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The Digital Conference “Archaeological Approaches to the Study of the Potter’s Wheel”

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From 24th to 27th November, 2020, the international conference “Archaeological Approaches to the Study of the Potter’s Wheel” was held digitally, organised by Caroline Jeffra (University of Amsterdam, Tracing the Potter’s Wheel Project), Richard Thér (Philosophical Faculty, University of Hradec Kralové), Chase A. M. Minos (The Cyprus Institute), and EXARC. Initially, the conference was to be hosted by the University of Amsterdam, but was quickly reconfigured to take place entirely online. The conference brought together archaeologists, potters, anthropologists, historians and classicists, with the aim of exploring a topic which has garnered increased attention in recent scholarship. The keynote lecture was presented by Sander van der Leeuw entitled “Invention... in ceramics and the environment” (<https://outu.be/hnUYLEbA6TM>), and he also served as theme three discussant (<https://youtu.be/ILu18DrnBig>) along with Carl Knappett (theme one discussant, <https://youtu.be/xzo-uUAXcAw>) and Valentine Roux (theme two discussant, <https://youtu.be/4aeBxdVGVOQ>). Furthermore, the conference was accompanied by a Potting Film Festival, which took the form of a curated playlist of videos available on YouTube which is published in EXARC’s online presence, available here: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLqWUT1pOFU1NOY_OTD2xFVmPyUG8tvIZF.

Recent scholarship on the topic has increasingly addressed issues which relate to the way that individuals, communities, and societies responded to the introduction of the potter’s wheel. In region after region, period after period, existing potting traditions were adjusted, altered, supplanted, or otherwise changed as potters negotiated with the different practices that this technological device enabled. To date, however, discussions of the integration of rotational potting have been largely seated within region- or chronologically-focused literature. In order to encapsulate a variety of regions and time-periods, three broad themes crossing regional and chronological borders were highlighted and explored over the course of the conference.

The first theme centred on questions of the mode of research, showcasing solutions reached in the absence of

a reliable, objective methodology for identifying the ways that the potter’s wheel was utilised in pottery forming sequences. This theme was included in the conference sessions in order to foster a dialogue regarding standards of practice in documentation, analysis, presentation, and terminology when describing the evidence. Carl Knappett took an introspective stance in his discussion of the papers in this theme “Expressive Technique or The Mechanical and the Thinking Hand”, drawing on a number of interdisciplinary perspectives to interrogate the foundations of how and why studies of the wheel are carried out. His basic concern is not to forget aesthetic expression as one of the basic dimensions of pottery technology. The effort to accurately detect technological actions and elements bears a potential risk of the reduction of the perception of technology into a mechanical sequence of interdependent actions leading to a functional product. While seeking for the causal links between observable features and technical actions that caused them, we must be aware that the reconstruction of the production process does mean understanding the craft, the artisan and her/his expressions.

Five articles from the presentations on this theme appear in this volume, each addressing a different methodological aspect of how the potter’s wheel is investigated and recognised archaeologically. Two of these focus on issues relating to the tool itself; in the first, Brandon Neth and Eleni Hasaki present a tool developed to aid and standardise wheel velocity measurement during experiments, facilitating greater comparability between experiments. Chase A. M. Minos, on the other hand, makes a strong case for explicitly considering the wheel as a variable within experiments, how it relates to a potter’s skill, and what impact these factors have upon macroscopic traces left on pots. Each of these contributions serve to re-focus the emphasis of experimental work to appropriately integrate, and report on, the particularities of wheel devices when discussing and describing the products made with these tools. Richard Thér and Petr Toms, on the other hand, take a deep dive into the way that wheel-throwing methods impact the orientation of

particles and voids, as seen in optical microscopy, which presents opportunities to analyse material more precisely as well as to overcome barriers that other methods, such as surface features analysis, might encounter. Francesca Porta meanwhile turns her attention to an often-overlooked category of vessels – very large storage containers – to establish a baseline of observable traces, both using macroscopic examination of surface features and X-ray analysis. These large vessels are often left aside in experiment and analysis, and F. Porta’s experiment and description of results allow for better assessments of the material going forward. Lastly within this theme, Caroline Jeffra’s contribution outlines the creation of and justification for an open-access generalised type set of experimental material, which serves as a starting point for comparisons against archaeological material from many contexts. With such comparanda available, scholars may focus their attention on creating more precise experiments, or, lacking experimental skills or resources, make assessments which would have been impossible for them in the first place.

Beyond the foundational level of interpretation and documentation of evidence was the second theme, which addressed current approaches to understanding the evolution of the technique. It is acknowledged that each archaeological context, in which these questions are asked, is formed of its own particular context based on social, economic, and cultural spheres, defining the character of the interplay between device capabilities and potting practices through time. Nine such examples are included in this volume, representing material from the Near East, the Mediterranean, Europe, Northeast Africa, and the Caribbean dating to the Early Bronze Age (c. 4000 BC) through the Colonial Period (1562 AD). In her discussion “Understanding the Evolution of Wheel Potting Techniques”, Valentine Roux drew on her extensive knowledge of the ways that the technology can manifest archaeologically, and the methods for recognizing the different ways of employing the wheel in pottery forming archaeologically, to bring together the talks from this theme. Considering the interpretation of surprising variability of forming methods, she highlighted the role of context in which the wheel is used for the evolution of the technological practices connected with this specific tool. She also raised the issue of using standardised, unbiased language in discussing observed evidence of manufacture.

Johnny Samuele Baldi’s contribution describes the earliest material within this volume, focusing on the Uruk cultural sphere, specifically from recent fieldwork from Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan. In particular, he gives context to the rise of the potter’s wheel as seen in the new data when considered against existing knowledge of wheel emergence and use in other areas of the Near East. The Middle Bronze Age Sudanese site at Amara West discussed by Sarah K. Doherty paints a different picture, investigating the role that Egyptian colonization played in changing local potting traditions. In a similar time period, Ilaria Caloi also raises some important questions about the influence or inspiration that Egypt might have played in the way that the potter’s wheel was employed,

this time in south-central Crete. Also in modern-day Greece, and during the Middle Bronze Age, Anthi Balitsari discusses one specific ware of pottery to explore the forming differences which exist between so-called “archetypical” and “imitation” variations from the Argolid and Attica. Xenia Charalambidou contributes further research from Greece, in this case concerning Iron Age Naxos. Her discussion tackles the traditional division of wheel-formed fine wares versus hand-formed coarse wares, describing areas of technical similarity for much needed nuance in the broader discussion of these wares. Beatrijs de Groot’s work also concerns the Iron Age, this time in southern Iberia. The relationship of the introduction of the wheel and the establishment of Phoenician trade colonies is discussed, especially in light of the creation of so-called “hybrid” forms from this period. The most recent archaeological contexts belonging to theme two included in this volume come from Alise Gunnarssone *et al.* and Marlieke Ernst. A. Gunnarssone *et al.* describe the interesting case of Baltic ware production from two nearby regions during the 11th–13th century in Latvia, where they argue for greater “professionalization” of production in one region when compared against the other. M. Ernst’s work concerns the colonial period in the Caribbean, where the potter’s wheel was introduced during colonization and important insights into the process can be gained from a context where more types of evidence are available.

An approach that several of these theme two contributions have in common is to critically examine broad categories of “wares” from the standpoint that variation in production technology may be indicative of differentiation between the potters. This is particularly evident in papers by A. Balitsari and J. S. Baldi, where in the former it may be a regional difference whereas in the latter it may relate to the relationship between potters and the wider social context in which they worked. I. Caloi also makes reference to this phenomenon as well, though to a slightly lesser extent. This standpoint of seeking differentiation within previously undifferentiated classes of material showcases a major asset in technological assessment at the assemblage level. Following a revelation of poorly-defined or unobserved difference within an otherwise grouped class of material, it is possible to interrogate the source of those differences.

A second trend among papers observable is the role that colonization plays in technological negotiations made by potters. S. K. Doherty describes this in Sudan (Egyptian colony), B. de Groot in southern Iberia (Phoenician colony), and M. Ernst in the Dominican Republic (Spanish colony). What is striking among these examples is the extent to which local potters responded, adapted, or maintained existing practices alongside practices brought with colonial agents. The three examples highlighted here provide interesting case studies against which other colonial contexts may be compared to gain further insights into the social and cultural mechanisms at work.

A final trend within the second theme of the conference is investigating the nature of side-by-side divergent production strategies. Two contributions, from X. Charalambidou and

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Archaeological Approaches to the Study of the Potter's Wheel

24-27 November 2020



Keynote

by Prof. Sander van der Leeuw
(Arizona State University, US)

Theme 1: Modes of research for potting practices

Discussant Prof. Carl Knappett
(University of Toronto, CA)



Theme 2: Evolution and spread of wheel potting techniques

Discussant Dr. Valentine Roux
(UMR 7055 CNRS, FR)



Theme 3: Ethnographic accounts or first-hand descriptions of change within a crafting context

Discussant Prof. Sander van der Leeuw
(Arizona State University, US)

Potting Film Festival

showcasing the diversity of potter's wheel
practices, illustrating the work of practicing
potters as well as experimental archaeologists.



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Figure 1. Conference poster (author: Magdalena Zielinska).

from A. Gunnarssone *et al.*, take this approach in their contexts. By examining the products of potters working (potentially) within close proximity or within the same region, it can be possible to find overlap in the previously differentiated material (as in the case of X. Charalambidou) or further support for previously identified differences (as in the case of A. Gunnarssone *et al.*). Either result provides important insights into the social and cultural contexts in which the potters were working.

The final theme of the conference extended beyond the boundaries of the archaeological record, and relied on the knowledge and experience of people negotiating technological change, whether through historical documentation, ethnographic accounts, or first-person descriptions of change within a crafting context. These narratives are often used as the basis for archaeological interpretation, so by emphasizing their importance as a central theme, it was hoped that a better understanding could be reached of both their usefulness and their limitations. S. van der Leeuw acted as discussant for this third theme in his talk “Ethnographic accounts of change within a crafting context”. As the ethnographic accounts allow us to see the potter’s decision-making in action, S. van der Leeuw explored the mind of the potter considering all the variables leading them to choose one technological alternative over another and emphasizing the complexity of such a process. Subsequently, he demonstrated this complexity in the case of a basic invention staying behind the potter’s wheel: use of rotation on a vertical axis for pottery forming, which can be and has been performed in many different ways. Three contributions within this volume address theme three of the conference, and paint a picture of complicated negotiations between practices over time. Deborah Winslow’s work within a Sinhalese Sri Lankan potter community spans nearly five decades and describes the unexpected ways that internal and external forces shape a community’s decisions about which practices to maintain, and which to invest in. Notably,

these community-level decisions are in fact revealed to be individual-level decisions which accumulate through time and influence to shape what might be visible to an outsider. Jaume García Rosselló’s work with the Pomaire potters of central Chile provides a perspective on the gendered nature of production, showing the wheel as a force of “displacement” whereby female, domestic, hand-making practices have been replaced by male, workshop, wheel-thrown practices. The wheel in this case is discussed as a feature of colonialism existing in opposition to indigenous practice. Lastly, Daniela Castellanos presents work in the Colombian Andes among the Aguabuena potters. This work also finds a gendered and colonial framework through which to view changes in production practices, but instead highlights various forms of discontinuity in pottery production during time that shapes the course of the technological changes which show the schematic nature of a linear explanatory narrative.

Taken as a whole, the works within this volume illustrate the many ways in which the wheel might be studied. Separately, the contents of this volume present many opportunities for others working on similar topics to find interpretive inspiration, methodological guidance, and contextual comparanda. By assembling the works into this volume, it is hoped that future scholars might take the guideposts provided here and push our understanding of technical change in the past further while also better defining the myriad of ways that technological change was negotiated in a case-by-case basis. This publication is but one part of the conference itself, and thanks to the digital nature of the conference, presentations are available to view via EXARC’s online presence. These are presented as playlists specific to theme one (<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLqWUT1pOFU1NyRJvH8Morbgeh2Niejw97>), theme two (<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLqWUT1pOFU1NSOBjNucxJjBhuDAvwi7Fe>), and theme three (<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLqWUT1pOFU1MKm83zGzWQD0UOiTnUI6Eq>).