Conference Review: Fields of Dreams. An overview of the EAC10 conference, Leiden, 20th to 22nd April 2017


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In recent years, experimental archaeology has increased in popularity due, in no small part, to pioneering universities. The examination and analysis of the past through reconstruction of lifestyle, chaîne opératoire of manufacture and the efficacy of produced materials is not new. Archaeological experiential sites, such as Britain’s Butser Farm, have added greatly to understanding and reconstructing the past. As such, experimental archaeology has developed into a staunchly academic discipline, invaluable for gaining knowledge of the past, and an unsurpassed means to engage with the public.

The conference started with the three reconstructions of the Gislinge boat, by Dr Sørensen and Dael, with each event drawing more interest. This was achieved by involvement of people from all over the world, from locals in education and community groups to various social mediums, all disseminating differing layers of information from ‘lifestyle’ images on Instagram to a website created for the more committed enthusiast, as much as the academic. This talk was followed by Leiden University’s Professor van Gijn and her team who were instrumental in the Vlaardingen prehistoric house-building project and Eindhoven Museum.

This theme of experimental archaeology as a means of engagement was part of University College Dublin’s (UCD) effusive presentation on the reconstruction of early medieval roundhouses in Ireland, with Professor O’Sullivan and Dr O’Neill fully engaging the conference delegates. The experimental unit of UCD archaeology has a highly active social media profile, and could be said to have built a community around that.

The dissemination of knowledge via social media has proved invaluable in the rise of the public perception of experimental archaeology, with Dr Postma utilising YouTube videos to demonstrate the reconstruction of a medieval turf-walled byre with the University of Groeningen.

Dr Tomsons of the Latvian National History Museum examined the working technologies used to produce metal artefacts in the eastern Baltic region. The region appears to have a much higher density of moulds and crucibles than would correlate with the number of metal objects found in the area, and Tomson has been exploring the possible reasons for this. His presentation issued in a series of metal-themed speakers, with Professor Thornton of Buffalo State University displaying next his discoveries on how to make soft iron tools much harder so they could be used to work on other metals. Godino and Bartoni of University of Siena and ARES experimental unit offered insight into the production of refined...
Day two started with a passionate tour de force of experimental archaeology by Professor Messner from the State University of New York at Potsdam. He reinforced how experimental archaeology can potentially engage all sciences, creating a platform for multi-discipline projects. The theme of experimental archaeology engaging the wider educational community continued with Professor Comendador and Lackinger from Granada and Figuerido of Lisbon, and Professor Schindler of Washington College.

The next few papers looked at how people deal with changing and turbulent times in their lives and landscapes with Professor Ollich and team, of l’Esquerda, Spain, examining the reconstruction methods of a Carolingian wooden watch-tower, while Schepers of Groeningen and team continued with a lively presentation by Dr Tapavički-Ilić on the cremation practices of Roman Viminacium.

Reconstruction was the name of the game for the next few papers, with Rogier and Dr Napierala presenting the workings of a pottery workshop in Campus Galli open-air museum, Germany, while Clerbaut’s team from Ghent recreated Roman heating tiles. Zagreb’s Kudelić asked if we can ever really accurately reconstruct prehistoric pottery exactly as it would have been. Dr Hopkins presented her results of experiments in dyes used in Pompeii, while the penultimate speakers from the Tel Aviv University brought the themes back to engagement, collaboration and involvement. The final thoughts of the conference came from Professor Hurcombe of University of Exeter. Her summary reinforced what the enthusiastic audience already knew – that experimental archaeology is about asking questions, and having the passion and dedication to try and answer them.

The thing which was most noticeable was the sheer energy and passion of all participants and their willingness to share ideas and discuss their work. It bubbled with new ideas, new collaborations, energy and good humour.