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## Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

# Book Review: Glossary of Prehistoric and Historic Timber Buildings by Lutz Volmer and W. Haio Zimmermann (ed.)

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The 1987 conference in Århus, Denmark on *ESF Workshop on the reconstruction of wooden buildings from the prehistoric and early historic period* has been important to EXARC as we have acquired, and are gradually publishing, the manuscripts of the unpublished proceedings.

> For anybody who works on timber buildings, this book is definitely worth having.

A contribution to this conference was recently published: a glossary of prehistoric and historic timber buildings up to *circa* 1800-1850, containing 900 definitions and 600 illustrations. The definitions are bilingual (English and German) followed by a translation into French, Dutch, Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, Polish and Czech. For each language area, the editors paired an archaeologist with a building historian. It was soon discovered that even within the same language area, regional differences exist in wording, making it difficult to describe technical details.

While originally the aim of the glossary was restricted to archaeological evidence, it now also includes descriptions of existing buildings. Geographically, the focus is on central European, especially German, buildings. However, the glossary is useful for a much wider area of European timber buildings. The approach of combining language, technical descriptions, archaeology and history was certainly not easy, simply because "often terms were not defined according to scientific but mainly pragmatic criteria" or local definitions were often "based on regional prevalence and ignored those constructions which were not common there" (p 12). Even if restricted to a single language, different wording can be used for the same item or technique, depending on who is talking or why it is referred to. Therefore, creating a typology is very hard–what is presented in this book is just one way of structuring the information.

It is not an overview of what timber construction elements were called historically, although many present day names are of course derived from the past. This book makes a common language possible; now when a German person mentions 'Hallenhaus', his British colleague cannot assume he refers to a 'hall house'. In some languages one can be more precise than in others where terminology gaps exist. For example, sometimes there is no distinction made between anearthfastpost and a non-earthfast post [in German: Pfostenbau versus Ständerbau], making interpretation of excavation reports quite hard for these matters.

Is the book too German-centric? With so much material in Germany this seemed like a good country to start from. The question remains as to whether it will retain its usefulness in countries where other building strategies (preferring the use of stone or adobe) prevail and wooden construction is used much less. Looking at the distribution of timber framing in Europe (Figure 9, p 31), translation of the glossary into Norwegian and Swedish was hardly necessary; Basque or Spanish would have been a better addition. Also, it would have been a great improvement to have everything not only described in German and English, but in French as well, instead of only translating words into French. But how far can you go?

The glossary is divided into the following sections: Building, Main construction, Roof truss, Joints, Fittings (doors, windows *et cetera*), Timber and finally Techniques and Tools. Added to it are a bibliography and an index in English and in German. The different sections are clear,

but a simple introduction (as far as this is possible) per section would have been very helpful. Also, it is sometimes hard to go back from a detailed description to the big image, understanding where in the building 'we are'–an option would be to use the margin of the pages to show with symbols orcolourswhat corner of a house is actually discussed.

Paging through this book opens a new world, even for lay people. Things are not as simple as they seem at first sight. But is not that the ingenuity of wooden construction? Many words people use when referring to elements of a wooden building refer to how an element is used instead of its technical purpose. As this is too culturally determined, in the present glossary such references are mostly ignored. The strength of the book is that each term is explained/defined in just a couple of lines: fast, factual and clear.

The uniformity in style of the line drawings is very helpful; there are however no photos; therefore much depends on the experience of the reader to 'translate' from the drawing to the real world and *vice versa*. Photos would provide the real life detail to augment the line drawings.

This 482 page book is very good. No wonder it took 25 years to compile the information. One point however: currently, books such as this are not just published in paper form. Many people will ask "isn't there an app for that"? It would be very useful to make this information available online, not only because we cannot always carry 2.3 kg in our back pocket, but also because photos, film fragments and links would greatly enhance the information andsearch ability. Another option that would work well online: zooming in and zooming out in a building, showing the relation between structural details. An online version would also solve another problem: a glossary is never complete: new terms, new languages or more precise descriptions can be added.

For anybody who works on timber buildings, this book is definitely worth having; for example, to better understand construction details and/or to compare different options when designing a new building, as one will better be able to read the archaeological source material when reconstructing house plans. The low cost (less than € 60) should convince most people: it is a must have!

## Book information:

VOLMER, L., and ZIMMERMANN, H. W., 2012, Glossary of Prehistoric and Historic Timber Buildings - Glossar zum prähistorischen und historischen Holzbau", *Studien zur Landschafts- und Siedlungsgeschichte im südlichen Nordseegebiet*, vol. 3, Wilhelmshaven: Niedersächsisches Institut für historische Küstenforschung, Marie Leidorf Verlag, 482 pp.

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