and in the case of YouTube, anyone else who is interested) to revisit the topics discussed.

There were some teething problems at the start of the conference, such as microphones not being muted, participants unsure which chat channel to use on Discord, and confusion over the YouTube playlist structure but the volunteers were constantly fixing problems and evolving the format throughout the conference. By the end of the first day, most of the issues had been ironed out and participant suggestions were already being implemented; for example, having a separate question channel for each individual presentation and introducing the start of each new video to make sure that all of the participants could follow in time.

The organisers were also very successful in dealing with the potential issues that could have been experienced through making any conference online. One of the most common arguments against such virtual events is the lack of networking opportunities and the difficulty in having meaningful group discussions. However, many of the question and answer sessions on the Discord platform led to the creation of new discussions and channels on a number of important topics, just a few of which are detailed here:

- Health and safety issues associated with traditionally reconstructed buildings
- How to meaningfully engage with local craftspeople and use their expertise in open-air museums
- Issues of digital documentation in terms of restricting interactions between locals and tourists
- How to integrate archaeological experimental data into a single international database

These discussion points also led to new contacts being made, and even some arrangements for potential future collaborations. The workshop on sustainable development in archaeological open-air museums was very well-received and easy to follow. Again, it could be argued that this online approach was more efficient than a workshop with physical participation as everyone could write down their questions and comments while the speakers were still talking, and the speakers could then answer them all in order once they were

finished. As well as providing professional channels for discussions on the content of the conference, the Discord also including a 'pub-chat' channel where, at the end of both days, participants could gather in a more informal networking setting.

Could such online events be the future of archaeological conferences? "Who knows," said Dr Julia Heeb in her welcoming address. "We might be setting a more environmentally friendly trend." Considering the international range of the speakers, there was a significant saving made in terms of carbon footprint and that is even without including the travel of the participants. The environmental impact of conferences is not the only thing to consider. An online event also enables the attendance of those participants who are less able to travel, either due to financial restrictions, physical and mental disabilities or responsibilities at home.

The Documentation Strategies in (Archaeological) Open-air Museums conference was an excellent example of how more flexible approaches can be made to international events. Given the success of the conference format and the positive feedback received from participants, perhaps the future of archaeological conferences in general could focus on a more virtual world, using the example of the EXARC Berlin 2020 meeting as a starting point.

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