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Reviewed Article:

# Results of a Discussion on the State of Experimental Archaeology in Switzerland

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The 'Pfahlbauland' exhibition at Landiwiese in Zurich in 1990 was an important event for the Swiss experimental archaeology community. On 27 March 2010, the board of the Working Group on Experimental Archaeology in Switzerland (AEAS-GAES) invited a panel of experts to hold a public debate in Olten on whether the incentives that had existed at the time still played their part, how they were now constituted and what the future perspectives were.

> Experimental archaeological research contributes to a better understanding of archaeological finds and results in an important way.

The discussion was inspired by Horizont 2015, a platform for the promotion of the future of archaeological research in Switzerland (www.horizont2015.ch). As explained below, it will be extremely important for the field of experimental archaeology to be part of this process.
Eight experimental archaeology practitioners with different levels of experience from both the German and the French speaking regions of Switzerland took part in the discussion: Markus Binggeli, Walter Fasnacht, Peter Kelterborn, Urs Leuzinger, Christoph Lötscher, Antoinette Rast-Eicher, Jacques Reinhard and Hannes Weiss. While additional panellists could obviously have been invited, the presence of approximately two dozen AEAS members ensured that the discussion was further enhanced by a broad range of opinions and ideas. Chaired by Thomas Doppler, the discussion dealt with questions pertaining not only to the present situation but also to the past and future of experimental archaeology. This paper aims to record the core points of the debate, thus offering a written basis for further discussion and future actions.

## Looking back

Although the tradition of conducting experimental archaeology in Europe dates back to the early 20th century, experts in Switzerland have only become more aware of it since the 'Pfahlbauland' exhibition some 20 years ago. Compared to other countries such as France or Denmark, this field of research is not very well advanced in Switzerland. Since the early 1990s experimental archaeology has experienced little, if any, progress. For a long time the limited exchange of knowledge between experts in the field meant that the wheel was being reinvented again and again. This was one of the reasons behind the founding of AEAS in 1993 and the establishment of its constitution in 1998. The association acts as intermediary between experimental archaeology enthusiasts. It facilitates contacts between the likeminded – experts or laypeople – thus promoting the exchange of knowledge and an opportunity to acquire practical skills.

## Status Quo

Experimental archaeological studies play an important part in gaining a better understanding of archaeological finds and features. A review of the archaeological literature shows that such research is an important step in gaining scientific insight – use-wear analysis of flint tools, the various steps involved in textile production or the study of the impact of heat on animal bones, to name but a few. Despite being a significant branch of research, it has yet to be aligned with any particular scientific institution in Switzerland and is still often accused of bearing the hallmarks of unscientific tinkering. It therefore comes as no surprise that often no clear distinction is made between experimental archaeology in the actual sense of the word (using scientific experiments to study an archaeological research question), archaeotechnique

(learning, using, and teaching prehistoric crafts) and hands-on archaeology (personally encountering the past). The organisational problem posed by the lack of institutional links as well as the lack of appreciation may be the reason why experimental archaeology is rarely represented in large-scale research projects. This in turn leads to a general lack of sufficient funding for experimental archaeological studies. These external conditions often curb the enthusiasm of otherwise highly motivated people. The lack of institutional integration also leads to a highly selective dissemination of knowledge and the justified fear that there will be no new generation of competent experimental archaeologists in years to come.

## Outlook

Having discussed the current situation, the panel turned to the question of the need for specific action and the existing options. The debate focused on five subjects: networking and lobbying, linking in with scientific institutions, dissemination of knowledge and methods, funding of research projects, and publication of the research results.

### Networking & lobbying:

AEAS must network more actively and at various levels, and it must present itself more as an association in order to play its part in establishing experimental archaeology as a field of research. By lobbying at various levels, from pre-schools to third-level institutions and research institutes (colleges, universities, the Swiss Federal Laboratories for Materials Science and Technology etc.), different interest groups can be reached and their awareness raised. It will also be a challenge, however, to meet the various demands and needs of these groups. One must also expect that the establishment of experimental archaeology as a scientific method of research will be a drawn-out process. The history of archaeobiology (archaeozoology and archaeobotany) may be used as an example: in that case it took more than 30 years of continuous effort on the part of individuals and research groups before its methods began to be established to any great extent among Swiss researchers and at Swiss universities. Although the process is still ongoing, it is no longer conceivable to exclude archaeobiological studies from interdisciplinary research projects. This is the goal towards which experimental archaeologists must work.

### Linking in with scientific institutions:

The gradual establishment of experimental archaeology as a scientific research method would be most meaningfully achieved via links with universities. Cantonal departments and museums are hardly relevant because their core tasks generally leave no space for (basic) experimental archaeological research, although museums in particular tend to advertise events and educational programmes by using the watchword ‘experimental archaeology’. AEAS as an association must approach the universities and attempt to establish a sustainable collaboration.

### Dissemination of knowledge and methods:

The institutionalised collaboration would enable an integrated system of disseminating knowledge and methodology. This would eliminate the need to constantly reinvent the wheel and would provide a targeted support base for the next generation of experimental archaeologists. It was repeatedly stated that students from various universities show a keen interest in experimental archaeology. This interest must be met with concrete proposals and offers. The first obvious step would be the organisation of regular experimental archaeology workshops, which could be integrated into the existing 'Practical Archaeology' study modules.

### Funding of research projects:

Research projects in the strict sense are rarely possible due to the lack of funding. Financial investments are usually limited to demonstrations of archaeotechniques, which are geared towards a wider audience and mainly serve commercial purposes. Alternative funds must usually be raised in order to finance research projects aimed at gaining scientific insight. The sustainable collaboration with research partners, for instance universities, could offer pragmatic solutions to this problem. The existing infrastructure could be utilised effectively and the costs incurred could be divided among the organisations involved. AEAS could invest some of its own funds in such projects. As an association, the working group could also approach foundations such as the lottery fund more frequently to raise funds for projects. A review of the situation abroad also shows that experimental archaeology is indeed integrated in large-scale EU projects. This, however, requires active self-promotion and international collaboration.

### Publication of research results:

Currently, experimental archaeology in Switzerland largely goes unnoticed. On one hand this can be linked with a lack of awareness of the often well-hidden publications. On the other hand, there is a noticeable passiveness in publishing research results. Even for the in-house annual report it often takes a lot of effort and several requests to collect even a small number of contributions. Much rethinking will be required and experimental archaeologists must move away from short and inaccessible publications towards submitting detailed papers for publication in archaeological specialist literature. Such papers play a significant role in the lobbying work because they raise awareness of the numerous fields of action and illustrate the contribution that experimental archaeology can make. This will provide a basis upon which to develop further research questions, couple research ideas and launch interdisciplinary research projects.

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