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## Reviewed Article:

# WEA's Latest Life Experiment

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Since the last life experiment was in 2001 WEA decided it was time to do another in 2010. The decision was mainly made to give WEA members the opportunity to gain first hand experience in life experiments, for most of the current WEA members had never participated in one. Not every member of the WEA was allowed to participate; such an experiment calls for experienced participants, not in the least because all needed a complete outfit and all necessary equipment made authentically. The period chosen was the Iron Age (900 – 50 BC).

## History of the WEA

> WEA, the part of the NJBG that focuses on experimental archaeology, conducted its first living experiment in almost ten years. The outcomes were surprising, if one looks at the sociological aspects of the experiment, and not only at the historical.

In the past, the WEA has organized several 'life experiments', meaning living in a reconstructed (pre)historical settlement using only 'authentic' equipment, food, clothing, etc. for a certain period of time, usually one or several weeks. The first of such life experiments was during the summer of 1988. For one of those life experiments the group even won the Ford Conservation Award in 1991. Since the last life experiment was in 2001 WEA decided it was time to do another in 2010. The decision was mainly made to give WEA members the opportunity to gain first hand experience in life experiments, for most of the current WEA members had never participated in one. Not every member of the WEA was allowed to participate; such an experiment calls for experienced participants, not in the least because all needed a complete outfit and all necessary equipment made authentically. The period chosen was the Iron Age (900 – 50 BC).

## The preparations

A group was formed to carry out the experiment. Nine members of the 16+ group would participate in the life experiment. Participants were aged 16 to 28, some with a lot of experience, and others with less. The majority of the participants were men, only three were women. The participants were: Jaco Schilp, 21, president of the executive committee; David de Jong, 21, member of the executive committee; Roel Jordans, 28,our oldest participant; Arjanneke van Kampen, 22; Bart Boogmans, 17; Linde Rappart, 17; Lasse van den Dikkenberg, 16; Oskar ter Mors, 18; Wimpje Rovers, 19; Pieter Boogerd, 18. Jaco,Arjanneke and Roel are employed; , Wimpje, Linde, Pieter and Oskar are students;and Lasse just graduated secondary school. A mixed group, but a group of friends as well.

Several meetings were organized to allocate the tasks that had to be done by each of the nine participants. Information on period clothing had to be gathered, for both men and women. People had to sort out which foods we could use, how we would sleep, what the exceptions of the authenticity rules were going to be, how we would cook etc. One thing was sure: help was needed.

## Food and drinks

The first thing discussed was food and drinks. The table of foods, taken from Twee Manen Lang (Boonstra 1997), a survey on a life experiment, appeared not correct. Some vegetables used were not imported to Holland until the 17th century, so the participants had to figure out what other foods could be used. At this point, WEA got help from a Dutch association, De Historische Keuken, that investigates food throughout the centuries. Eventually this table was

used during the life experiment. The book Prehistoric Cooking (Wood 2001) was also used for recipes. The amount of food was also strictly calculated from these sources. During the experiment, food amounts used were measured to evaluate the needs of the group.

Now that it was known what foods could be used, we could divide the tasks. Someone had to make lard, there was cheese to make, apples to dry et cetera. This was just the start. We also had to decide how to cook the food: it was decided to cook the food in pots, instead of the iron kettles that WEA usually uses. Ceramic pots were made by Flor Buchuk Gil, the ceramist of the Eindhoven archaeological open-air museum.

A clothing instruction book was made by one of the participants, after a period of research. Some exceptions were made; modern underwear and spectacles were allowed. Fire was only allowed if the wood was hand-chopped and the fire was authentically started. Sleeping bags were not allowed, so everyone had to sleep under woollen blankets on straw and cow skins.

## The life experiment

During the life experiment there were some experiments with food. All grains were ground by hand to make flour, bread was made in a wood furnace, and there were some grains cooked without grinding them. Pork meat was salted, lard was made, and lamb meat was dried. Apples were dried, cheese was made and gravad lax (a Swedish dish with salmon, literally means buried salmon) was buried. A fox, unfortunately, managed to find the gravad lax and dug it up.

## The first day

The first day was used for the preparations that still had to be done. One of the participants had not finished his clothing yet, all participants put all the modern bags and other items in one of the buildings, which was locked afterwards, and food was measured and then put in linen bags that had been made for the occasion. Everyone dressed in their period clothing and put the modern clothing away. A little booklet was handed to every participant to make notes, and to answer questions that were already written in there. The questions were meant to keep track of about how everyone felt. Did they sleep well, what was the quality of the food, et cetera? Age and weight were also recorded. For obvious reasons, everybody had to use the same scales for weighing.

## The second day

The second day was the official start of the experiment. At 5:00 AM the alarm went off. That was the last modern sound of the week. The group split up in two: the men went to go chop wood and make fire to cook, the women went to grind the grain for porridge. After breakfast some went to sleep, others went to chop more wood and some made preparations for lunch.

After lunch everyone had some time to do something for themselves, sleeping or craft work. Shortly after, dinner was made. After dinner there was some talking by the fire, but by the time it was half past nine everyone was vast asleep. This day/night rhythm would eventually be experienced as ideal throughout the entire week.

## Rest of the week

The first two days were important for the way things were done the rest of the week. The decision to grind grain extra each day for the next day, for example, was important. After two tries, the bread had become very good, and we even made a few batches of cookies. Preparing dinner went better every day, and some really nice stews were made during the experiment. Carrying baskets were made so the participants could take a long walk. Food and drinks for lunch were packed and half a day was spent in the woods. After that, dinner had to be made quickly for it takes quite a long time to cook: cooking in the dark was experienced as impractical and annoying. One of the participants had an asthma attack during the experiment, because of the straw he slept on. To relieve it, he slept one night outside. Some pots and pans broke during cooking, since it was, after all, a new way of cooking for most of the participants. The participants discovered that they needed much less wood if they chopped it into really small pieces and used it only to cook on, and not to warm themselves.

During the week of the life experiment a pattern developed for daily life, in which every participant had his own place, determined by several factors.

The aforementioned events were not the most important aspect of the experiment though. A survey was made for all the participants to fill in every day. The questions had to be answered with a grade, with 0 as the least and 10 as the most. This survey was conducted in order to discover what happened if one puts a group of modern people into a completely alien environment, in this case an iron age village. It was meant as a social experiment, as well as a life experiment.

## The questions, as well as their outcomes, will be treated here.

### 1: How do you feel today?

At the beginning of the week everyone felt fine, no one had any problems whatsoever. This changed over time. Because of a lack of sleep and some things participants could not agree over, there were some arguments halfway through the experiment. It was nothing serious, but enough to make the participants feel worse than they did before. Luckily, the arguments were solved. After that everyone felt fine again for the rest of the experiment. The average grade given during the week was a seven.

### 2: Did you sleep well last night?

The first night no-one had had enough sleep, mainly because everyone had gone to bed too

late, and the alarm went off at 5 AM. Everyone did add that they slept well, but just not enough. Everyone had the chance to sleep some more during the day, so the lack of sleep did not last long. Except for the first night almost everyone slept really well the rest of the experiment. There were, however, two participants that had trouble sleeping the last three days of the experiment. Because one of the participants had an asthma attack he could not sleep well, and another worried over him so she did not sleep well either. The last night they decided to go sleep outside, because the straw inside triggered the asthma, and though it was colder than sleeping inside it was better. The average grade given was a six and half.

### 3: What was the quality of the food today?

The quality of the food was good, according to the participants. There was enough of it, there even was fresh fruit: everything for a balanced diet was available. On day three, the participants whose task it was to cook, couldn't finish in time for sunset, the cooking was finished in a hurry and the food was not really good as result. The grades were lower that day, averaging a mere six, compared to a seven and half during the rest of the experiment.

### 4: Are you hungry?

The first day everyone answered this question with yes. First day's breakfast was by far not enough to get through the day. Lunch, however, was more than enough. The first couple of days everyone was really careful not to use too much of the ingredients, but, since there was more than enough, meals got bigger and bigger during the week. The cooking got better too, thanks to more experience in cooking with Iron Age cooking pots. Overall, the food was good and no one was really hungry.

### 5: How much energy do you have to do things?

Though the Iron Age diet was low on sugar, in this case honey, it was high in fat. A lot of cereals also gave participants the energy to do everything that was needed, and even more, like the walk. Every participant had enough energy, and this question was answered with an average of a seven and half.

### 6: Was it warm enough last night?

This question was mainly asked to find out if the interpretation of Iron Age sleeping was correct. Since, instead of the usual sleeping bags, only woollen blankets were used, the question was to assess if that was warm enough. The answer is simple: Yes. Every participant slept really comfortable, and most even traded their sleeping bags for the blankets after the life experiment. The average was a seven and half.

### 7: Was it warm during the day?

The answer to this, again, was yes. The weather was really nice during the experiment, and the self-made Iron Age clothing was warm enough in the evenings. The average grade given

was an eight.

### 8: How do your clothes fit?

The clothes, home-made by all the participants, were really comfortable. Not everything was perfect, everything was a little oversized, but they were great to wear and fit to do everything, from chopping wood to plucking nettles.

### 9: Does anything bother you?

This was an open question, and various answers were given during the week. Answers varied from ticks, a lack of food the first day, to sunburns and broken cooking pots.

### 10: What did you do today?

This question, again an open question, will not be treated here since a description of the daily activities is already given is this article.

## Conclusion

WEA, the part of the NJBG that focuses on experimental archaeology, conducted its first life experiment in almost ten years. The outcomes were surprising, if one looks at the sociological aspects of the experiment, and not only at the historical. Every participant had his own role in the pattern for daily life. This role was determined by many factors, such as sex, strength, abilities etc. To most of the participants' surprise, traditional man-woman patterns developed. For example: When the women were grinding grains, the men were chopping wood for the fire, and the men made a fire which the women used to cook on. There was more than enough food, and more free time than anyone had expected. Cooking took more time than expected, but since everyone could guess the time really well by looking at the sun, this was not much of a problem. The perception of time also changed. The exact time was no longer important in daily life, only three moments were: The time one got out of bed, noon and the time one went to bed again.

Concluding, one can say this was a very successful life experiment, certainly since most of the participants had never before participated in one before, and the short period of preparation. WEA most certainly wants to do more life experiments, to be able to make better conclusions and discover more.

Keywords life experiment
food
ceramics
textile

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# About WEA

WEA - Werkgroep Experimentele Archeologie
The WEA, Society for Experimental Archaeology, is a sub-society of the NJBG, the Dutch Youth Association for History, formed by youngsters aged 12 to 26 who enjoy participating in several aspects of living history. WEA offers them a chance to learn about history, set up their own archaeological experiments, and the opportunity to participate in living history for example by learning a traditional craft. At the WEA camps, they not only learn about history, but also about the natural environment. There is, of course, lots of room for fun stuff as well. Since our activities are done not just in private, but also at open-air museums, we have the chance to inspire others. History is often seen as boring, however we show that it can be fun. WEA has two different age groups, both with a different approach. These are the groups for the ages 12 to 16, also called the 'medioren', and for the ages 16 to 26, the 16+ group. For the medioren the WEA provides a safe and fun environment to make friends, learn about history and nature, and to discover things with a lot of guidance. The 16+ group is expected to be more mature, and they only receive guidance if they ask for it. They also form the executive committee of the WEA, and organise camps and day-trips. They are expected to come up with their own experiments, for which the WEA provides almost everything they need.

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## Gallery Image

FIG 1. PHOTO TAKEN DURING THE 2010 LIFE EXPERIMENT.

FIG 2. PHOTO TAKEN DURING THE 2010 LIFE EXPERIMENT.

FIG 3. PHOTO TAKEN DURING THE 2010 LIFE EXPERIMENT.

FIG 4. PHOTO TAKEN DURING THE 2010 LIFE EXPERIMENT.

FIG 5. PHOTO TAKEN DURING THE 2010 LIFE EXPERIMENT.