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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Book Review: Experimentelle Archäologie in Europa, Bilanz 2014

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Volume number 13 of the periodical Experimentelle Archäologie in Europa. Bilanz contains 215 pages with 18 different articles on a wide variety of subjects. The contributions are presented in four sections: Experiment and Test, Reconstruction Archaeology, Theory and Emanation', and Short reports and Annual reports. Judging from the short introductory words by Professor Dr. Gunter Schöbel, president of the European Association for the Advancement of Archaeology by Experiment (EXAR), this publication is directed to a professional audience

as well as to the public. The journal represents the proceedings of the 11th meeting of EXAR held in Linz, Austria in 2013. As such, it is a recent overview of archaeological experiments. Most authors come from Austria and Southern Germany or are affiliated with institutions in these regions. Notable exceptions are one Danish contribution and three from Bulgarian colleagues or with their participation. Although mostly written in German, the journal seemingly tries to appeal to an international readership by heading each article with an English abstract as well as including two articles written in English. These are headed with a German abstract.



This volume contains some very interesting contributions of high quality, and most articles tackle important questions, but the lack of review process makes it somewhat of a mixed bag. Nonetheless, it provides a good insight into the experimental research currently conducted mainly in German speaking academia.

Due to space restrictions, it is not possible to discuss every article in detail. Philipsen starts the first section with an article on the use of X-ray and neutron tomography on experimental and archaeological ceramics for the identification of fats and organic materials. Thereafter, Probst reports on her experiments with replica bone tools copying Late and Final Neolithic implements and her subsequent comparative use wear analysis. Subsequently, two articles are presented on gold production at the Ada Tepe site in Bulgaria. One team (Popov et al.) tests the hypothesis of fire setting as a method for mining ores based on the discolouration of rocks from the anthropogenic layers. Melting gold from the ore is the task of the second team (Stoychev et al.). Both contributions link experiment and natural scientific evidence in meaningful ways as does Philipsen. The following contributions in this section are concerned with cooking in pottery from the Hallstatt period (Rösel) and problems with heat distribution, cracking, sooting and gas leakage in modern built thermea in open-air museums (Lehar). Schwarz concludes the first section with his report on the production of Roman clay bricks in a kiln based

on old excavation data.

The section *Reconstruction Archaeology* opens with an article on the construction of an Early Neolithic house (Linearband Ceramic period) with prehistoric tools (Lobisser). Following this contribution, Behnke investigates several hypotheses on how sequins made of shell were produced during the Corded Ware Culture in Central Germany. Then we move forward to the Iron Age with an examination of possibilities on how females may have been dressed using two or three fibula (Rösel-Mautendorfer) and the construction of a bow based on the excavation of the “princely” grave from the Glauberg, Germany (Flügen and Lessig-Weller). The remaining two contributions focus on historic times. Schubert and Schubert explore Merovingian female dress and its functionality, for example, for breast-feeding. This section

closes with an assessment of the production and fracture mechanics of Late Medieval and Early Modern mining tools (Holdermann and Trommer).

The shortest section of this volume, *Theory and Emanation*, starts with a theoretical elaboration by Weller, who defends the term 'reconstruction' in experimental archaeology and proposes a methodology for what he calls 'Reconstruction Archaeology'. Brenker follows with an article which argues for a better connection between the amateurs that practice 'Living History' and academia. Furthermore, he presents his views on their respective methods. In the third Bulgarian contribution, Bonev and his colleagues introduce a 3D-model and visualisation of the south of the Royal Palace in Great Preslav. The team modelled the palace on a combination of excavated still standing features, historical drawings and photographs, and they produced a film that links Virtual and Public Archaeology. Concluding this section, Crumbach takes a look at the history of research on tablet weaving with a special emphasis on the first half of the 20th century and its impact on the presentation of tablet weaving in museums even today. She argues that the re-appearance of tablet weaving in the 1970s is not without ideological baggage from the earlier days of research.

The only short report assesses earlier hypotheses on the use of Roman candle holders by constructing a replica (Schwarz). The author uses remarks by Pliny the Elder to argue that wicks were not only used for lamps but also to produce candles. The journal's final contribution is the annual report of EXAR for the year 2013 (Weller).

Many of the contributions are highly interesting. Even though Philipsen's original aim for example, to be able to identify fats on the sherds, was not met it is still a very important contribution for future research in lipid analysis by showcasing that negative results are very valuable. Both contributions on gold production link scientific analysis and archaeological work very well, and both show to what length people went in the past to gain access to gold, proving beyond its material properties that it was of high value. They verify the incredible amount of knowledge people that needed to possess in order to extract even the tiniest amount of gold. Behnke's contribution is an exemplary model of how an experiment should be set up with a proper research question and hypothesis testing. He highlights that shell wick production required knowledge of the appropriate technology and tools, and provides another useful interpretation for the use of early copper awls. Finally, Flügen and Lessig-Weller argue very carefully for their construction of the bow and arrow from the "princely" grave from Glauberg. Their hypothetical elaboration demonstrates that thinking about the technology has the potential to alter interpretations of the original archaeological record. Furthermore, they are able to indicate that hunting and possibly combat was conducted from close quarters rather than from long distances despite the use of bow and arrow.

In spite of these highly interesting articles, others suffer from a number of problems. Probst, for example, does not directly mention which archaeological bone tools were the prototypes

for the reproduced replicas, which makes an assessment of the results and comparisons difficult. Similarly, Lobisser does not clearly explain what comprised the basis for the wooden tools they used in constructing a Neolithic house. Apart from that, many contributions are riddled with inconsistencies, unexplained assertions, contradictions and nonsensical or irrelevant statements. Some examples are mentioned here in no particular order. Rösel's observations on Hallstatt pottery start with the proclamation that ceramics are defined as inorganic and non-metallic because they may possess any number of chemical compositions (p. 59). This combination of statements is pure nonsense. Ceramics are inorganic and non-metallic even if there would be just a single composition possible, because that composition would be particular in the sense that the major component is not organic or metallic. Lobisser's standard measure of 31.6 cm moves from being a premise (p. 101) to being a hypothesis (p. 108), and despite his mentioning that there are reasons for this, he never explains them. Probst asserts in her conclusion that the experimental approach enhances a *mere* descriptive topology (p. 25). While one could agree that experiments do enhance typology, how is the observation and description of experimentally produced traces not descriptive as well? The advantage from the description of experimentally produced use wear is that its source is known. Although Holdermann's and Trommer's historical and mechanic expositions about mining tools are interesting, it is difficult to discern how their experiments advance our knowledge apart from what we know by considering stress mechanics and the like, or what indeed their research question is.

Unfortunately, both theoretical contributions are problematic as well. Weller's argument for keeping the concept of 'reconstruction' in experimental archaeology starts with a definition of "Reconstruction Archaeology" solely relying on internet sources, mainly Wikipedia[©] (p. 166-167), which seems very inadequate. If there are no archaeological primary sources on this branch of archaeology, then this should be explained, as should why the author thinks it would be wise to add this to the already existing corpus of archaeologies. It seems that the author wants to save the term 'reconstruction', but if he has accepted that we can only achieve certain degrees of likelihood that what we do in experimental archaeology fits past reality, then why hold on to the term 'reconstruction'. This term implies that the experimenter is exactly 'recreating' past behaviour, production and products as Outram states in an article that Lessig-Weller does not cite (Outram 2008: 2).

Brenker's contribution starts with many complaints that seem to be geared toward the lack of professional archaeologists to understand the sensibilities and problems of amateurs engaged in 'Living History', for example that they wish for their work to be "appreciated" (p. 178), only then to conclude that both sides could benefit from each other if only they listened to the respective other side. The tone of his argument and statements are very authoritarian, demanding and anti-intellectual. For example, he states that the prerogative of interpretation should not reside with the professionals (p. 181). While it may be true that interpretations have to be open for discussion, the idea that professionals who deal with the data everyday

should give up the notion of the importance of their interpretations is simply absurd. Imagine the same demand made by an amateur interested in law towards a professional judge or lawyer. Professionals should, according to Brenker, be grateful for the impulses that re-enactors provide (p. 181), and later on he states that if professionals reject ideas by amateur re-enactors on methodological grounds then the professionals are somehow obliged to help them (p. 183). However, this is not something that most professionals at institutions are hired for and such activities would fill up their busy schedules even more. However, many take on such tasks in spite of this. Furthermore, Brenker uses ideologically charged language. For example, according to him the aim to achieve authenticity provides re-enactors with a sense of inner identity (p. 178) or that certain unresolved questions may “pollute” the experience of the past that visitors may have (p. 182). This gives rise to the suspicion that he really thinks re-enactors are able to re-live past experiences. Despite some lip service to the difficulty and complexity of the issue, Brenker confirms that suspicion when he states that the actors reach not researched aspects of past lives by “living the daily life of the chosen era”. It seems superfluous to point that out, but there is simply no chance for modern actors to ‘truly’ experience the past, because they will never experience scenarios like the risk of a crop that fails and with that the danger of starvation, resulting in illness they have to deal with without modern treatment or the untimely death of children, etc.


Many of these problems could have been avoided by a peer review or an editorial review process of the contribution. Review, in whatever form, is not only a control mechanism, but improves the quality of articles and a publication in general. That such a process was not employed can be seen when looking at the English abstracts. As was confirmed by several native English speakers, they were badly written. Many of the contributors in this volume are at a very early stage in their career and a proper review could have helped them to formulate their research questions clearly, to clarify and expand arguments where necessary, and to refrain from platitudes and truisms. In conclusion, this volume contains some very interesting contributions of high quality, and most articles tackle important questions, but the lack of review process makes it somewhat of a mixed bag. Nonetheless, it provides a good insight into the experimental research currently conducted mainly in German speaking academia.

Book information:

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OUTRAM, A. K., 2008, *Introduction to Experimental Archaeology*, World Archaeology, vol. 40, issue 1, Abingdon, Routledge, pp. 1-6.

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