Symposium report: experimental archaeology - method and future: Gällö
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Olausson, Deborah
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There is a growing interest in the use of practical trials and the reconstruction of prehistoric handicrafts in Sweden. This interest is manifested in the numerous prehistoric centers (Sw. "fornbyar") which have sprung up in various parts of the country (cf. Forntida teknik 1985, Nr. 10). Nevertheless, it can also be suggested that there is some uncertainty as to what the goals of practical research should be, and of its place in the discipline of archaeology. The symposium held in Gällö was organised by the Institute for Prehistoric Technology (Institut för förhistorisk teknologi) to enable those engaged in this field to meet and discuss both the present and the future of this type of activity.

The participants (about 50) were a rather heterogenous group linked by an interest in practical archaeology. Representatives from most of the existing prehistoric centers in Sweden, and graduates from the courses in prehistoric technology organized by the Institute at Bäckedals Folkhögskola, were in the majority. The comparatively small number of representatives from the academic institutions in Sweden probably reflects the minor role this approach has so far played in such an environment. Attendance was mostly Swedish and Danish, which indicates the weaker interest in this kind of activity in Norway and Finland.

The first day’s program was devoted to presentations by six invited “experimentalists” of their work and their thoughts about experimental archaeology. Following a brief welcome by Lars Rumar from Föreningen Norden, Tomas Johansson spoke on the theme “Experimental archaeology — transitory trend or topic of the future”. The presentation included a glimpse into the activities of the Institute for Prehistoric Technology and established the theme for the rest of the symposium. The author followed with a discussion of experimental archaeology in the ideal and in practice, illustrated with examples from her research on Neolithic axes. She stressed that the term “experiment” should be reserved for testing hypotheses under conditions of control, although she maintained that less rigorously designed projects also have a place in the study of prehistoric lifeways. Frands Herschend’s presentation centered on his work with reconstructing the fortification and houses at Eketorp on the island of Öland. Herschend suggested that attempting such reconstruction allows archaeologists to consider the question of why prehistoric people behaved in a certain way — to evaluate if their actions were rational. He also noted that trying out prehistoric tasks can cause the archaeologist to look at the archaeological record in a different way.

Unfortunately Kjel Knutsson, scheduled as the next speaker, was unable to attend. In his place Søren Nancke-Krogh spoke briefly of his experience with practical trials, and Roger Engelmark described the experimental farm at Bäggbôle in northern Sweden.

The afternoon session was devoted to presentations by Danish colleagues. E. Benner Larsson of the School of Conservation in Copenhagen described his work with investigating and documenting manufacturing traces on prehistoric objects. The ability to identify individual craftsmen or workshops has ramifications for locating workshops and for discussing exchange. Next Bo Madsen described his work with flint, including the identification of traces of manufacture and axe grinding experiments. Madsen’s many years of experience with flint-knapping, in combination with formal training in archaeology, give him unique opportunities for making concrete statements about many questions about stone age technology of interest to archaeologists. Søren Vadstrup, an architect by profession, spoke of his experiences with recon-
structing Viking craft. Vadstrup's presentation reflected his particular area of interest, as it emphasized the practical difficulties involved in building a boat for which the only blueprint may be rows of rivets and impressions left by wooden planks.

The next event on the program was to have been a ride on the newly completed replica of the boat from Valsgärde 14. This boat represents a 9th century craft designed for inland waterways. It was built with copies of 9th century tools under the direction of Jan Bill. Unfortunately the boat could not be launched in time for the symposium. Nevertheless we gained good insight into the project through Jan Bill's slide presentation and from a visit to the "shipyard" on the shore of the lake Revsunds-sjön.

The second day of the symposium was devoted to discussion, with Anna-Lena Segestam of Ekehagens Forntidsby acting as moderator. The discussion centered around general questions, circulated to the participants in advance, about the past and future of experimental archaeology.

Knut Odner of the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Oslo had been invited to act as critic at the symposium. He opened the day's discussion with a few provocative and timely comments. Odner cautioned against letting exploration into prehistoric technology become an end in itself. As a social anthropologist, he found that the presentations of the previous day had not reflected a wish to understand prehistoric society, which he saw as a major goal for archaeologists as cultural historians. He also cautioned against isolation from the rest of archaeology. He suggested that by letting reconstruction become an end in itself (a possible danger of the prehistoric centers) we are merely building a new kind of amusement park.

The general discussion which followed was naturally colored by these remarks, at the same time as it centered around the six discussion points. There was general agreement that "prehistoric technology" (Sw. "forntida teknik") is a more appropriate label for the activity of trying to rediscover and preserve prehistoric handicrafts than the term "experimental archaeology". We also agreed that experimental archaeology cannot and should not be a separate branch of archaeology, but rather is one of many methods for arriving at knowledge about prehistory.

There was also discussion about problems of generalising on the basis of results from practical trials. Tomas Johansson pointed out that generalisations in time and space are a common and accepted part of traditional archaeology. The practical and theoretical problems connected with documentation were also aired, although Johansson's suggestion that film/video documentation should in some cases replace (rather than supplement) a written presentation did not gain wide support. He also described plans for a project by the Institute for Prehistoric Technology to record non-industrial technologies worldwide before they disappear. We did agree that documentation was an important part of any project involving prehistoric technology. The last question to be taken up dealt with the limits to experimental archaeology. Here the discussion centered around whether the experimental archaeologist himself/herself should perform all the activities being investigated. Greater objectivity is possible if he does not, but this may occur at the expense of a loss of insight gained by experience. There is however a great deal of difference between being able to perform a task oneself and becoming an expert at the task. The former may be sufficient for gaining the personal insight which can be valuable in evaluating a practical experiment, while perfection of the latter may require years which can better be spent more wisely. When practicing more traditional archaeology we are not hesitant to rely on experts — why should we not do so as experimental archaeologists as well?

The symposium adjourned without having reached any concrete decisions about the future of experimental archaeology. However one result to come out of the symposium was the founding of a working group composed of representatives from the existing prehistoric centers in Sweden. The participants found it both useful and stimulating to have had an opportunity to meet and discuss areas of mutual concern. We were thankful to Tomas Johansson
of the Institute for Prehistoric Technology for taking the initiative for the symposium, and to Anna-Lena Segestam for seeing to it that all the practical arrangements worked smoothly. It is to be hoped that the publication of the symposium, planned as an issue in the Institute’s publication *Forntida teknik*, will be read by a large part of the archaeological community and will lead to a wider acceptance of experimental archaeology.

Deborah Olausson
Lunds universitetets Historiska museum
Krafts torg 1, 223 50 Lund

*Den internationella arkeologkongressen i Mainz 1987*


