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RETOLD: A European Project Digitises Memories of Experimental Archaeology for Their Preservation

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The origins of the European RETOLD project, led by the international association EXARC, lie in a concern to preserve the heritage generated by archaeological open-air museums through the creation of a standardised system for collecting, digitising and disseminating knowledge (memories) of the processes of building reconstruction and handcrafted objects. The project has a duration of four years (January 2021 to December 2024) and will be realised through

the creation of a platform where these memories can be stored in digital format, available both for technical staff and for the non-specialist public through, for example, the creation of narratives (storytelling) derived from the memories.

> “ … as of 2019, concerns began to be raised about the urgent need to collect all information derived from craft and construction experiments in these [archaeological open-air museums] institutes. The nature of this information has often been primarily oral, forming part of the memory of the people who have initiated and participated in the experiments, but it has rarely been collected …

The memory of experiences in experimental archaeology

In the twentieth century, the sixties and seventies represented a turning point for the archaeological discipline. During this period various initiatives emerged in European countries, that had Anglo-Saxon heritage. Here experimentation and reconstruction of the crafts and construction processes of ancient times were used as a way to expand our knowledge of the past. The two most emblematic examples of that time were the creation of the archaeological open-air museum Butser Ancient Farm by the archaeologists Peter J. Reynolds (1939-2001) and Christine Shaw, and the opening of the Lejre Experimental Center (now Sagnlandet Lejre), which was founded by the ethnologist Hans-Ole Hansen (1939-2021) in the sixties in Denmark.

For more than half a century experimental archaeology has been defined as a subdiscipline within archaeology. This discipline aims to understand the processes of making pottery, shaping flint tools, metal work, fabric production among other crafts, as well as the processes of construction of ancient houses and reconstruction of building materials to understand the techniques of manufacture. These experiences, often based on artisan practice, have rarely been disclosed or published systematically, so that the memory of these process and the knowledge gained has been lost as we lose the people who carried them out.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the international network EXARC was created, led by Roeland P. Paardekooper with the support of many people and organisations linked to experimental archaeology. The main goal of the organisation is to collect and make visible the knowledge generated by archaeological open-air museums and the processes of experimental archaeology. This organisation has managed to bring together, in a collaborative network, many of the existing institutes around the world, with a focus on European centres, and has worked tirelessly, especially through annual conferences in experimental archaeology, to disseminate and collate the knowledge that arises from these endeavours and their investigations.

For about 20 years, the EXARC organization has led various European projects that have been involved in archaeological open-air museums and their experimental activities. These have concerned both their character as experiential and unique spaces where the relationship between archaeology and the public plays out and their contribution to scientific research from experimentation. It is in this context that, as of 2019, concerns began to be raised about the urgent need to collect all information derived from craft and construction experiments in these institutes. The nature of this information has often been primarily oral, forming part of the memory of the people who have initiated and participated in the experiments, but it has rarely been collected, a fact that endangers a great part of the knowledge obtained in recent decades in archaeological open-air parks.

It is this situation that made us design a project, the RETOLD project, led by the international association EXARC, with its remit to create a standardised system of collection, digitisation and dissemination of knowledge on the processes of reconstruction of buildings and traditions as carried out by archaeological open-air museums. The project will lasts four years (January 2021 to December 2024) and has a budget of about € 300,000.00. During this period, we will develop multimodal documentation methods that will bring the past to the public through immersive digital storytelling.

The project is made up of six partners. Three partners are archaeological open-air museums, two located in Germany: the Steinzeit Park Dithmarschen in the German village of Albersdorf (Schleswig-Holstein) and the Düppel Museum that is an off shoot of the Berlin Stadtmuseum; and the ASTRA National Museum Complex in Romania. The three remaining partners are EXARC, located in the Netherlands, which is the promoting and coordinating partner, with an important role in communication, Nüwa Digital Media Content Production, located in Ireland, an agency specialised in the production of digital strategies for the cultural sector and the academic partner is the Center d'Estudis del Patrimoni Arqueològic (CEPARQ) of the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB) which, together with the last two mentioned partners, has the role of coordinating the digital system and the data that takes the form of digital material that will be collected from the project museums.

A European repository of archaeological open-air museums

RETOLD wants to be the European repository of archaeological open-air museums. The objectives of the project are:

- To develop a standardised scheme of work to collect, digitise and share data related to experimental reconstruction of buildings, handicrafts and traditions.
- To create an open digital access repository with the intention that museum professionals, researchers and the public can freely access these data.

- To create narratives in a storytelling tradition for museums to make data more attractive and impactful to the public, while maintaining their quality as a scientific resource.

How will these goals be achieved? From 2021 to 2024 we will carry out a number of actions focused on achieving the proposed objectives. As of 2021, work is already underway on the first surveys that will help to understand what digitised documents already exist in museums and identify the needs, in terms of digitisation, presented by these places. In parallel, at a technological level, we are working to identify the best digital tool that can be used to house this information and organise it by tags and voice trackers, text, static and moving images. Throughout the entire project, seminars will be held for training, as well as partner coordination meetings and outreach activities.

In 2024 we expect to be able to launch a first platform version, which will integrate the repository of data related to experimental reconstruction of buildings and product manufacturing processes of ancient crafts. This first version will be publicly presented to other archaeological open-air museums through the international EXARC network, allowing the expansion of its contents.

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Universitat Autónoma de Barcelona (ES) is one of the partners in the RETOLD project which is responsible for developing of a Documentation App to collect information across open-air museums.

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