

How does Scandinavian experimental archaeology look from the outside?

Is there any reason to publish in English?

Petersson's and Narmo's volume *Experimental Archaeology. Between enlightenment and experience* is a useful introduction to experimental archaeology in Scandinavia for an international readership. However, its most important value lies in its engagement with theory.

Review

Petersson, Bodil and Narmo, Lars-Erik (eds) 2011
Experimental Archaeology. Between enlightenment and experience.

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The background

The concrete background to the birth of this volume was a workshop held in the North Norwegian Lofoten (2008), which was followed by two other meetings in the universities of Lund and Copenhagen (2009). The fact alone that a whole volume is dedicated to a theme more often practiced than written about raises interest. One would imagine that the results summarised in 12 chapters written on Scandinavian experimental archaeology, by Scandinavian experts, would target the same North European readership. At a closer look it becomes clear, however, that the publication in fact exceeds the aim of merely presenting new expertise and/or new sites. Instead, with the help of the case studies, the volume offers a good summary on the state of affairs within the history of experimental archaeology.

Archaeologists who do not come from Northern Europe often have only some general information about experiments in Scandinavia. To begin with, the name of Thor Heyerdahl – with his experiments on a probability field – comes up, then famous village museums, like Frilandsmuseet in Copenhagen. Given

this unsatisfying set of previous information, a clear admiration arises from reading about such a large number of workshops, meetings and experimental archaeological training camps where archaeologists, craftsmen and students work together, not to speak of the university trainings offered. Henriette Lyngstrøm reports about the teaching of experimental archaeology in the University of Copenhagen, and Kjell Knutsson gives an even wider account on the development of the experimental training through many years in the Uppsala University. Some similar training programs can be mentioned in the United Kingdom (e.g. in Exeter), but concerning the major part of Europe, experimental archaeology still remains a side course within mainstream courses at departments of archaeology if studied at all.

The experiments

A further good reason for the publication is the large choice of local initiations that all focus on some specific monument or one-time activity in the study area. A few chapters tell the reader how these groups are organised, what experiences they can be given by experts and how fascinating these programs to the public can be (e.g. Roeland Paardekooper: Experimental activities; Lars F. Stenvik: Experiments with Iron production in Trondelag). Even more importantly, these joint experiences by experts and civilians often strengthen tolerance between groups living together: in one case the experiment helped with the better understanding between local Sami and Norse communities (Gorill Nilsen: Doing archeological experiments in an ethnic context).

It quite often happens that whilst remaking archaeological finds, archaeologists gain basic new information for their research. In one of the several cases presented, the colours of striped bands on an 11th century costume were reconstructed and analysed. It turned out that the faded colours contained blue, which carried a strong identity signal. Since blue colour was expensive during the Iron Age and Medieval times, it was available only for people of high social status (Lars Erik Narmo: *The unexpected*).

Different theoretical approaches to experimental archaeology

Thus, the first level of understanding this book is about the broad spectrum of new ways of experimental archaeology in the Nordic world. The reader learns about all these with a taste of jealousy, realising how much has been done there in the last decades. But further, it gives a sensible hinterland to the main topic of the volume. The reviewer presumes that this second level is the real essence of the publication.

Already in the Introduction, written by the one of the editors, Bodil Petersson, it becomes clear that experimental archaeology can be divided into several phases. There is a chapter (by Pavel Nicklasson) on 19th century antiquarians in the *Götiska Förbundet*: many of them were not only forerunners of professional archaeologists, but also real experimental archaeologists of their era. According to the author, the method and the curiosity towards reconstructing the past by imitations can be traced back that far. Later, in the second half of the 20th century, two main strands of experimental archaeology flourished in parallel to those in archaeological research in general. Briefly, Nicklasson distinguishes a processual and a post-processual attitude in experimental archaeology.

The first chapter, touching upon the stages of experimenting is written by the two editors, Bodil Petersson and Lars Erik Narmo, titled "A journey in time". Being placed to the beginning of the book it reveals the intention of both authors: after mainly technical and functional studies they suggest that it is time to enhance conditions for a more humanistic aspect. In other words, more and more post-processual aspects should be focused on, in terms of attempting to understand past processes through interpretation. The chapter discusses all stages of

research history, back to the Age of Enlightenment, in detail, followed by a history of development within the experimental archaeological methods, whilst the "postmodern", interpretative narratives are the cornerstones to be tested on several occasions in the volume.

Yet, the publication does not lack traditional scientific approaches, such as describing how to make replications with the (inferred) original technology, to show why refitting and use-wear analyses tell us much about how and when implements were used in a given community (Lotte Eigeland: *State or Status quo*). The chapter implies that reconstructions have a double meaning, referring both to the process and the product. However, even with the most physical reconstructing process it soon becomes clear that experiments can be made by two (often parallel) approaches, called "a controlled and a contextual" approach (Marianne Rasmussen: *Under the same roof*: p. 156). Rasmussen's arguments do not leave the reader without an evaluation of the outcome, as she concludes on the experiment with Iron Age houses: "The final and finished model of the house is our interpretation of that which was excavated. The interpretation can be good or bad..." (p. 158).

The hermeneutics of experimental archaeology

One of the central ideas that make the interpretative narratives more useful comes along with the acknowledgement that researchers are never fully free of bias, simply because of our *Zeitgeist*. This thought is expressed in a convincing way: "Hermeneutics states that we assign meaning based on our presuppositions when interpreting new input" (Tine Schenck: *Experimenting with the Unknown*, p. 96). However, the chapter most thoroughly written on theoretical perspectives in experimental archaeology is certainly that by Anna S. Beck (*Working in the borderland of experimental archaeology*). In her text, the strictly meant positivistic period in experimental archaeology of the 1960s and 1970s is understood as a clear parallel to processual archaeology, while experimental archaeology's new narratives after the 1970s reflect the ideas of postmodern, interpretative trajectories. Beck begins with a very informative example, when she reports of an experiment in which she and students inhabited in a reconstructed Iron Age long-

house in the Historical-Archaeological Centre in Lejre for a fortnight in wintertime. To protect themselves from the constant draught, the modern inhabitants built some small partition walls inside the building, traces of which were actually found inside such a house that was excavated soon thereafter. In this way, the Klima X project, as it was called, did help the research with a series of important observations. Beck, however, soon moves the debate from the practical issues, to clear theory. In putting contextual experiments into theoretical context, she states: "The problem is that proper standards have not been formulated for the contextual experiment... [so archaeologists working with this, E.B.]...always present the results with a certain humility and excuses... But as the experiment is based on completely different premises and another scientific approach, an evaluation against a positivistic background is not adequate. Standards of contextual experiment should be formulated so that the contextual experiment can be evaluated on its own premises" (p. 184). One could add that the ideal outcome of both the objective controlled experiments and the inspirational conclusions would be a true combination of the results. From the twofold approaches relevant inferences about past

technologies as well as about social structures could be drawn.

In conclusion

Thanks to editorial work, the volume has a clear structure; the reader can follow the logic where each chapter is built on the previous one. More meticulous editing would have helped to avoid some repetitions by using cross-references, e.g. the starting points of several chapters refer to profound work by John Coles ("Experimental archaeology", 1979), and new information is again and again compared to the processual state of research. Still, this recent summary of the postmodern experimental archaeology is a very informative and useful reading both inside and certainly outside of Scandinavia. Although it would be a real merit in its own to get a series of new ways of experimenting on lifestyles in past periods with enjoyable descriptions and coloured illustrations, the ideas of this publication go far beyond this. For readers beyond Scandinavia, the book offers a good occasion to enrich our vision and to think what needs to be done to create a more developed experimental work within our own regions.