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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Roundtables at University College Dublin, January 2015

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On 15 January 2015 around 25 people participated in the Academic Round Table chaired by Professor Bill Schindler from Washington College, and later this day in the Experimental Archaeology Networks Roundtable, with Roeland Paardekooper from EXARC chairing. Attendees came from a variety of countries, including Malta, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Latvia, UK, Sweden, the US and Poland, with the majority drawn from associations and independent museums.

Summary of the Academic Roundtable, University College Dublin



Professor Aidan O' Sullivan from UCD emphasised how traditional archaeological perspectives on experimental archaeology has shifted in recent years from viewing it as largely based on demonstrations and aimed at the public, to accepting it as a valid research and teaching tool.

On 15 January 2015 around 20 people participated in the Academic Round Table chaired by Professor Bill Schindler from Washington College. Attendees came from variety of countries including Malta, Germany, Switzerland, UK, Sweden and Poland. The original topic of conversation was interactions between academic and museum institutions, As only a handful of participant worked in academic institutions the discussion changed to how experimental archaeology as a discipline should develop.

Other attendees, including those from Butser Ancient Farm (UK), emphasised the importance of interaction between museum and academic institutions, particularly as those working within the museum industry rarely have the time to write up their work because their research does not make money and is often not funded. Many attendees agreed that greater cooperation across experimental archaeology is necessary, particularly between museums and academic institutions. With each museum often representing or bringing

multiple associations and groups, any project involving multiple museums can often lead to large numbers of groups being involved. Schindler emphasised the importance of individuals setting out independently and achieving what they could within their immediate situation, underlining how logistical problems varied between institutions and could only be resolved locally.

There were interesting discussions about what museums could do to help academics arrange student and experimental trips and the use of the museum facilities. Critical areas identified were cheap/on-site accommodation such as camping, and places to buy and cook food. In return, academics sending students need to ensure that students are independent and motivated, capable of working without continual oversight or extensive assistance from museum workers. Attendees working in academic contexts identified problems arising from the academic term structure, particularly the need to undertake experimental work early in the final year and inevitably during the winter.

Several people expressed concern that people working in experimental archaeology are repeating the work of others, due to poor communication of past experimental work. Björn Jakobsen of Foteviken (SE) was keen to emphasise that video recordings of experiments are a valuable method of communicating past experiments. Representatives from Butser Ancient Farm (UK) introduced the value of networking sites such as Facebook groups for helping those working within a single discipline to communicate with each other. In general those present were very positive about using Facebook to post videos and experimental

information, although it was pointed out that this is a very transitory method of communication that is not a permanent repository and cannot be easily searched for information.

A more permanent web archive for experimental archaeological material was discussed, but no one volunteered to accept the responsibility of producing or maintaining a site, and there was no clear agreement of how such a site would be moderated. It was suggested that the EXARC database could be used as basis, and much time was spent discussing the importance of sharing videos. It was agreed that communication of experimental work is key to raising the overall quality of work within the discipline. The repetition of experiments due to a lack of knowledge about previous experiments was emphasised. This is critical in areas such as Switzerland where large amounts of experimental work were undertaken by a generation that is now aging and had not been recorded or communicated. One potential solution involving students conducting oral interview projects into past experimental work was identified.

There was quite a range of opinion on what 'experimental archaeology' was composed of, but all of the attendees agreed that it is fundamentally based on archaeological evidence. Several attendees emphasised the importance of experiential work and 'play' within the wider remit of experimental archaeology, and to others hypothesis-testing was critical to whether something qualified as experimental archaeology or not. All the attendees agreed that guidelines identifying what experimental archaeology is would be beneficial to them and EXARC. It was agreed that any outline of experimental archaeology would need to include guidelines for conducting experimental work. However several attendees were quick to point out that prescriptive guidelines can be elitist and hierarchical and potential identify experiential or replication work as 'lesser' than experimental work using scientific techniques. In order to prevent this, several attendees suggested that a flowchart or Venn diagram structure would be better at expressing the interacting forms of experimental archaeology.

Professor Aidan O' Sullivan from UCD emphasised how traditional archaeological perspectives on experimental archaeology has shifted in recent years from viewing it as largely based on demonstrations and aimed at the public, to accepting it as a valid research and teaching tool. Dr Roeland Paardekooper mentioned that in previous years the possibility of having an award to promote 'good' experimental archaeology was discussed, but judging what was 'good' remained difficult. It was agreed that a criteria for what qualifies as 'experimental archaeology' is necessary before such an award can be instituted.

Experimental Archaeology Networks Roundtable, University College Dublin

Around 25 people participated in the Experimental Archaeology Networks Roundtable, which took place on Thursday, 15 January, with Roeland Paardekooper from EXARC chairing. Attendees came from a variety of countries, including Malta, Germany, Switzerland, Italy,

Latvia, UK, Sweden and Poland, with the majority drawn from associations and independent museums.

Paardekooper began the session by introducing a generational problem seen in a number of EU countries, including Netherlands, Denmark and Switzerland, which is leaving experimental archaeology associations low in numbers. In addition, as Björn Jakobsen noted, there has been some decline in academic experimental archaeology as those involved retire from academic positions.

Following this the presence of associations within member countries was discussed. In Switzerland there is a move to develop one of the associations to a semi-professional level, with a formal office and engagement in all four languages spoken in Switzerland. They also want to help bring experimental archaeology to universities. In Malta there are no formal associations, and there is a similar situation in the UK despite a high number of archaeologists and a number of open air museums engaging in experimental archaeology. There is also a new site opening soon in North Wales exploring the late Iron Age and early Roman periods. Representatives from Italy also indicated that there was no national association in their country, but that there were many small local groups and open air museums doing work which is at least nominally experimental, though the emphasis is on demonstration for the public. They also discussed the problem of working with universities, as it was felt that Italian academics have a poor opinion of experimental archaeology.

In Poland there are small regional associations, which work with local museums, though this is often difficult as the museums do not always see the value in working with associations. In Sweden there is at least one student group doing experimental work. In Spain there is a large association, but they meet only once every three years for a conference, and there is little community or contact between members. In Latvia there are only a few interested in experimental archaeology, but they are keen to increase the number involved in the work. Paardekooper mentioned EXAR in Germany, but they conduct their conferences and work in German which is not as accessible as English. He also mentioned Lithuania, who may have some associations but were not represented at the roundtable.


Several attendees mentioned the difficulty balancing the need to run a museum, activities for the public, and make a profit, vs. conducting experiments and publishing. There was also discussion about the difficulty of competing with others doing 'experimental archaeology' in museums, schools and as performance. One attendee mentioned that cooperation was bad in this case, as it lead to people 'stealing' ideas and skills off others and then making money from them, but the majority of attendees did not agree with this position or see it as a concern. Many felt that it was important for archaeologists to have contact with others doing experimental work to improve the use of archaeology and the relevance of the experimental work. Other attendees who had taught people skills that they then went on to monetise, felt

that overall the contact was beneficial, and that they had helped to create communities of practice. Interestingly it was also mentioned that in Eastern Europe many older skills still survived, so people were involved in what was essentially experimental archaeology without knowing it.

The question of what the associations and groups wanted to do, particularly with regards to working together and EXARC, was raised. Paardekooper indicated that EXARC was not aiming to get every experimental archaeologist signed up, but was interested in fostering communication. Others questioned what associations were for, and whether the emphasis was on education, or on fostering communication of those already practicing experimental archaeology. The question of the purpose of teaching experimental archaeology was also raised, as it is clear there are very few jobs that explicitly make use of the skill, despite it being key to many museum and outreach projects. However it was also emphasised that archaeology is not an important subject for many people, and experimental archaeology is one of the key ways to keep people aware of, and interested in, archaeology in general. Several attendees involved with re-enacting emphasised how it had changed and evolved over time, and the importance of accuracy within the movement at the current time, and other attendees agreed but said that bringing scientific parameters to re-enactment could be an important way to expand experimental archaeology. A number of attendees agreed, and identified bringing people together from multiple interests and academic areas as a key role of associations in experimental archaeology.

Following this, Paardekooper raised the question of how associations achieve their aims, and what challenges they face. Attendees from Italy indicated that there were complexities in interacting with the different groups involved in projects, and real difficulties getting academic institutions involved. They also emphasised that without formal publication, there is also the risk that work will be stolen or plagiarised. The old-fashioned view that experimental archaeology is nothing but demonstrations is still present in a number of countries, and this is very challenging for associations. Bill Schiller also introduced the idea that there have been problems within academic experimental archaeology itself, and that it is necessary to work to bridge the gap between those practicing traditional crafts, those doing scientific experiments, and the interested public. However in the US there is a slow movement towards accepting experimental archaeology as part of archaeological practices, and papers on experimental work are being accepted at conferences. However as many attendees identified, those who are interested and able to undertake experiments do not always have the required skill, and that is one of the reasons that bridging the gap between those practicing crafts and those wanting to do experiments is so important.

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