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Summer Camp for Experimental Archaeology in the Eindhoven Museum (NL)

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Every year the Dutch Youth Association for History (NJBG) organizes several summer camps for children and young adults. Since the Eindhoven Museum was founded in 1982 the Workgroup for Experimental Archaeology (WEA) has organised activities in the museum which are concerned with experimental archaeology. This year a group of young adults (age 16-26)

stayed for one week (27th July – 2nd August 2015) in the Eindhoven Museum where they conducted several experiments.

> Although our experiments do not have a scientific value they are clearly valuable for entertaining the public. They also provide our participants with a chance to learn more about parts of Iron Age life in which they are interested. The camp also offers a unique experience allowing our participants to live in the museum for one week

Definitions

This article will deal something we call experimental archaeology. However I will not neglect the recent discussion concerning this definition. We may choose to make a distinction between experimental archaeology and experiential archaeology. Experimental archaeology will be the scientific approach where experiments serve to answer specific questions. Experiential archaeology would be conducting experiments, re-enacting history or prehistory in order to obtain personal experiences, in other words experiencing the past (Deady et al. 2015). If we make this distinction, the activities conducted by the WEA during this camp would be considered experiential archaeology and not experimental archaeology. It is however easier to avoid this discussion and continue to use the term experimental archaeology, even though technically this article is more concerned with experiential archaeology.

The camp

For one week the participants of the camp lived in the reconstructed Iron Age (800-12 BC) part of the Eindhoven Museum. We cooked our food on an open fire, we slept in a reconstructed Iron Age house and during the day we wore Iron Age clothing. The camp was not a living experiment. We didn't intend to completely reconstruct life in the Iron Age. However when the museum was open for visitors, every day between 11 am and 5 pm, we did not use our modern items openly. During these hours we were, together with the volunteers and employees of the museum, responsible for entertaining the visitors. During this period we dressed in Iron Age clothing, conducted Iron Age experiments and we explained our activities to the public. Before and after visiting hours the participants were allowed to use modern items and wear modern clothing if they wished to. Every participant was asked in advance to conduct an individual experiment which concerned an aspect of life in the Iron Age. The experiments would not be documented but they were intended as an individual experience and as a demonstration for the public. A selection of these experiments is described below.

Experiments

One of the participants tried to make a deerskin (roe deer) pointed hat similar to finds from the Hallstatt area. The deerskin was an individual choice and the model was taken from hats

which were made of raw calf hide. The hat was not made as an actual reconstruction; the goal was to create a hat based on an Iron Age model. The hat was unfortunately not finished at the end of the week but it was a satisfactory experiment in terms of personal experience for the participant, who didn't have much experience with working with this material. It also proved to be a valuable public presentation since many visitors had never seen a real deerskin.

Another participant experimented with dyeing wool using plants. The wool was dyed using tansy (Tanacetum vulgare). This plant is native to the Netherlands and the plants were collected just outside the museum during the camp. It is not certain that the plant was used for dyes during the Iron Age but since the plant is native to the region, and has excellent dye qualities, we chose to use this plant. The wool was next put in water with an alum mordant, and then the plants were added as well. The wool was heated on a fire, but not allowed to boil. The process was repeated a couple of times still using the same water but after several hours the plants were taken from the water and fresh plants were added. The wool turned a beautiful olive green. We were surprised by the result since we expected to obtain a yellowish colour. The change to green might be explained by the fact that the wool was dyed in an iron kettle and not in an earthenware pot, which would be the most likely method in the Iron Age. This experiment also proved to be a valuable presentation for the public since most of them were not familiar with this method of dying wool with plants.

Three experiments were conducting forging iron. This time we moved our workshop to the part of museum covering the late medieval period. We moved there because the forge in this part of the museum is much better than the simple forge in the Iron Age part. However the principle setup was similar. We used bellows to heat the fire to the required temperature. We did use coal instead of charcoal. Both were in use during the medieval period but during the Iron Age only charcoal would have been available. Two people made a simple Iron Age knife (a blade with a square pin at the end to attach a wooden handle). Another person tried to make a pair of tongs, to use for forging. The knives both succeeded, the tongs unfortunately failed. The presentation at the forge was very popular among the young visitors. Throughout the day a large group of children stood amazed beside the forge asking questions and discussing our work. We often tried to rectify their first impression - most of them thought we were creating "weapons". However this didn't affect their enthusiasm and their parents and guides had trouble taking them to other parts to the museum, which we considered as a compliment.

One of our participants did however do some experiments making weapons. In terms of authenticity the most notable was a sling. This weapon was made of braided ropes and a small piece of leather to hold the projectiles. Slings were introduced to the region around 500 BC and it proved to be a very effective weapon since they remained popular for centuries.

We also conducted several experiments concerning food preparation. The most notable of these was smoking meat. Smoking is an ancient technique to preserve food. The experiments were conducting in a special chimney-shaped oven. An iron plate with sawdust on it was placed above a fire. This proved to be an excellent method since this generated a lot of smoke. We might expect that during the Iron Age a ceramic or stone plate would have been used for this. At the end of the experiment the meat was well smoked judging by its taste.

We also baked bread in one of the (loam) ovens in the Iron Age part. The bread was made with a simple recipe of flour, water, a little salt and some yeast. The loaves were placed on dock (Rumex sp.) leaves in order to separate them from the dirty oven floor. The oven was first heated for a few hours. Then the charcoal and ashes were removed, the floor was cleaned (as best as we could) and the loaves were placed on the empty, heated, floor. After this the bread was baked for about an hour in the slowly cooling oven. The experiment worked very well, however the moist leaves prevented some of the bread to cooking thoroughly on the bottom. Therefore the use of leaves in this experiment was not a great success but apart from that the experiment worked really well. We baked about eleven loaves which served as our lunch and breakfast over three days.

The public

An important aspect of this kind of summer camp, which are conducted in an open air-museum, is interaction with the public. Our participants are not trained to entertain the public however it appears that most of them are able to learn this skill very fast. At the camp there is always someone who has more knowledge and insight about the historical or archaeological background of the experiments. Often if a participant doesn't know the answer to a question he or she asks a more experienced participant to answer the question. The interaction with the public forces us to explain our experiments. Not everybody loves dealing with visitors, but in my opinion it forces participants to actively experiment and to avoid the use of modern techniques. In the end this contributes to the success of the camp. Therefore I always prefer to organise these camps in an open-air museum rather than a reconstructed building which is not open to the public.

Final remarks

Although our experiments do not have a scientific value they are clearly valuable for entertaining the public. They also provide our participants with a chance to learn more about parts of Iron Age life in which they are interested. The camp also offers a unique experience allowing our participants to live in the museum for one week. The combination of public education and participant experience is unique in the Netherlands. We would definitely recommend other groups in other countries to organise this kind of summer camp, as they

contribute to both the education of the participants and that of the public visiting the museum.

Link(s)

Website of the Dutch Youth Association for History (NJBG)

Short Dutch article about the summer camp in “de erfgoedstem”

Keywords archaeological open-air museum
event

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Bibliography

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