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Conference Review: Experiencing Experimental Archaeology, May 2020

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Author(s): Katharina Singer [1] ✉

[1] Philipps-Universität Marburg, Biegenstraße 10, 35037 Marburg, Germany.

The conference "Experiencing Experimental Archaeology / Experimentelle Archäologie Erleben" took place between May 9th - 10th 2020 at the Lauresham Laboratory for Experimental Archaeology, part of the UNESCO World Heritage Lorsch Abbey site, Germany. In previous years the event was held on site through lectures, information booths and presentations, providing the visitors with information about current projects. This year, due to COVID-19 restrictions, it had to be undertaken digitally, as museums and other institutions

were temporarily closed to the public. Therefore, the Open-Day at the Lauresham Laboratory for Experimental Archaeology was transformed into an online conference. The shift to going digital gave more international participants the opportunity to present their projects and institutions and to partake in the live online discussion. EXARC hosted the event, facilitating video access of the lectures to academic and non-academic participants, who could ask questions via the platform. These were answered directly after each talk via audio channel.

> The previous events on Experimental Archaeology at Lorsch aimed at bringing insights into current projects to mainly a local audience. What first seemed like a cause for restrictions might have opened opportunities for future events like this. Instead of being limited by having to close down the Open-Air Laboratory for visitors, the circumstances gave an opportunity to open up to a wider international audience.

The conference started on Saturday morning with a welcoming speech by **Claus Kropp**, Manager of the Lauresham Laboratory for Experimental Archaeology. Kropp gave an introduction to the Open-Air Laboratory, its concept and aims, historical background of the Lorsch Abbey site, and the numerous projects and presentations at Lauresham. Another key aspect mentioned is scientific research and therefore the necessity for international cooperation with other institutions.

Following this, Kropp gave some insight on the agricultural projects at the Open-Air Laboratory, where draft cattle are used and trained as part of Lauresham's concept. The draft cattle at Lorsch belong to the Rheatian Grey breed, which comes quite close to medieval standards. Kropp described the training of the cattle from a young age onward until they are ready to take part in the ploughing experiments. The problems of medieval forms of harnessing were also addressed and why a different, more modern kind of collar is used for the regular work to reduce stress on the cattle.

Saturday's keynote lecture was held by **Prof. Linda Hurcombe** (University of Exeter), titled "Experiments within experiments: building a Bronze Age boat and other experiences within museums". Prof. Hurcombe talked about the experiment of reconstructing a Bronze Age type sewn plank boat after the example of the Ferriby Boats, which took place at the National Maritime Museum Cornwall. The main task of building the boat itself was accompanied by a number of other experiments on tools, materials and skill sets; the challenges of building the boat inside the museum as a public presentation; of attracting and keeping volunteers with very different backgrounds and skills over the whole period of the experiment; and finally creating an exhibition around the experiment.

This presentation was followed by another project presented by Claus Kropp, who talked about the strategies of documenting the experiments in medieval agriculture at the Lauresham Open-Air Laboratory, including the cultivation of ridge and furrow, square plots or the selection of field crops. A special emphasis was laid on the documentation strategies

within the long-term monitoring with a framework of data on microclimatic conditions, different field types and fertilization. A yield analysis is carried out annually and makes it possible to compare the outcome with that of modern cultivation methods.

Subsequently, **Dr. Roeland Paardekooper** (EXARC) presented his paper on "Experimental Archaeology: what is it and who does it?" where he provided a definition for Experimental Archaeology, its results and the fact that the outcome of undertaking this, is data in the first place, not a physical product. He gave an overview on how an archaeological experiment works and the different approaches taken by various institutions, museums, societies and freelancers. He also highlighted the opportunities EXARC offers with its Bibliography of Experimental Archaeology, via articles, and the interdisciplinary network generated for the international public.

The next lecture was presented by **Dr. Jens Schabacker** who conducted an experiment on indoor climate in early medieval houses, respectively life size house models. Dr Schabacker presented the preliminary results from a long-term experiment at the Lauresham Open-Air Laboratory, during which the indoor climate was measured over a period of time during which the house model was heated with open fire and reenactors lived in the house to create conditions as close as possible to an authentic daily medieval use of such a house as possible.

The last presentation of the day was a virtual information booth by the International Association of Agricultural Museums (AIMA). The association informs about the history and significance of agriculture and provides international links between museums on a range of educational tools on agriculture.

Sunday's session was opened by **Florian Saum**, who talked about the Weaving Comb Project at the Lauresham Open-Air Laboratory, which offers children a possibility to try out medieval weaving techniques by themselves. It is part of Lauresham's dissemination programme, which offers a variety of crafts and projects for the visitors, including both children and adults, of the Open-Air Laboratory.

Following this, **Dr. Katrin Kania** and **Andrea Klitsche-Hiebel M.A.** presented the project on the analysis and planned recreation of the tablet woven Albecunde-Belt and the role of noble women in early medieval textile-production. Dr. Kania gave a general introduction to tablet weaving, the technique in which the extant belt, dated to the 9th to 10th century was fabricated. The authors elaborated on materials used, especially silk, and the role of such precious textile pieces for the early medieval society, especially for the women who made these textiles as an essential part of manorial production of the Carolingian upper class.

The next paper was presented by **Claire Walton** and **Trevor Creighton** of Butser Ancient Farm, Hampshire, UK. In their talk "(Re)constructing the Stone Age: Building a Neolithic house" they talked about the building process of a Neolithic house with different tools and materials on

the site of Butser Ancient Farm, which focuses on research and education. Organic archaeological finds are unusual for the British Neolithic, so the reconstruction of a house excavated at Horton provided great insight into potential construction methods.

Claus Kropp presented Lauresham's Pit-House Project and talked about the choices and decisions that had to be made when (re)constructing a sunken featured building (pit-house) from the 7th century. Though the pit-house is a type of building which is recorded quite well in settlement archaeology, there are still many variables to be considered when reconstructing such a house, be it structural details or the possible use of the house. Two different versions of the pit-house were built, which allowed to interpret those details differently.

Thereafter Claus Kropp provided in his paper "Draft Cattle Usage in (Archaeological) Open-Air Museums. Perspectives, Potential and Limitations" some insight into the usage of draft cattle, not only in archaeological museums, but open-air museums in general. As cattle were used from the Neolithic onwards, it is a good possibility to show visitors this aspect of agricultural every-day life up until quite recently. It provides the transmission of intangible heritage and traditional techniques. For museums those iconic cattle can also provide advantages for public relations. Kropp also talked about the issues and limitations when keeping and using draft cattle in a museum environment.

Following this, Claus Kropp and archaeotechnician **Frank Trommer** presented the "Panzerreiter - Project" at the Lauresham Open-Air Laboratory and the UNESCO World Heritage Site Lorsch Abbey. The project focuses on the equipment of the loricati milites, the horse-mounted early medieval warriors who formed the special force of the Carolingian army. Manuscripts dating to the Carolingian period list down equipment and the required parts needed, including armour and weapons. These items can be found in graves of the Merovingian era, but with the predominance of Christianity in the Carolingian period, there are no grave goods in most parts of the Frankish Empire. With the help of an international team of archaeologists, archaeotechnicians and craftspeople, the "Panzerreiter"- Project looks into upper-class warriors and their individual items of equipment. A Carolingian spatha with a pattern welded blade portion and inlay work on the guard and pommel, a Flügelkopflanze (winged spear), also with some inlay work, and a longsax were already reconstructed. A helmet and shield are currently under construction and the project is planned to continue.

The session was closed with a virtual information booth, presenting the site of Butser Ancient Farm, UK, and the wide array of presentations and activities in which the visitors can participate.

The decision to convert the previous on-site event which was held in one day before to a digital two-day conference made it possible for an international audience to participate and interact with experts and created a meeting point for people with an interest in experimental

archaeology, regardless of academic background, and provided a professional platform for information exchange. The videos were uploaded to the Lauresham YouTube channel and are still available publicly.

The previous events on Experimental Archaeology at Lorsch aimed at bringing insights into current projects to mainly a local audience. What first seemed like a cause for restrictions might have opened opportunities for future events like this. Instead of being limited by having to close down the Open-Air Laboratory for visitors, the circumstances gave an opportunity to open up to a wider international audience. The organizers did an excellent job on rescheduling the event on short notice, from an in-person event to an open access online event. It surely is important to show certain aspects of Experimental Archaeology live on site, since crafts and techniques are involved which can only be fully experienced in person, but given the restrictions due to COVID-19, the event at Lauresham opened up to the possibility offers to incorporating a digital approach in future events, reaching out to a wider audience.

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Corresponding Author

Katharina Singer
Philipps-Universität Marburg
Biegenstraße 10
35037 Marburg
Germany
E-mail Contact