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Conference Review: Archaeological Approaches to the Study of the Potter's Wheel, November 2020, via Discord and YouTube

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‘Archaeological Approaches to the Study of the Potter’s Wheel’ was a virtual conference hosted on EXARC’s Discord server and YouTube channel from November 24th to 27th of 2020, organised by Dr Caroline Jeffra, Dr Richard Thér, Chase Minos and Dr Roeland Paardekooper. Similar to many conferences affected by COVID-19 restrictions, its initial venue location in Amsterdam, Netherlands was not possible. Nevertheless, it gathered a substantial number of followers with over 500 registrations and an average of 100-150 people following it on Discord alone.

> The content of this conference has highlighted the importance of integrating interregional and broad chronological research for furthering the current state of knowledge in the archaeological study of the potter’s wheel.

This conference was about promoting the development of research into the technology of the potter’s wheel. Conceptually, the conference discussed issues surrounding the evolution and spread of the wheel, the idea of applying rotation to shaping clay and methodologies for analysing wheel-made ceramics. All of the presentations contributed to the goal of making this type of study cross-disciplinary, pushing innovative approaches into the spotlight to be engaged with and discussed among prominent scholars in the field. Three themes were designed to exemplify and bring forth new research on the potter’s wheel in contrast to past conferences which have generally focused on ceramics; as in *The Many Dimensions of Pottery* (Van der Leeuw and Pritchard 1984) or wheel-fashioning techniques as a theme in the *6th International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East* (Roux and Berg 2008).

The inaugural address was given by **Professor Sander Van der Leeuw** of Arizona State University, who introduced the history of study and interrelationships between innovation, sustainability, and invention, including how these concepts help archaeologists to better understand technological change. His opening introduced key issues in the study of the potter’s wheel, emphasising how and why changes occurred among potting groups so that potting practices and communities of the past might be better identified, and understood respectively, from the archaeological record. Van der Leeuw encompassed the three themes of the conference by coalescing innovative approaches with ethnographic and more traditional archaeological research.

Theme 1

Theme 1 of the conference was titled ‘Modes of Research for Potting Practices’. It brought forth contributions ranging from the identification of macroscopic or other traces on pots, to studying the speed of ancient potter’s wheel, emphasising the importance of the type of wheel and unveiling a wheel-trace database to promote and cultivate all of these new approaches. Several presentations within this theme introduced new methods for studying

the macroscopic traces left on ceramics, including the utilisation of three-dimensional (3D) and Computerized Tomography (CT) scanning for the orientation of ceramic components by **Dr Ther** and **Dr Tomas Mangel**; X-radiography and experimental archaeology for the study of pore orientation in clay by **Dr Ina Berg**; and again using 3D scanning to assess surface topography for understanding the results of different rotational-making techniques from ideal pot forms, which was presented by **Dr Ther** and **Dr Josef Wilczek**.

As a co-organiser I, **Chase Minos**, presented my research primarily on the tool (the wheel), wheel-making techniques, and the traces these techniques and devices can leave on reproductions of small conical cups from Bronze Age Crete. My experiment highlighted the importance of the pottery wheel as a tool to be studied, particularly in regard to how different types of rotational movements generated by a wheel's physical characteristics affect the manufacture of small pots.

The latter presentations of this theme turned to holistic approaches that assessed the potter's wheel within the environment of settlements and workshops in places such as Amarna, Egypt. **Dr Sara Doherty** introduced analytical criteria for identifying workshops that can often be difficult to visualise in the archaeological record. Co-organiser **Dr Caroline Jeffra's** presentation launched her online database developed as part of her post-doctoral project called **Tracing the Potter's Wheel**. Available here: https://tracingthewheel.eu/database. The open-access database deconstructs the barriers that hinder the development of objective analyses for the study of wheel-making techniques. It already features Dr Jeffra's own experimental work acting as an excellent example of how experimental datasets (through the use of 3D scanning and photogrammetry) may be shared and compared to others that may contribute in future.

To end Theme 1, **Dr Carl Knappett** took a more conceptual and cognitive framework for understanding and studying the modes of research for potters of the past and their techniques. Indeed, for Dr Knappett, the techniques of making were not to be seen as only mechanical aspects to be studied in abstraction. Rather, the modes of research for studying pottery wheel techniques, might instead be utilised as models to help better understand the conditions and realities of potting as studied from the archaeological record. He emphasised that the limitations of 'approximative' model making as used in experimental archaeology might be bettered by contemplative thinking that does not 'treat hands as mechanical devices'.

Theme 2

Theme 2 was titled the 'Evolution and Spread of Wheel Potting Techniques', where the presenters dealt with the questions of how and why these techniques spread or disappeared from communities of the past. The first presentations of Theme 2 dealt with the early history of the potter's wheel. **Dr J. S. Baldi** presented his research on the Uruk and Northern

Mesopotamian potters of the 4th Millennium BCE, in which he discussed the modalities of technique adoption between the two areas, concluding from experimental work and macroscopic observational evidence that the two regions were typologically and technically disparate. **Ashley Cercone** presented results of her experiments with mould and wheel-made ceramics, applying morphometries and suggesting that the advantage of the potter's wheel to standardize vessel-making could explain the adoption of the wheel in Bronze Age Anatolia.

A sub-theme which manifested among the presentations of the second theme was the idea that the proximity or interaction of settlements did not necessarily guarantee the transmission or adoption of the wheel and/or different wheel-making techniques. In the case of mainland Greece during the Bronze Age, **Dr Maria Choleva** argued that several sites such as Lefkandi, Pefkakia, Lerna and Tiryns were employing different techniques at different times. Similarly, **Dr Anthi Balitsari** noted the existence and regionalisation of multiple techniques used for the production of one ceramic type (Grey Minyan or Grey Burnished Ware) within a single cultural framework.

The following presentations explored issues of non-adoption, where the wheel (or a type of wheel) was rejected or became disused over time. **Dr Susanne Prillwitz's** presentation explored this in Bronze Age Greece where a lack of physical evidence for wheels, but the presence of very few foreign 'Minoan' wheels, led her to argue that perhaps mainland potter's maintained their native wheel designs. **Dr Francesca Porta,** discussing the spread of the potter's wheel in Bronze Age Southern Italy, presented evidence showing that the use of the wheel for certain shapes (pithoi) ceased after the collapse of the Mycenaean palaces. By contrast, **Dr Doherty** reviewed the introduction of the potter's wheel between the 14th and 13th century BCE Sudan, where the wheel was maintained after Egyptian rule disappeared, until the post-Meriotic period where it was noted in the discussions on Discord that wheel-making then decreases in usage.

The **Potting Film Festival** started on the third day and featured a number of films from Japan, India, and Egypt as well as some experimental videos by conference presenters such as Dr Jeffra, Dr Doherty and myself, all of which can still be found on YouTube. Dr Carlton also submitted films of potters working in the Western Balkans which portrayed many unique methods of manufacture and wheel constructions.

To continue theme 2, **Dr Beatrijs de Groot** explored the mechanisms behind the spread of the potter's wheel to Iron Age Iberia, where regional variety in many areas was associated with agricultural intensification. Using a combination of experimental archaeology, ethnographic research and the principles of physics, **Dr Alise Gunnarssone** studied 11th to13th century CE ceramics from the Baltic region of Europe, finding that the spread and use of the potter's wheel varied significantly between two communities in close contact. **Dr Kateřina Těsnohlídková** and **Dr Karel Slavíček** made an excellent contribution by delving more into the

characteristics of the local clays and how it affected adoption of the kick-wheel in the 13th century Czech-Moravian highlands, something which is a frequent topic of discussion in current research. The last presentation of the third day by **Dr Marlieke Ernst,** concerned the adoption of wheel-making in the 16th century Caribbean. Her presentation demonstrated that the adoption of the wheel into the Caribbean islands was not merely the result of European (or colonial) imports, but involved the interaction of native Caribbean, European and African cultures. It served as an excellent transition to the last theme in which many of the presentations concerned islands of the Caribbean and South America.

To encapsulate theme 2, **Dr Valentine Roux**, an expert in the study of wheel-making techniques and the spread of the wheel in Mesopotamia, assessed the adoption or non-adoption of the wheel. Through examples of Hindu and Muslim potters making granite tempered water jars she considered how a single ceramic type can be distributed over a large area but made by different communities using different techniques. By drawing on several presentations such as Porta, Balitsari, Prillwitz and others she also noted the highly fluctuating nature of adopting, borrowing or adapting the wheel and/or technical traits. Moreover, she concluded that there are general rules for the evolution and spread of the wheel that can be used to explain why it may be adopted or, indeed, refused.

Theme 3

Theme 3 of the conference was titled 'Ethnographic Accounts or First-hand Descriptions of Change within a Crafting Context', in which the focus of the presentations was upon viewing technological change in places such as Sri Lanka, the Caribbean and South America. Ethnographic research can be a highly advantageous as an analogy for research into changes occurring as a result of the adoption of the potter's wheel in the past, particularly when combined with experimental archaeology. **Dr Deborah Winslow** recalled an account of Sinhalese potters whose pottery making traditions were affected by political independence, and consequently an open-economy that brought about high demand for dairy products served in specific pots, and the decrease in wheel-made ceramics.

Dr Richard Carlton stressed the importance of technique and how different types of wheels were used as a result of the potter's skills, needs and desires among potters in modern-day Western Balkans (Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia primarily).

Dr Patricia Fay demonstrated the globalised nature of pottery making in the Anglophone Caribbean, where there is a confluence of Indian, African and English pottery traditions that were adopted and adapted. **Dr Daniella Castellanos Montes's** presentation was particularly topical as it engaged with the recent impact of the global pandemic of 2020. Her talk emphasised the concept of discontinuity as not only a fact of pottery production among the Aguabuena potters of the Colombian Andes but also as a methodology for analysis given the clear evidence for both the expansion and contraction of potting activities in the area. In a

nearby region, **Dr Jaume García-Roselló** presented a talk on the introduction of the potter's wheel to the Chilean Central Valley where the adoption of other technologies in ceramics heralded the way for the uptake of the wheel, noting that these changes were not initiated by the introduction of the wheel or, indeed, the technique of wheel-making.

Professor Sander Van der Leeuw concluded the conference as the discussant for Theme 3 in which he reminded all of us following the conference that in order to study pottery and remain truly interdisciplinary there must be a combination of ethnography, archaeology, experiments, and knowledge of the technology. In his presentation he recalled not only those of Theme 3 but earlier presentations as well by stressing the need for coherent terminology based upon 'measurable characteristics' of the wheel. Indeed, while it is noteworthy that there are a number of ways to define actions and characteristics in ceramics, there is yet to be a completely standardized terminology. Another salient point discussed by Professor Van der Leeuw was the importance of understanding the 'long term' when studying potters and pottery making. The observations of political, economic and other changes over time in the detailed accounts by ethnographic analyses in places such as Chile, Aguabuena, Sri Lanka and elsewhere can and should be used as analogies for the study of the potter's wheel in the past. One of the issues that was discussed throughout the conference, and by Van der Leeuw, was the issue of organisation of labor such that the introduction or adoption of the wheel must be considered within the context of existing labor structures including cultural factors and potting traditions.

As for the format, each presentation was pre-recorded and uploaded to YouTube. Each session of two to three papers had a 20-minute discussion afterwards via the audio channel on EXARC's Discord. Despite the number of people following and the two media platforms, the conference ran remarkably smoothly with few technical issues. All presentations can be found on EXARC's YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/c/ExarcNetofficial. It is certainly a format to be used in future conferences to not only foster critical discussion but also aid the dispersion of research. Indeed, a core theme of the conference was aimed at advancing research methodologies that can be standardised in order to promote coherent analyses.

Looking back, there were several excellent additions to the study of the potter's wheel and ceramics generally that do this. From the discussants, Professor Van der Leeuw's expertise in innovation, sustainability and pottery making generally complimented well Dr Knappett's conceptual framework and Dr Roux's scientific analyses of wheel-making traces. From the speakers, several contributions enhanced our understanding of techniques for better ceramic analyses and methodologies (Dr Ther, Dr Mangel, Dr Wilcezk, Mr Minos, Dr Gunnarssone and Dr Choleva to name but a few) as well as how and why techniques do or do not spread (particularly Dr Prilwitz, Dr Doherty, Dr Roux, Dr Castellanos, and most of Theme 3's

presentations). Moreover, Dr Jeffra's wheel-making database affords the likelihood of future comparative analyses between experimentally reproduced ceramics.

This conference certainly garnered the attention of those studying the potter's wheel around the world. Moreover, the three themes facilitated discussions concerning wider topics including the study of technology, ethnography and ceramics. Indeed, it successfully fostered a forum for researchers studying pottery from ancient Mesopotamia to the modern-day and from varying disciplinary backgrounds. The content of this conference has highlighted the importance of integrating interregional and broad chronological research for furthering the current state of knowledge in the archaeological study of the potter's wheel.

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