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Reviewed Article:

Making, Multi-Vocality and Experimental Archaeology: The Pallasboy Project

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This paper outlines The Pallasboy Project, which set out to craft a replica of the eponymous Irish Iron Age wooden vessel. We consider the process and progress of the project, as it developed in a number of slightly unusual directions. The paper includes a description of the experimental work, alongside personal reflections and comments by the people who became involved in the project as it progressed. The work was documented visually through photography, video and artistic responses and selections from this material are included. Unconventional (in experimental archaeological terms) 'interactions' are outlined, including a performance by musicians who 'played' the replica vessel. This paper is also intended as a guide to the project blog, which hosts the written pieces and other content linked to below. The project subsequently moved onto consider other wooden archaeological artefacts, also discussed on the blog, but in this paper we focus on the Pallasboy Vessel itself.

The ethos embodied by the approach can be conceived as one of 'multi-vocal understandings', a concept inspired by the process known as 'Deep Mapping'. Springett (2015, p.628) has described this as an approach through which: "There is no privileging or authorizing knowledge of one source of information over another and all agents have equal resonance ... at least philosophically." In other words, the practical, experimental archaeological crafting is just one of the various different strands and 'responses' to 'understanding' the Pallasboy vessel as an Iron Age artefact, but also the replica as very much a contemporary object. We discuss how concepts of 'multivocality' may be of broader value for experimental archaeology.

> "Although the project set out to recreate a particular

Background

Wooden artefacts rarely survive in terrestrial archaeological sites, but can be preserved in wetlands due to the anoxic conditions found in these environments (e.g. Coles and Coles,

artefact, it became clear during the course of the work, that generating 'the right' answer to questions concerning the original vessel's function were not only impossible, but were in fact really only starting points that led to a variety of different opinions, discussions and events.

1986; Raftery, 1996). Such discoveries are made in Ireland on a fairly regular basis due to the large scale drainage and extraction of peat from the extensive lowland peatlands of the Irish midlands, with all manner of wooden artefacts ranging from small everyday utensils and vessels, to large composite objects such as wheels, carts and wooden structures such as trackways dating from the prehistoric through to more recent periods (e.g. Mc Dermott *et al.*, 2009)..

The Pallasboy vessel (PB) was found during an archaeological survey of the industrially extracted (See Figure 1) peatland of Toar Bog, County Westmeath, Ireland and was subsequently excavated (Murray, 2001). The vessel measured 1.29 m high, 0.57m wide and 0.49m deep, and was carved out of a single piece of alder wood, from a tree over 54 years old. Analysis of the toolmarks indicated at least five different tools were used in its carving (including axes, a chisel and a gouge). The vessel cracked during crafting and was repaired using tiny wooden wedges. At a later stage in its 'life', it was further damaged on one side and repaired using wooden panels stitched on using wooden ties. Scorch marks around the edge and base indicated it had been accidentally or deliberately exposed to an open fire. A few small stone chips found in the base might relate to the use of 'hot stone technology' for heating water in the vessel. The artefact was taken into the peatland, using hazel withies and pinned down in a shallow bog pool using hazel wood stakes, sometime between 197 BCE and 68 CE (cal), during the Iron Age. It has been suggested this was a votive 'offering' as there are parallels between the manner of its deposition and later prehistoric 'bog bodies' (Van de Noort and O'Sullivan, 2006; see also below).

The prehistoric people who created such prehistoric wooden items are generally regarded as having been highly skilled woodworkers (Moore *et al.*, 2003; McDermott *et al.*, 2009), but it is unclear what this amounts to in terms of modern technical woodworking schemes. Previous experimental studies included investigation of techniques required to fell trees using stone and metal tools (Ennos and Ventura-Oliveira, 2017; Coles, 1973), and technical recording tool marks on wooden artefacts (Sands, 1997). The project set out to investigate the creative process behind the PB and initially comprised archaeologists (Gearey, Moore), a master craftsman (Griffiths), with experience in reconstructing historical wooden artefacts, artist and photographer (Mac Domhnaill) documented the entire project from start to finish, employing both photographic and video recording. Additional 3D laser scanning (Power) used an Artec Eva handheld laser scanner. The following sections outline the various stages of the work with observations drawn from the blog and other reflections that arose as the project progressed.

Stage 1: Viewing and Sourcing Timber

The first stage was a viewing of the conserved PB, at the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin (See Figure 2), to allow a detailed recording of the toolmarks 'up close' with the guidance of Conor McDermott (UCD) who was part of the Irish Archaeological Wetland Unit team that excavated the artefact (Murray, 2001). The vessel had never been on public display, but kept in storage for nearly a decade and a half. Mark Griffiths made the following observations:

> *"The craftsmanship of the maker was in no doubt; the Pallasboy vessel was both technically advanced and quite beautiful. I was struck by the detail of carving employed to finish the graceful curves of the vessel's sides. Small chips of approximately 10cm ran in a horizontal pattern from top to bottom. To my mind this detail was a design choice over the more random pattern, which would be seen when carving these shapes."*

The next challenge was to source timber for the replica; since black alder (Alnus glutinosa L.) is not commercially valuable, one of the first problems that we faced was sourcing timber of size as close to the original as possible. This early problem led to reflections on the original 'Pallasboy alder' as it became known. Brian Mac Domhnaill noted:

> *"The rarity issue made me wonder about the original Pallasboy vessel and the tree from which it was crafted. Was this tree felled with that single purpose in mind? Did it fall down due to natural causes? Was it valued due to its rarity as well as its species-specific qualities?*

The tree grows in wet soil conditions and is often found around the edges of bogs, alongside rivers and lakes (Stuijts, 2005, p.139). The Irish name for Alder is *fearnóg* and the past presence of this tree is attested by place names such as Ferns, Co. Wexford or Glenfarne, Co. Leitrim, which translate respectively as 'Place of alders' and 'Valley of alders,' (Flanagan and Flanagan, 2002, p.87). In early Irish law, the tree was designated as '*Aithig Fedo*' or a 'commoner of the wood' meaning it was of lesser economic value than other species such as oak or ash (Kelly, 1997, p.380). Although alder may reach 80-100 years of age it generally does not grow to very great height or size (maximum diameter of 1 m).

Whilst alder is fairly common in Ireland, older trees in managed woodlands at least tend to become rotten around the base and prone to collapse, and therefore are felled long before they reach this age. The analyses of the wood had noted that the rings of the tree were relatively wide (suggesting a growth rate of 0.7cm/year) indicating it had grown rapidly in open conditions. This may be regarded as unusual as alder woodland tends to form quite a dense, crowded canopy in which individual trees must compete for space and light. Sourcing a tree of the exact size in a modern woodland proved impossible, but eventually a specimen close to the required dimensions was found, just under 60cm diameter in the appropriately named 'Bog Wood' in County Wicklow.

The tree was felled and delivered to Meitheal Mara community boatyard in Cork City, that had agreed to host the crafting. It had been decided that the project would use replica tools wherever possible, which were forged specially for the work by UK blacksmith Terry Tyhurst, based on archaeological examples of Iron Age implements. Over the course of crafting, the work would switch between these replica tools and modern equivalents.

Stage 2: Crafting and Display

There were two logs to choose from; the final choice was left to Mark Griffiths who observed:

> *"The one taken from the trees mid-section was free from knots and defects, so with its predictable grain pattern, it would be relatively easy to work. However it would come up smaller in width and height when compared to the original. The second log was cut close to the root end; this would make it more of a challenge to carve, as the grain would battle to follow its own random path. I had seen this same wild grain pattern on the Pallasboy in Dublin, leaving me to suspect that it too came from timber taken close to the base of the tree. The trunk's proportions were also close to the original vessels, only shy a couple of inches either way. This then had to be the timber for our project."*

The process began with the scoring of a deep groove along the guideline with an axe; small hardwood wedges were driven in with a large mallet working from treetop to root. As the split widened, larger wedges replaced the smaller ones, until the timber yielded and a large slab of the alder split away, an axe and adze were then used to create a flat surface that would be the upper surface of the vessel. This stage of the crafting was relatively rapid and in under an hour a level face had been hewn, and the plan of the vessel sketched out. The next stage was to prove a much longer and physically demanding task: roughing out of the inside using an adze. The soft wet wood was initially easy to work, although the replica adze made for slow working, mainly because the blade became regularly detached from its haft. We learnt some useful lessons from the use of the replica tools that allow us to speculate on minimum times for the original carving of the vessel (see below).

The hollowing out of the vessel proved to be physically punishing: those of us who assisted at this stage soon discovered how woodcrafting could inscribe itself on the physical body, blistered palms and aching wrist joints testimony to this process. In this way we also established it was possible to have two people working simultaneously (including one essentially 'unskilled' woodworker for this straightforward process), which certainly speeded things up with this task near completion by the end of the third day. This hollowing out also produced a huge number of woodchips (See Figure 3) and the decision was taken to leave these to accumulate over the course of the work. Days four and five were spent forming the vessels underside and distinctive curved, bow shaped ends (See Figure 4), for which Mark used a replica Iron Age chisel and oak wood mallet with the following observation:

> *"The replica chisel with its forged Iron handle is uncomfortable and heavy to use. Based on period tools it has been ground with a bevel on both faces, and works surprisingly well when struck with the mallet. However when used for making small, fine cuts, with just the pressure of a hand, it proves difficult to find an optimum cutting angle. Another issue with the Iron Age chisel is in the simplicity of the forging process. Unlike a correctly tempered steel tool the iron replica will not hold a keen edge, leading it to produce an unsatisfactory dull finish on the timber."*

The decision was also taken to leave the interior unfinished as there would be a few weeks break in the crafting and it was felt that leaving a greater volume of wood in place would prevent too much structural movement and hence cracking and splitting (something that had clearly happened during the crafting of the original, as evidenced by the 'invisible' repairs made to the original using tiny wedges). As it was, when work began again, there had indeed been several changes despite the vessel being stored wrapped in damp hessian. As Mark recorded:

> *"Splits, some fine, some alarmingly large, were radiating out from the heartwood at each end of the vessel. In one regard, I was glad to see our Pallasboy replica displaying the same problems with drying that confronted our fellow pre-history maker. Moisture held within green timber starts to release the moment the tree is felled. The art of producing a workable stable timber is in managing this changing moisture content..."*

The vessel had dried out sufficiently to alter the way that the wood carved. Later, Mark mused that some of his later tool marks looked very similar to those on the original: had it also been worked in stages? This was something that came back into discussion when we reflected on how the project had brought new perspectives on interpretations of the original Pallasboy. It was decided to limit the removal of further material from the inside of the vessel, to prevent or at least slow down excessive splitting and warping bringing the entire project to an abrupt and tragic end.

Instead, crafting concentrated on shaping and tidying up the sides, interior and rim. One of the last tasks was to explore how to best replicate the fine linear pattern of shallow 'chip carving' (c. 10mm wide) marks that graced the original vessel. It had been variously observed that these clearly decorative marks were reminiscent of fur, fish scales, feathers, wool or even the hammer patterns typical of certain metalwork. Mark established that a large (55mm) gouge produced a cut closest to the original pattern (See Figure 5), using hand pressure alone rather than with the assistance of a mallet. Whilst Meitheal Mara is a working boat yard and not intended as an open public space, we had many visits from interested parties during the crafting. Brian Mac Domhnaill was intrigued to note that:

> *"It was a pleasure to watch Mark crafting our replica vessel. In fact everyone said so, even if they could only stay for a few minutes. Visitors often remarked that they could*

watch him all day. It certainly got me thinking about the practical and evolutionary benefits of finding it enjoyable to watch the process of making. Are we hardwired to enjoy watching such activities so that we can learn and survive?"

One of the last tasks was the replication of the tiny wooden wedges similar to those observed on the original and which Mark inserted with the hope that these would stop the fractures which had opened across the uppermost ends of the vessel from shearing further. Finally the holes though the handles were bored out. The entire process has taken around 9 days.

Stage 3: Display

Our replica of the Pallasboy Vessel (2016) was delivered to Cork Public Museum, where it went on display (See Figure 6). We wanted to encourage people to touch the vessel rather than just view it from a distance, as is often the way with museum exhibits. Hence the display panel read: "Please DO touch (but watch out for splinters!)" and attempted to engage the imagination of the visitor by actively seeking views and opinions through social media.

A number of 'conversations' included in blog posts, opened up themes extending away from experimental archaeology, through water transport in the Iron Age, to folklore, embodiment and object agency. These had not been planned in advance and generally arose as a result of people's direct encounters with the replica itself or remotely via social media The agency of material extends beyond the haptic and visual to the sonic: another exploration arose from the distinctive sounds of woodworking: the acoustics of different tools, the changes in the resonance of the wood as the vessel took shape. This inspired a performance by experimental percussionists Marco Gargioni, Katie O'Looney and Angelika Hoger who 'played' (See Figure 7) the re-crafted vessel drawing an audience to the event held in Cork Public Museum.

Children were asked to think about the recrafted and original vessel and encouraged to imagine its use in the past, expressed through their own artistic endeavours. Other events included a 'test' of the function of the original artefact as a watergoing craft. Some people suggested it may have been a crib for a baby, an interpretation that was duly 'tested' using a willing volunteer of appropriate age (See Figure 8).

Scanning and digital dissemination

The replica vessel was laser scanned and 3-D models uploaded to the 3D platform Sketchfab. The digital content utilised annotations to communicate and describe the vessel and the process of crafting. Social media played an important role for dissemination and as discussed above, remote interactions and discussions. Facebook was the primary social media platform, accommodating the posting of extended content with various multimedia formats (i.e Sketchfab models). Using social media platforms in this way permitted a user-led experience

of the content and allowed the project to be investigated cyclically, with every piece of content linking back in on itself from each explored pathway. This process was informed by the Deep Maps: West Cork Coastal Cultures project.

Discussion

Previous interpretation of the Pallasboy Vessel stressed the fact that time and care had gone into the carving of the vessel, with the use of the 'invisible wedges' and the decorative marks on the outside suggestive of a fine object that was intended for display. Although of course there is no way of knowing how long an average 'working day' was for a woodworker during the Iron Age, or how fast such work might have progressed, the 9 days (around 80 person hours in total) spent crafting gave us perhaps a minimum idea of how long the original vessel might have taken to create. We can state that considerable care and skill were necessary. Professor Aidan O'Sullivan (University College Dublin) speculated on the project blog that the evidence suggested:

> *"During the early years (months?) of the life of the Pallasboy vessel, we might propose that it was probably used for some high-status activity, perhaps bathing, feasting or the display and consumption of fine foods, as befitted such a beautiful and imposing thing. This is suggested by the fact that the toolmarks on its outer surface were pristine and unblurred, suggesting it was not moved around much or roughly handled with ropes or and ? generally handled."*

The subsequent split to the side of the vessel, and the repair using a wooden panel, along with the evidence for scorching lead Prof. O'Sullivan to conclude that the meaning or significance of the Pallasboy changed again and perhaps it was then used in a more prosaic manner, maybe for salting, curing, tanning or dyeing. Finally, for reasons that might include the death of a person with whom it was most closely associated, or the end of the special event for which it was crafted, the vessel was carried to Toar Bog and staked down in a pool. Given the relatively short time it took for cracks to develop, a process that continued over the weeks that the vessel was on display in Cork Museum, then the original 'life' of this unusual object must have been measured in months rather than years. We are not sure whether the use of the vessel to store liquids might have slowed down the opening of further cracks. Dr Niall Gregory also speculated on the blog that the Pallasboy Vessel might have been a form of dugout canoe, to be towed behind a larger vessel or even by a person wading through shallow waters. Another rather darker suggestion was that it looked somewhat like a small coffin…

One feature that struck some observers, was the resemblance of the vessel to the head of a ram (See Figure 9). Was this relevant in terms of the use or significance of the original vessel, or just a case of pareidolia? Finally, more prosaically, it was suggested that its discovery in Toar Bog had nothing to do with 'ritual' burial. Given the clear problems of splitting and

warping of the green wood with both the original and the replica, had the vessel been removed to this location for temporary storage, prior to a final phase of repair and re-working, only to be forgotten or lost?

The Pallasboy Project commenced with a set of general questions and issues; by the time the replica was installed in the museum, we found the work had shed light on some of these questions but had generated some unexpected new perspectives on the process of experimental investigation itself. The experimental archaeological crafting of a replica artefact would generally focus on the practicalities of the process of making; detailing time taken, specific tools used, technical issues of crafting and exploration of the functional aspects of the replica. These data, which might be recorded in a variety of quantitative and qualitative formats, would then be regarded alongside the finished or completed item, as the central output or product of experimentation.

However, as outlined above, whilst this was important, the interactions and responses of different people and communities became a central focus. Involvement of different communities of practice included the woodworkers based in Meitheal Mara, other archaeologists, a cultural geographer, artists, photographers, students, and members of the general public. These arose through both planned and unplanned visits during the crafting, informal discussions, online engagements and an open day held at Cork Public Museum.

Although the project set out to recreate a particular artefact, it became clear during the course of the work, that generating 'the right' answer to questions concerning the original vessel's function were not only impossible, but were in fact really only starting points that led to a variety of different opinions, discussions and events. In contrast to debates within experimental archaeology that problematise the distinction between the approaches and opinions of professionals and amateurs, sustaining a top down or hierarchical structure, there was no settled conclusion or right/wrong answer, perspective or response. The re-crafting acted as a starting point, or 'node' for engagements and meditations on aspects and intersections of the past/present.

As outlined above, this may be conceived as 'flattening out' ways of knowing (Springett, 2015), or placing various modes of enquiry onto an equal plane, recognising interconnections rather than separations (see also Tringham, 2018). Another theoretical touchstone might be Shanks (2001) 'exploded interpretation', beginning with one object rather than a methodology, and tracing subsequent connections. In his study of Greek perfume jars, this took enquiry from pottery production and manufacture, to techniques of painting, pictures of animals, soldiers and flowers, to the use of perfume in temples and graves. In the Pallasboy Project, a similar process of 'tracing' connections took us from the ecology of alder woodland, dendrology, the technical and mechanical properties of timber, palaeoenvironmental records, the practice of community woodworking at Meitheal Mara, folkloric associations of alder, Iron Age

technologies, the tactile and working properties of wood, acoustics, artistic practices, through to the responses of different individuals and groups, including the 'general public' and children. We discovered that what emerges, was an extended web of connections, an 'object biography' but one extended across time, space and people.

Recently, Dolfini and Collins (2018, p.37) have attempted to reconcile what they identify as the distinction between 'research' and 'non research contexts' within experimental archaeology. The latter is defined as including: teaching, public engagement, the enhancement of exhibitions and museum displays and arts performances. This paper further casts 'non-research' as: "...methods and procedures which are dramatically at variance with those of science.", but do not provide a formal definition of 'science' or the 'scientific process'. This seemed to pre-suppose the separation of 'research' (carried out by academics) from 'non-research' (carried out by anyone who is not an academic). Dolfini and Collins (2018) go on to propose that experiment and experience can be reconciled through regarding each as opposite ends of a broad spectrum of enquiry.

Hurcombe and Cunningham (2016) have also discussed ways of incorporating 'experience' into experimental research projects. Despite such efforts to address the issue of experience versus experimentation, experimental archaeological approaches are often underpinned by an implicit, if not explicit, epistemological framework that casts the 'scientific method' as the most robust way to create knowledge concerning the past. Such a framing reinforces (whether intentionally or not) or not, a division between the value of the work of the scientific 'expert' and that of the 'untrained amateur' or member of the public.

It is obviously important to avoid collapsing into unanchored subjectivity, but there is a clear split between the 'communication' of knowledge from the 'acquisition' of that knowledge; and it has been observed that the former is often undervalued compared to the latter (Richardson and Lindgren, 2017, p.146). Such theoretical concerns have been little discussed within experimental archaeology, although there are exceptions such as the volume of papers edited by Appel and Knuttson (2006).

Also relevant is the digital reach and framing, through the project blog and Facebook page, which permitted wider connections and inclusion. However, as Richardson and Lindgren (2017) and Perry and Beale (2015) have recently observed, social media and the internet do not provide unproblematic communication or interactions with different groups or communities of practice. In terms of attempts to flatten or democratise the acquisition and communication of knowledge, further consideration of this aspect of future experimental archaeological work is also important.

Conclusions

Schofield (2017, p.289) has recently suggested that rather than taking an interest in the past for its own sake, we should regard it as: "...only useful in what it contributes to the present and the future". Experimental archaeology lends itself to this active engagement, but not only because archaeology by experiment allows us to better understand specific aspects of the material past and hence 'prove' or 'disprove' different interpretations or hypotheses.

We have argued that 'value' and 'purpose' in experimental archaeology can extend beyond hypothesis driven science (e.g. Outram, 2008), with the process and form of enquiry just as important as the acquisition of data. In the words of Springett (2015, p.625) this can be regarded as: "...a method of production in which people can begin to see things in a relational way through underscoring the fundamental connectivity of different knowledge orders..." In other words, all opinions and responses are situated on an equal plane, a framework through which the 'binary' of 'scientific' versus 'non-scientific' experimentation ceases to be a concern.

Closing the loop between the production and dissemination of archaeological knowledge through this field is both desirable and achievable. We are not arguing that the Pallasboy Project is entirely unique; other experimental archaeology projects already include many of the approaches outlined above. Nor are we implying that 'anything goes' in terms of research or our understanding of the past. Experimental archaeology has considerable power as a transformative practice, to involve and engage people within the process of knowledge production and exchange, rather than sustaining a producer/consumer approach and casting a hierarchy of expert versus non-expert, valid versus invalid interpretations.

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Link(s)
Pallasboy Blog
Pallasboy Facebook Page
Sketchfab models

Keywords wood
(re)construction
woodworking
container / vessel

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Gallery Image

FIG 1. THE ORIGINAL PALLASBOY VESSEL AT THE TIME OF ITS DISCOVERY IN TOAR BOG, COUNTY WESTMEATH IN 2000. IMAGE BY THE IRISH ARCHAEOLOGICAL WETLAND UNIT, UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

FIG 2. MARK GRIFFITHS, CAITRÍONA MOORE AND CONOR MCDERMOTT VIEWING THE CONSERVED PORTION OF THE ORIGINAL PALLASBOY VESSEL AT THE NMI STORAGE FACILITY. PHOTO BY BRIAN MAC DOMHNAILL

FIG 3. THE VESSEL SURROUNDED BY WOODCHIPS FROM CRAFTING. PHOTO BY BRIAN MAC DOMHNAILL

FIG 4. FORMING THE VESSELS UNDERSIDE AND DISTINCTIVE CURVED, BOW SHAPED ENDS ON DAY 3. PHOTO BY BRIAN MAC DOMHNAILL

FIG 5. USING A LARGE (55MM) GOUGE TO REPLICATE THE PATTERN ON THE EXTERIOR OF THE ORIGINAL VESSEL. PHOTO BY MUIREANN NI CHEALLACHAIN

FIG 6. THE REPLICA PALLASBOY VESSEL ON DISPLAY AT CORK PUBLIC MUSEUM. PHOTO BY BRIAN MAC DOMHNAILL

FIG 7. EXPERIMENTAL PERCUSSIONISTS MARCO GARGIONI, KATIE O' LOONEY AND ANGELIKA HOGER 'PLAYING' THE REPLICA PALLASBOY VESSEL. PHOTO BY BRIAN MAC DOMHNAILL

FIG 8. THE RE-CRAFTED PALLASBOY VESSEL AS A ‘CRIB’, WITH FERDIA DE BARRA SWEENEY. PHOTO BY BRIAN MAC DOMHNAILL

FIG 9. ONE OF THE DISTINCTIVE HANDLES OF THE ORIGINAL VESSEL; REMINISCENT OF THE HEAD OF A RAM. IMAGE BY THE IRISH ARCHAEOLOGICAL WETLAND UNIT, UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN