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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Conference Review: EXAR Tagung 2012, Brugg (CH)

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In early October 2012, EXAR held its yearly conference in Brugg, Switzerland. EXAR is the European Association for experimental archaeology and has over 150 members. Their highlight is their annual conference and the proceedings, which usually appear 12 months later, which is very fast. In Switzerland, the proceedings of Schleswig 2011 were presented, and were almost 300 pages thick.

Of the 90 participants at this year's conference, about 80 were either from Germany or Switzerland. Most of the 20 presentations were in German, four were in French, and

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everything was simultaneously translated between French and German.

The director of the host museum, Thomas Pauli (CH) of the Museum Aargau kicked off with a presentation of 100 years of excavations in Brugg, a location of a Roman legion's camp. Nowadays, the Legionary Path shows the Roman past: part of it is original, while part has been (re)constructed by fellow presenter Christian Maise (DE). We later got to see most of this, and some of the participants even spent the night in the Roman soldier barracks.

Marianne Senn (CH) discussed iron smelting experiments in Switzerland, executed by two different groups, but both using the same early medieval site at Boécourt les Boulies. There was some discussion about the so called 'massenbilanz', i.e. the 'balance of mass': simply said, the mass input of a chemical process must equal the mass output, albeit of another composition.

Bente Phillipsen (DE) works in Århus, Denmark and had reported a year earlier on the 'fresh water reservoir effect' implying that radiocarbon samples originating from freshwater systems sometimes seem much older than they actually are. These samples can be fish, pots in which fish was cooked or even bones of people who ate a lot of freshwater fish. This year, Mrs Phillipsen discussed her progress, which is very promising!

Claudia Merthen (DE) from Nürnberg discussed textile terminology in experimentation and education. She also made a comparison between German and English phrasing. It would be interesting to find out who else abroad has done similar things with defining a terminology for archaeological textile experiments.

Sylvia Crumbach (DE) has a long record in living history, among others at the archaeological open-air museum in Oerlinghausen. She described the challenges in textile (re)construction and how (re)construction images are used to transfer scientific paradigms.

Karine Meylan (CH) presented her association and focused on the work of one of their members, the potter Pierre-Alain Capt. The group and Mr Capt both concentrate on the Celtic and Gallo-Roman period in Switzerland. Capt started off learning more about the archaeological material over a decade ago, and with his pottery background specialised in the material of this early period, both for demonstration purposes, for replication and experimentation. He publishes frequently in his own blog at: http://arscretariae-archeoceramique.blogspot.ch.

Alain Besse (CH) from the Atelier Ciel et Terre (http://monnaiesanciennes.blogspot.ch) is working with coin production, and took us back to the Celtic coin die found at the Oppidum Mount Vully (CH). At the Celtic Festival of Vully in 2007, Besse demonstrated a (re)construction of the die and held a coinage workshop for all ages to strike their own coins. He showed us honestly the errors in reproduction that he identified and how they were solved over the years, improving on materials, tools and techniques. This presentation showed how simple festival work can bring the long-time experience needed to improve an existing (re)construction.

Guillaume Reich (FR) from both Neuchâtel and Strassbourg University took a good look at La Tène weapons. Were they damaged in acts of war or are the traces resulting from religious treatment? Probably we are looking at a combination, but can we identify some this way, others that way? His research, which involves forensic methods, is sponsored by the Ministry of Defence in France. Unfortunately he has not come across similar research elsewhere yet. Possibly the iron weapons in Denmark (Nydam, Illerup) have been investigated in a similar manner.

Thiery Luginbühl (CH) of the Lausanne University is involved in a group on Iron Age warfare. The association Cladio (http://www.unil.ch/iasa/page29116.html) specialises in the first and second century AD. Dr Luginbühl explained how, from very modest beginnings, they now have a semi-professional group with a military structure that is able to put on a good show. The work is very impressive and useful and focuses on experience and replication, as well as teaching the public a bit about Iron Age warfare.

The second day started off far away, in what used to be called Irian Jaya, since the year 2000, Papua in Indonesia. Ralf Laschimke (DE) has led seven expeditions into the central highlands, where he was able to observe people using stone adzes for making items such as large wooden boards before the final transition to steel tools. In his presentation, Laschimke particularly focussed on the issue of left and right-handedness.

Rengert Elburg (DE) then discussed the second series of the 'Ergersheim' experiments. Last year he had presented the start of this program, which consists of a large interdisciplinary team that includes archaeotechnicians and archaeologists experimented with early Neolithic Bandceramic woodworking. On Youtube, several short films are available:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3mA0v-smtY
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXUsItu74LU
Elburg clearly showed that this might be a bit of ‘boys playing with toys’ but it went much further than that and has a clear research plan.

Walter Fasnacht (CH) is a long standing experimental archaeologist form Switzerland, with a record of bronze casting and more on Cyprus. He was also a key person in ‘Pfahlbauland’ an open-air exhibition in Zürich in 1990. Fasnacht discussed using wood instead of charcoal in

metallurgical processes. It should not be taken for granted that people have always used charcoal; in many cases unprocessed wood can bring you the same result. In iron smelting for example, this means that in the top of the shaft the wood is turned into charcoal, and lower in the shaft, the process continues, using the charcoal in the iron smelting process. As long as the fuel contains carbon, it can be used, as with the use of peat in some experiments show. Fasnacht introduced the phrase 'Pseudoköhlerei', which would best be explained as a non-intentional carbonising of wood. It seems like the 'Tagung' is developing its own vocabulary with other words like Strohhüttendisaster and Paläobastelei and the expression "wer miβt, miβt Mist".

Uwe Sperling (EE) described Bronze Age casting in the Baltic States and more specifically, one-time use clay moulds for bronze rings. The paper focussed on statistics from the first attempts of experimental (re)production of the moulds and rings.

Leineweber &Lychatz (DE) gave an interesting presentation of what started as 'university meets institute of technology' and led to a total of 20 years of cooperation in 34 iron smelting experiments in Northern Germany. An interview we published with Dr Leineweber can be found online here. Of course, not all problems have been solved yet, and there is enough left for the younger generation.

Fabienne Meiers (DE) from www.grubenhaus.com in Freiburg discussed a very expensive experiment with purple dye. Imagine dyeing a pair of socks the original way, using the purple pigments of sea snails. They would cost € 3,500. The experiments involve a lot of tedious work with very smelly materials. Meiers' experiments were well structured and thought through, a real necessity with such expensive material. She also compared it to other dyeing methods that result in similar colours, but have their own disadvantages.

Sturm & Jansen (DE) presented with great flair the plans for the Campus Galli. This is a large scale project attempting to build an early medieval monastery and annexes like seen on the map of St Gallen from about 830 AD. The Campus Galli will be a living history museum. It is quite an undertaking, but if it were not for people thinking on a grander scale, we would all still be stuck in small scale activities. Sturm emphasised the importance of good staff before having a good scenery of buildings and artefacts. The site will open when the first buildings are under construction and the first staff is trained. More information at https://www.campus-galli.de.

Susanne Rühling(DE) from the RGZM in Mainz made us listen to (re)constructions of ancient and medieval organs. Greek archaeological material has been re-interpreted showing flaws in several (re)constructions of the past 100 years. The Mainz (re)constructions have been built in close cooperation with a traditional organ building company – a most useful cooperation.

Wolfgang Lobisser (AT) presented the only Austrian lecture, although there will probablybe many more in 2013 when the 'Tagung' will be in Linz. About five years ago, VIAS from Vienna designed and built an early medieval settlement in Unterrabnitz in the Eastern Alpine Region near Hungary. Lobisser explained how they thoroughly worked from archaeological information to present different examples of traditional building techniques. The archaeological open-air museum (http://fruehmittelalterdorf.at) has been open since 2008 and is experienced as an enrichment of the daily life in Unterrabnitz. With 10,000 – 14,000 visitors a year, it brings just this bit of extra 'Schwung' to the area.

Markus Binggeli (CH) is known from his metalworking with all possible periods in Swiss archaeology. This time, he presented a (re)construction of a ninth century silver cup from Pettstadt. His source of information on how to make such a thing was the 12th century book The Various Arts by Theophilus Presbyter. Binggeli followed every step but it became clear that in some cases, Theophilus gave too much detail, and in some other cases important details were missing. You cannot just read the book and understand the full process. The final result was a beautiful cup that took Binggeli over 100 hours to produce.

As icing on the cake, Marcus Cyron (DE) from Wikimedia was invited to discuss possibilities of presentation of experimental archaeology on Wikipedia. The German pages are one of the largest collections within Wikipedia, but 'we' are very much underrepresented. Wikipedia is easy to use, both for readers and authors and continually gains in importance. We must make a plan!

Conclusion

In general, the Tagung lived up to its expectations: a place for the more experienced to renew contacts and a place for beginners to get involved – there are no stupid questions! The range of subjects was very wide, some people discussed the realisation of their childhood dreams, others were looking for validation from a scientific perspective, and it all happened in Brugg. More than previously, we witnessed experimental research originating in living history, an interesting development. See you next year in Linz? Check www.exar.org for details when they come online.

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