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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Book Review: Experimental Archaeology Presented in the AiD Magazine

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The top popular magazine in Germany on archaeology is called Archäologie in Deutschland, simply referred to as 'AiD'. It has been published every two months since 1984 and is 84 pages in length. The publisher is Theiss from Stuttgart. They publish on archaeology, history and ethnography and carry about 650 titles. AiD carries many adverts for their publications, as well as offers from others.



It is not said that only academics can perform serious and valuable experiments, not at all, but we need to see how these actions are embedded in archaeology and museology. In this sense, we have come a long way, but a good link between museums and universities would be beneficial to both – and above all, to experimental archaeology in Germany.

The A4 size magazine does not just publish on photogenic excavations around the world with a heavy focus on anything relevant in Germany. Obviously much of the magazine is about German excavations, books and exhibitions; however AiD often offers room for archaeological open-air museums, exhibitions and books which appeal to the general public. On various occasions, they have published on experiments as well.

In 2012, the first issue focused on experimental archaeology. This means about a quarter of the magazine carries seven articles showcasing good examples of present day experimentation in Germany. Archaeologists need to understand traditional techniques they know nothing of because they live in a high tech world where ancient crafts have mostly disappeared. That is where experimental archaeology steps in: a method to learn to understand the past, hands-on.

Almost 20 years earlier, a similar issue of AiD was published with five articles sampling German experimental archaeology in the early 1990s. It was much about education, metals,

ceramics and antler – apart from terra sigillata all detailed examples were prehistoric. In the 2012 series there is no single example of experimental archaeology from the past two thousand years. Has nothing changed in the past two decades? None of the 1993 authors are presented in 2012, but we can still see continuity. Themes presented in 1993 would still do well at present and vice versa: bronze working, construction of longhouses, textiles et cetera.

The 1993 AiD opened with an article by the Chair of EXAR, the mostly German speaking organisation for experimental archaeology, Dr Fansa stating: “experimental archaeology works in the manner of natural sciences”. In the 2012 volume, Wulf Hein starts by asking: “how would you fell a tree with a stone axe? You make one and try it out!” These are two different approaches, signalling that in the early 1990s, experimental archaeology in Germany still needed to gain a place in archaeology and museology, when by now, support among museums and the general public has grown immensely. As Hein puts it, experimental archaeology is coming home now: with the support behind us, serious experiments have now become possible, with valid hypotheses and working scripts.

Grömer&Rösel-Mautendorfer present textile experimentation following finds from Hallstatt, Austria. The perfect find circumstances allow for detailed reconstruction of production

processes. Binggeli & Sander discuss how to make the sofa of the Celtic Chief of Hochdorf. In 1985, Längerer made a similar sofa in a modern workshop in three and a half months (Längerer 1995), Binggeli used four months. However, the latter attempted to not only use original materials, but also make it with original tools and methods. There we see the progress compared with the earlier generation.

Lund presents attempts in making flint daggers the way we know them from Southern Scandinavia, mentioning Callahan and Waldorf from the United States as some of the few who come close to making such masterpieces. Lund's article is a good example of how knowledge needs to be paired with sufficient practice: away with first time experimenters!

Braun describes the construction of a new 'Bronze Age' house at the archaeological open-air museum in Hitzacker, explaining the important link for any (re)construction with the archaeological source information. New knowledge, gained in the past 14 years since the last house model was constructed at Hitzacker, could now be presented in the new building.


Leuzinger&Rast-Eicher discuss lake dwelling research around the Alps by example of working flax in prehistory. This article exemplifies that experimental archaeology has become a tool from a toolkit, one of a variety of methods archaeologists can apply in order to find out more. That is true emancipation of experimental archaeology.


Berger, Hein &Wehrberger end this section with a review of the 'Lion Man', a 30,000 year old statue found in 1939 in the Stadel Cave depicting a mix of a cave lion and a human figure. In the 1930s about 200 fragile splinters were salvaged, but recent, new excavations have led to the finding of even more. Using modern techniques (stereo lithography) the remains were replicated in another material. This shows that when one refrains from using similar techniques or similar materials as in the past, one can still get to a (re)construction of an artefact by means of which one can learn many details which could not be derived from the original. However, following on this stage, a (re)construction was made in original material and techniques. It proved difficult to make similar traces on the ivory surface as the original showed; on the other hand, several features of the lion man could be best explained by what is possible to produce with flint tools in ivory: the tools and the material dictated part of the outcome.

There are no examples of pure laboratory experiments in this volume of AiD although they do exist. It is often unclear how the showcased works are supported by universities or museums. It is not said that only academics can perform serious and valuable experiments, not at all, but we need to see how these actions are embedded in archaeology and museology. In this sense, we have come a long way, but a good link between museums and universities would be beneficial to both – and above all, to experimental archaeology in Germany.

Book information:

The magazine *Archäologie in Deutschland*, Issue 2012-1 can be ordered through www.theiss.de and costs Euro 9.95 without postage.

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