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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Interview: “You’re not Replacing the Museum, you’re Advertising it” with Linda Hurcombe

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Linda Hurcombe, senior lecturer at the University of Exeter, visited the Hunebedmuseum in Borger (NL) as part of a staff exchange for the OpenArch project. She talked about how to twin new tech-nologies, such as 3D-printing, within archaeology and museums.

You’re interest in archaeology started way before you went to study, at a young age. How come?

> I like to understand how the ideas that you generate as a researcher go down with the public. To follow that process through, not just as academic writing, but to make some practical experiments, show what something could have been in the past. To engage with people in that process.

I always had an interest in objects. Because we lived in the outskirts of Bristol, when we dug into our garden, for potting plants for example, we found little fragments of clay pipes and pottery and such. I collected them. I also realised that I wanted to use my head as well as my hands. I wanted to do scientific things but had an interest in art. Archaeology allows you to do a range of things; it's a little bit art, a bit of science and it's a little bit practice.

The OpenArch project started in 2011 and ends in December 2015. What is the role of the University of Exeter?

We're the only university in this project. Together with our partner Kierikki, we are particularly responsible for the work package known as 'the dialogue with science'. That's a good subject for us to tackle. That dialogue is something we engage with every day, I've used a lot of experimental work in my research, and also I've seen how well it works with students and as a communication tool.

Each partner has a special responsibility. It fits us, and I think we can make a valuable contribution to it.
It's my first time in Borger; I wanted to come see it because I heard a lot about the Hunebedmuseum. We also focused on the use of new technologies in the presentation of experimental research to the public. For example, my research project focused on touch and bringing touch into museum experiences. In a part of that we looked at modern technologies such as 3D-printing, that proved to be tremendously successful with the public.... I wanted to come here, bring the objects and have a dialogue with the people here. They're interested in new technologies and that why this is an excellent staff exchange.

Is 3D printing all about touch?

We've been using a range of different approaches for different audiences. We used crafted replicas, which give a sense of object in live, with all its strength and colour. 3D-printing does something slightly different; it gives you as near as it can an exact copy of an ancient subject as it currently exists. You can have a direct copy, you can hold the ancient object without damaging it. That works because you can try to look at it in more detail.

What is the real significance of 3D printing for archaeological museums?

It has very many applications. For a start, you don't have to worry about breaking the ancient object. The object suggests other possibilities. We have some objects with fine details on the surface: place it were children can put some powder on the surface and brush it a cross to reveal the design. It's their moment of discovery, in their hands. It's more enjoyable and memorable in that way for them.
We had a 3D scan of a stone mold for making metal axes in the past. We lent it out to a class of ten years old students, who were studying the Bronze Age…. They made replica axes, painted them and really engaged with the past. They put blood on the edges, because of course if you have an axe what are you going to use it for. So if they see something in a museum, they will know what the purpose of the object was. They know the process of bronze casting.

It's not just a museum thing?

We have museum curators in Scotland—who work in very small museums—they used a museum in a bag and took it to classroom. The kids loved it and told their parents. So it's also a way of advertising the past, the treasures of museums. Which is an interesting idea, I think.
It would be fun to print a Trechterbeker and see if it's good for drinking. So you're not replacing museums, you're advertising them.

What do you think about the Hunebedmuseum?

It's got many different aspects to it. I like the outside hunebed [dolmen], and you have the outside experimental buildings and areas as well as such fantastic resources inside the museum. The relationship between the archaeology that's presented inside and the archaeology presented outside is beautifully intertwined. The presented pottery is stunning. The museum gives you the flesh on the bones, a dolmen is only a shell of course.

In which direction lies the future of this museum?

I think the way it is working with old and new technologies. And it's in giving context to some of the sides, by building outdoor buildings, which will provide venues for performing some craft skills for the past. These are being intertwined with new technologies and with a great deal of thinking about how to present these new technologies. In order to be current, museums have to experiment with modern technologies. Audiences do change, and I think we are in the middle of a big shift in how people react to their phones and such. It has to see the advantages of new technologies.

In 2015, the OpenArch project is ending. Will the cooperation between the partners end too?

> No, you forged alliances and friendships. You understand possibilities and difficulties of the other partners. It helps you in your own research and future plans and projects; this is a springboard rather than an end.

What do you seek in the cooperation for the University of Exeter?

> I like to understand how the ideas that you generate as a researcher go down with the public. To follow that process through, not just as academic writing, but to make some practical experiments, show what something could have been in the past. To engage with people in that process. Go down new paths in a public arena. To show them how much fun it is.

You had that dialogue as a child. With your surroundings. With the objects. So it's important for you, I guess?

> I still have a fascination with objects. I still believe we can learn a lot form them. And I came to understand that in the past people were very connected with their surroundings. We can learn from that connection, for example in regards to sustainability issues now a day.

About the OpenArch project

OpenArch is a five year Culture project with 11 partners, based on EXARC's key strengths - its supportive community and international perspective. It builds a permanent partnership of archaeological open-air museums, raising standards among participants and improving the visitor experience across Europe.

About Linda Hurcombe

Linda Hurcombe has broad interests in artifacts and material culture studies. She is especially interested in ethnographies of craft traditions, the sensory worlds of prehistoric societies and the manner in which archaeologists and anthropologists approach artifact studies. She has also worked on gender and material culture, and explored function as a concept as well as conducting functional analysis of stone tools via wear traces. Her research is characterized by the extensive use of experimental archaeology and ethnographies, providing a detailed practical understanding of how materials can be transformed into material culture. Fieldwork projects have been undertaken in Europe and Pakistan and in recent years she has worked with a variety of craftspeople. She has just published a book with Routledge on *Perishable Material Culture in Prehistory: investigating the missing majority*. Her work on two related interdisciplinary projects on Touch experiences in museums using a variety of media has just led to a joint paper for the international Human Computer Interaction conference which has received acclaim as the 'best paper' for the whole conference of circa 1500 papers.

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