



Online forum: Archaeological Approaches to the Study of the Potter Wheel, 24th–27th November 2020, EXARC.net

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Онлайн форум: Археологически подходи към изучаването на гърнчарския кръг, 24–27 ноември 2020, EXARC.net

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The initial plan for the International conference “Archaeological Approaches to the Study of the Potter Wheel” was for Spring 2020 edition in the picturesque town of Hradec Králové, Czech Republic. Due to the pandemic situation many initiatives faced inevitable changes of timetable and format. Instead of meeting in the modern university in the Eastern Bohemia, enjoying the cultural landscape of the historic town centre or the remote peaks of Krkonoše Mountains, Discord and Youtube set the stage (fig.1). Online formats provided opportunity to expand the horizon from a medium-sized meeting of experts to a platform and forum, encompassing various stakeholders on a global scale (as put in fashionable academic marketing labels).

The event took place online for four days (Tuesday to Friday), from the 24th to the 27th of November 2020. The Discord platform, designed “to create communities”, served as „a forum for scholars to discuss their work with colleagues“, aiming “to facilitate the development of a research network of shared interest which bridges geographic and chronological divisions“ (<https://potterswheelconference2020.wordpress.com/general-information/call-for-papers/>). Registered participants (around a hundred attendees, from Indian artists to graduate archaeology students or just curious researchers) plus 50 presenters had the opportunity to seek answers to a wide range of questions, related to the invention, spread and use of the potter wheel, as well as to the concomitant cultural and social phenomena. Three major themes were outlined. The speakers broadcasted their recorded presentations on a conference YouTube channel, according to a well-kept schedule.

After a welcome greetings (on behalf of the organizers) by Pascal Barnes, current chair of EXARC.net, Professor Sander van der Leeuw was accordingly entrusted with the inaugural address on “Invention ... in Ceramics and the Environment“ Considering his previous contributions and expertise in the research on emerging technologies, inventions and innovations, it was the most ap-



Fig. 1. Official header of the online forum
 Обр. 1. Колонтитул на онлайн форума

appropriate beginning of this event, touching upon key issues, discussed during the following sessions. Professor van der Leeuw intellectual pursuits and reflections on ceramic and environmental studies set the tone for further reconsideration of relevant topics (such as novelty, information processing in societies, perception, cognition and learning, involved in the invention of ceramics and so forth). His tropical screen background of palm trees on the coast had additional and refreshing environmental impression.

The online forum sessions were divided into three themes, spread over four days (fig.2).

Theme One focused on the mode of research and included three sessions, scheduled for the first day of the event. For “a metal boy” such as the present reviewer, “quantification of the orientation of aplastic components of a ceramic body as the tool for the identification of the forming techniques utilizing rotational kinetic energy” (R. Thér and T. Mangel) or “identification of the contribution of rotational movement in pottery forming sequence based on statistical analysis of surface” (J. Wilczek and R. Thér) could hardly cause an outburst of sincere amazement. However, it is beyond any doubt that questions of technological variability and technological development are the first ones to be posed, if the horse should take their logical place in front of the wheeled cart. The contributions in these sessions provided user-friendly panorama on the state-of-art of different approaches employed to identify and describe vessels formed with rotation, relying on evidence such as traces viewed at the micro, meso, and macro scale. Discussions in the chat rooms contained valuable notes on the infelicities, limitations and challenges, related to the technological examination of pottery, produced on potter wheel.

The third component in this thematic circle – experimental work or replicative potting is incorporated in a number of contributions (I. Berg, B. Neth and E. Hasaki, C. Minos, S. Doherty), revealing the potential and the sources of inspiration in the approach.

“Widening participation in wheel-potting technique assessment” by C. Jeffra turned attention to the standards of practice in documentation, presentation and terminology when describing the evidence. Concluding remarks and synthesis came from the Theme One discussant Carl Knappet, who shared his experience and provided an impressive and mind-stimulating presentation on the variety of issues, discussed during the conference opening day.

Approaches to understanding the evolution of wheel potting techniques represented Theme

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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Fig. 2. Official poster of the online forum
Fig. 2. Постер на онлайн форума

Two of the online forum. The range of the contributions, their chronological and geographical scope, as well as social, economic and cultural ramifications, related to the spread, evolution and use of the potter wheel, could be summarized by just one adjective - impressive. From Uruk potters and the earliest application of the innovation (J.S. Baldi), via hands on clay wheels, potters crafts, masters and their workshops in Bronze Age Aegean (A. Cercone, M. Choleva, A. Balitsari, S. Prillwitz), ancient Sudan (S. Doherty) to pithos production in the Late Bronze Age Southern Italy (F. Porta). Case studies on the first millennium BC included an insight into the Iron Age Iberia (B. de Groot) and the Early Iron Age and Archaic Naxian coarse ware (X. Charalambidou). Later in time, but equal in their potential to provoke various reconsiderations, were the contributions devoted to pottery practices in Latvia (A. Gunnarssone), medieval Czech-Moravian Highlands (K. Těšnohlídková and K. Slavíček) and the introduction of the potter's wheel to the Spanish colonies of Concepción de la Vega and Cotuí (Dominican Republic 1495–1562) (M. Ernst). In addition to this brief review of geographical and temporal principles, one should note that all the contributions, corresponding to *Theme Two* (sessions 4 to 8) dealt with the questions on the evolution of wheel potting techniques in specific archaeological context and data sets in various scales. It was the responsibility of Theme Two discussant Valentine Roux to provide a general feedback and synthesis on the topics discussed during the second and the third day of the online event.

The last two sessions (9–10) of the closing day were devoted to Theme Three: ethnographic accounts or first-hand descriptions of change within a crafting context. The focus of these contributions was on the intersection of tradition and innovation, on the knowledge and experience of people negotiating technological change. Examples of innovation in Sinhalese potter assemblages (D. Winslow), traditional use of the hand-wheel in modern Europe (R. Carlton), the globalized evolution of

rotational potting in the Anglophone Caribbean (P. Fay), Aguabuena pottery making (D. Castellanos and F. Romano) and on the potter's wheel in the Chilean Central Valley (J. García Rosselló) provided insights into the emerging technologies as a process occurring within a complex social system. Professor Sander van der Leeuw (discussant of Theme Three) managed to summarize and outline technological, societal and even philosophical aspects of human behaviour, involved in pottery production innovations and traditions. Metaphorically, the potter wheel managed to make a full rotation in order to continue turning around.

The diversity of practices associated with the potter's wheel is best illustrated at the Potting Film Festival. The aim of this festival is to showcase the work of potters from around the world, emphasizing the diversity of techniques and tools. Wherever potters can be found, both in the past and the present, so can the concept of rotating clay and forming it into any number of shapes and designs. Excellent addition to the online forum and an amusing visual experience by its own merit, the initiative of the Potting Film Festival deserves admiration.

The "Archaeological Approaches to the Study of the Potter Wheel" online forum should be considered as a positivistic example of how to overcome some of the pandemic limitations in expanding research network of shared interest. The model of YouTube contributions streamed at scheduled times raise practical doubts, but the present reviewer is more than pleased with the opportunity to gain knowledge from the safety of his couch. A link to the Facebook wall of a Romanian colleague opened the doors to the world of pottery magicians and their apprentices around the globe.

Turbulent times often inspire innovations, boast the speed in action or information exchange and impose long-lasting models of behaviour.

All of the presentations and the Potting Film Festival are available at:

<https://potterswheelconference2020.wordpress.com/programme/conference-schedule/>

(Accessed on 09.12.2020)